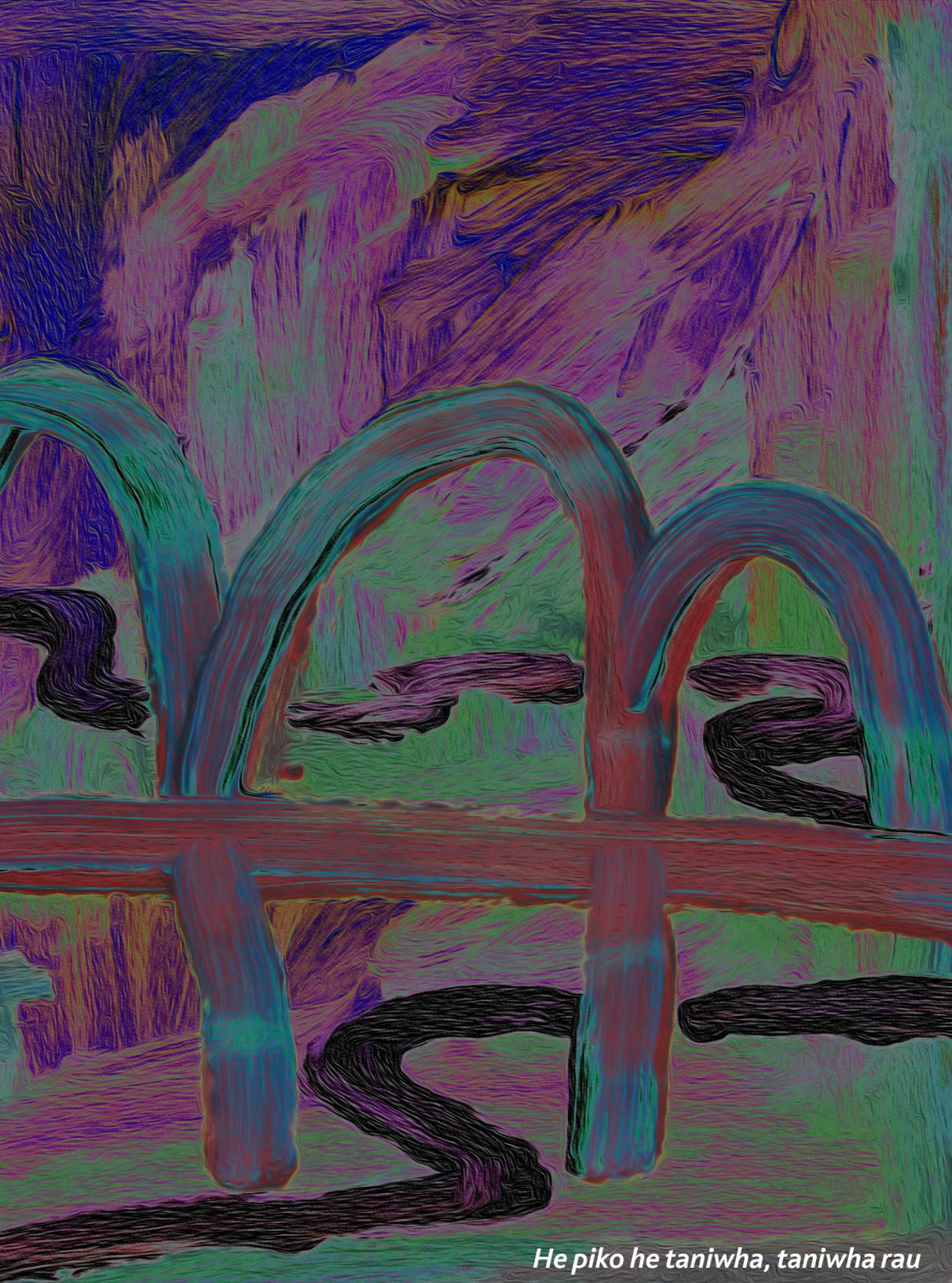




Wilf Malcolm Institute
of Educational Research
Te Pūtahi Rangahau Mātauranga o Wilf Malcolm
THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO

Waikato Journal of Education Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato



Special
20th
Anniversary
Collection
2015

He piko he taniwha, taniwha rau

TE KURA TOI TANGATA
FACULTY OF EDUCATION



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Waikato Journal of Education Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

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Dancing within postmodernism

Pirkko Markula

Department of Leisure Studies
The University of Waikato

Each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of ... [social] relational determinations interact. de Certeau (1985, p. xi)

Proem

We're in a dark classroom quietly watching Aborigines dance in an exotic Australian night. They move in brilliant patterns: sudden high jumps of energy, trancing rhythms of instruments we've never seen, constantly stomping feet, twisting torsos. We see these moves transferred to a Western dance stage by a Dutch ballet company. Suddenly we don't like it. The dance has lost something; as if the electrical stage lights have destroyed the exotic feeling of stomping feet. The dance has become too sterile—it seems pointless.

Introduction

Forgetting that the condensation on the ranch sliders in the two bedroom house I share with my husband, Jim, is impenetrable, I glance out the window onto my New Zealand garden. Like Dutch choreographer Jiri Kylian who travelled to Australia to observe Aborigines' dance festival in the desert, I also seem to belong to a group of "cosmopolitans" wandering around the world for work. Staring at the yellow daffodils in my Alvar Aalto vase beside the television, more memories from graduate school in America, like the one above, wash over me. Then, back again in the damp and cold antipodian winter, I open the travel section of the daily morning newspaper. A huge colour photograph depicts Cook Island dancers elating in the middle of their electrifying performance at a Rarotongan beach resort. I think about the paper I promised to write for a special section of a journal Jim is editing. Wasn't this what my paper was all about: western audiences enchanted by ethnic dance, the exotic, the authentic, the different?

I walk to my university job because it is impossible to find a car park. I walk through a Kahikatea forest, a small preserved spot of New Zealand native forest. I look up to the canopy of the trees, listen to them hum and feel their fallen needles under my feet and I try to imagine the Kirikiriroa (Hamilton) landscape prior to European settlement. Recently, the city has planted native bush amongst the trees to provide support from the wind. Chris Rojek (1993) thinks that nature preservation actually increases our control over the nature. Westerners have viewed progress as the cultural domination of nature. Preserved parks are, curiously, particularly attractive to us because they seem to reverse this order: nature dominates the culture. However, nature in such parks is still carefully contained in isolated



spots, pruned and sprayed by the park personnel. Dean MacCannell (1990) calls parks museumised nature: the parks are staged representations of nature, simulated through our notions of what nature should be like, the nature we have destroyed. I have never seen Kirikiriroa, but I imagine it's exotic appearance; something like the animation in a recent television documentary about the Moa, an extinct, giant, flightless bird. Simulation, exotic, past, museum—all postmodern concepts. I think about my paper again.

In the office, I search for an early draft of my paper. It opens with a whole section regarding nostalgia. I begin to read:

Frank Davis (1979) characterises nostalgia as remembrance of recollections of the past. The past evokes nostalgic feelings that are positive and “infused with imputations of past beauty, pleasure, and joy” (p. 14). These feelings can have a touch of sadness, because the pleasures are perceived in a past that cannot be relived in the present. My feelings during the video presentation of the Australian ethnic dances that I watched as a graduate student in America could be recognized as nostalgic. I felt pleasure in watching the “authentic” performance out in the desert, whereas I disliked the integration of the movements into the western dance tradition; the experiences of the Aborigine dance, I thought, could not be relived in a foreign cultural context. As another example, a dance critic gets nostalgic as he glorifies the “ancient and noble dance tradition” of the forever lost, great and civilised Africa (Highwater, 1988, p. 25). Today's African ethnic dance, he laments, is fakelore; only its exquisite and refined drumming echoes the great past of the African nations.

Such feelings of loss and longing, Davis (1979) asserts stem from ones private subjective meanings. He labels this type of nostalgia as private nostalgia (Davis, 1979). But are my meanings completely private? Similar to other interpretive social researchers, I believe that my thoughts take shape within a cultural and societal context rather than in isolated privacy. Therefore, I want to examine the ways that nostalgia works in our culture. Davis (1979) argues that nostalgia is “a deeply felt social emotion” (Davis, 1979, p. vii). This, Slowikowski (1991) adds, makes nostalgia interesting as a cultural form.

My computer announces the arrival of an email message and I put down my paper. It's that sport sociology network again. They're still going on about the stacking of Latinos in baseball. Haven't we exhausted the critiques of stacking as a limited way to examine ethnicity in sport? In dance, which plunged into postmodernity in the early 60s, we don't waste our energy on such fruitless debates. I return to my paper.

I continue from a section where I claim to examine the meaning of nostalgia through my personal experiences as a dance spectator. I am concerned with some of the ways nostalgia encounters my everyday experiences. My experiences are, I write, “complex: sometimes I can point out nostalgic thoughts within my discussions with others, and other times I carry on without realising how nostalgia undermines my thoughts” (Markula, 1993, p. 2). I also confess that I am often confused: “Is it good or bad to long after an authentic cultural presentation? Who defines what is an authentic presentation? Or, what does it matter anyway?” (Markula, 1993, p. 2–3).

Watching dance

Jim and I are waiting in line at the University of Illinois student union to see a performance by “Ballet Folklórico de Mexico”. Is this the real Ballet Folklórico de Mexico, I ponder, the one that I read a review of in the *New York Times* a couple of days earlier. The doors open and we all rush in, a big mass trying to get the best seats in the front. Jim and I take seats on the side, in the third row. I am glad and relieved: now I can see the performance and also the dancers' feet, instead of the heads of the people in front of me. The audience is mostly Latino students, we can hear Spanish accents all around us. I feel like we are the only “whites” there. The performance starts. The first dance is a light ritual by the Mayas. All the dancers wear lavish costumes with huge red, green, blue or orange feather

headdresses that extend all the way from the dancers' heads to the floor. Gold is glittering from the women's jewellery. A male dancer plays dangerously with a live fire that is set in an authentic looking clay lamp. The feathers of one female dancer are burning. You can smell it; faint occasional bursts of smoke arise from the burning feathers ... the dancer doesn't notice.

I say to Jim, "Doesn't this resonate with your nostalgic understanding of the South American Indians. People must be loving this!"

The show goes on. What's next? I wonder. "Oh look, La Bamba has been included in the programme!" We watch the folk dance cavalcade that consists of several dances from different regions of Mexico.

When it's over, Jim asks, "When was the La Bamba?"

"What do you mean", I say, "It was when the women had the fluffy skirts on, the ones with lots of different colours, the short ones. Didn't you see it?"

"Oh that. But that was nothing like what they did in *Dirty Dancing*."

The performance ends and shouts of "Viva Mexico!" are echoing around the room. The performers thank us for our support and politely ask for donations to maintain their elaborate costumes. We go home and rent *Dirty Dancing*.

"So, Jim, When did they dance La Bamba?"

I meet Amy after the performance in the Krannert Center for Performing Arts' large, stylish lobby. Its full of people going to see a play, to listen to a concert, or exiting from the evenings dance performance by The American Indian Dance Theatre. The sound of the numerous steps on the lobby are dissipated by Krannerts deep brown parquet floor. The dim lighting gives the floor an even darker tone. We can clearly hear the sound of silver wear clanging and the soft tones of voices in conversation as people eat cakes and sip coffee.

"How did you like the dance?" I ask Amy.

"I just didn't like the costumes. I don't think that Native Americans wore neon pink, bright green or yellow clothing. I don't know," Amy sighs, "It's all a question of authenticity." Shrugging her shoulders, she continues, "I do all these studies about the representations of Native American culture and its fake western created authenticity and I'm still like this; you know, expecting something that I think is authentic. But those costumes just didn't seem to fit".

I'm thinking of the very last moment when the lights went off and the only thing I could see were the feather ends of one dancer's headdress: they were fluorescent and they glowed green in the darkness when he exited the stage. They, for sure, didn't wear such things, but it certainly looked cool.

It's a freezing night in New York. I, the country girl from a far corner of Europe, am going to see a dance performance in New York, the capital of dancing America. I'm happy to squeeze into the warm lobby that's full of people. Partly to thaw-out and partly to escape my violent impressions of New York street life that I learned from watching *Hillstreet Blues* on Finnish TV. Among the crowd are a group of young black males discussing the *Nutcracker*. I can sense by their upright postures and drawn faces that they are ballet dancers dreaming of making it in the harsh, competitive world of performing arts. They pick up their tickets and walk into the theatre with ease and grace. We sit down and glance at our programmes. Ballet Hispanico is performing its annual two-week season. I read a review of them during our flight to New York, and I'm excited to see the actual performance.

"How many Hispanic people do you see in the audience?" asks Jim.

I look around. The seats are filled with middle aged New Yorkers. They resemble characters in a Woody Allen movie. They're nothing like the Midwesterners I'm finally getting used to after seven

years. But Hispanics, I can't detect any obvious one. Then I wonder where did the young ballet dancers go?

I liked the performance. Especially the way they combined flamenco moves with ballet. However, I clearly preferred the parts depicting "the Latin American" style over the ballet pas de deux. Ballet lifts and poses have always annoyed me.

"Who ever came up with the idea of combining ballet with Spanish heritage", Jim says.

"What's wrong with that? I thought it was a clever idea. It nicely combines features from two different cultures."

"It's like giving up their own cultural heritage and surrendering to the influences of western culture", Jim continues.

"What a nostalgic thought," I reply, "Just because this dance doesn't correspond to your ideas of pure Latin culture, you feel uncomfortable and betrayed and sad. Well, I don't. I think it opens the way to cultural enrichment."

I glance down at my programme. "Oh, too bad we couldn't see the performance yesterday." I say to Jim, "They did a tango. I would have loved to have seen real Latin people tango!"

An invisible Spanish voice introduces the next piece. Because we don't understand what he is saying, we don't capture the meaning of the performance.

Jim thinks it's rude, "They should've announced the piece in English, too". I keep making sense of the story line during the intermission. When we return to our seats, I find the translated story on the floor.

"Oh no," I realize, "It must've dropped out of my programmes".

Nostalgia in hyperreality

Nostalgia can be identified as part of the collective memory that people in a society have towards things, persons, or events from the past (Davis, 1979; Snyder, 1991). Paul Connerton (1989) elaborates that "our experiences of the present largely depend upon our knowledge of the past" (p. 3). This past knowledge is moulded through different images of the past: either we have not lived the past and rely on the images to create it; or we relive the past through recollected images. Connerton (1989) adds that these images are often conveyed and sustained by performances in culture. In this sense, dance concerts among other performances such as sport have an important role in the persistence of, in Connerton's words, the unconscious collective memory.

Images transmitted through different performances, then, are an important part of the collective nostalgia. Jean Baudrillard (1983a) places the image production within the postmodern cultural condition. He argues that in the era of postmodernity, the images have become more real for us than the actual world we live in. Our lives are filled with images that precede *the real*. Society has turned into *hyperreal*: "the real is not only what can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced*, the hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1983a, p. 146, italics original). For example, videotapes can form ones understanding of aerobics before ever attending a class. Or one's idea of dance can be based on the movie *Flashdance*, not on an experience as a dance participant. Or televised drama, like *Hillstreet Blues*, can construct ones impressions of New York City previous to a visit. These tapes or movies can be endlessly reproduced in our society where the distinction between what is real and unreal is no longer apparent (Kellner, 1988). Recall my story about La Bamba. Jim had seen La Bamba performed in a movie a long time before "the real" performance and created his understanding of this dance based on the movie image. It is ironic, though, that in *Dirty Dancing* they did not even dance La Bamba. The origin of Jims image was not clear despite his vivid recollection of it. The boundaries between the real and the hyperreal seem further blurred.

Baudrillard (1983a) adds that in hyperreality meanings are devoid. Everything is visible and transparent in postmodern society, he argues, whereas meaning requires “depth, a hidden dimension, an unseen substratum” (in Kellner, 1988, p. 246). This lack of meaningfulness makes present life empty for us and we begin to look back to the past to restore the passed, but more meaningful life. This longingness, for Baudrillard (1983a), is necessarily melancholy: we try to bring back what we have destroyed in order to survive today. I, for example, long for lost traditions when we go to see dance performances and do not want to accept modern variations—like neon colours in Native American costumes or ballet moves distracting the flow of flamenco. We want to witness what once was; what we have defined as authentic heritage. At the same time, authenticity is our hyperreal construction of the imaginary past.

Jim comes into my office as I’m preparing to head off to class. “Look what I got from my parents,” he says and waves a newspaper clipping in his hand. Jim’s parents often send him articles from the *New York Times* that they think might interest us here in New Zealand. This is about a recent Alvar Aalto exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It is honouring the centennial of the great Finnish architect’s birth. “Aalto, a modernist ahead of his time” the headline reads. The article describes Aalto as creating “free-form curves, warm, wooden interiors, facades of irregularly laid red brick” (Muschamp, 1998, p. B.10). Freeform curves, what an accurate description. It reminds me of a wave, which coincidentally, translates in Finnish to Aalto. The article continues

During his life, Aalto’s nationality gave him an aura of otherness; people regarded him as a special case whose work derived from exotic conditions: those lakes, that birch, that Finland, a country where even the factory smokestacks look to be pumping out fresh air. The young nation was not yet independent when Aalto was born. Its people spoke a peculiar language, seemingly related to no other. (Muschamp 1998, p. B10)

“Isn’t Aalto who designed your favourite vase?” Jim asks.

“Yes,” I say, before adding, “It’s also interesting how the article depicts us Finns as exotic, as different. They even think of us as a postcolonial country”.

“I noticed that and thought you might find this article particularly fascinating.”

To Americans, I have “an aura of otherness”. I am like the dancers from “other cultures”. I feel quite proud of being regarded as exotic and postcolonial. All of a sudden, I’m not quite a Westerner any more, instead, I’m different, somehow special. But I put down the article and decide to finish it when I get back from my class.

In my class called Leisure, Media and Culture, I discuss cultural performances within commercial sporting events that, in recent years, have grown into entertainment spectacles. Such sporting events like the Olympic Games and the Commonwealth Games have included opening and closing ceremonies partly to boost the nationalism of the host country, and partly to create attractions for mobile masses of tourists. These spectacles, like dance performances, can serve as occasions that, according to Connerton (1989), manifest the “unconscious collective memory”. An integral part of these performances is to display the traditional dances of the host country’s indigenous people. The native people dressed in their colourful costumes, create an attractive, distinctive tourism image. I show my students videos from the Auckland 1990 Commonwealth Games opening ceremony and we watch the Māori performing Haka and Poi. We continue with a clip from the Commonwealth Games’ opening ceremony in Victoria, Canada 1994 and again see brightly clad native tribes leading the procession into the stadium. “But isn’t it good that these people get a chance to show off their culture?” my students ask in response to my critiques. Perhaps it is positive to display indigenous people publicly, I tell them, because generally they are rather invisible minorities in their home countries. But at the same time, there is something deeply disturbing about this stereotypical representation of indigenous people. Do we demonstrate our respect for the native peoples, or our

respect for the stereotypical image of them that we have created? Outside of cultural events, most indigenous people throughout the world are represented in a negative light, as a risk to social order, an economic liability, or a problem for the justice system. Don't we like the way the indigenous people live now? As Slowikowski (1993) summarizes:

What is curious about these Native American ... images and performance today as they appear in physical culture is that they are often juxtaposed with slick, intellectualized representations such as honour and authenticity. These representations dance and are dressed exotically, but they do not speak the words of their present day people—they are tokens of a people, “attended to” only at functions like athletic contests. (p. 31)

Some researchers have approached our ambivalent preference for traditional cultures by connecting our views of authentic culture to the present power relationships in society. They argue that we insist on preserving “Other cultures” to maintain the present system of dominance. For example, many ethnic dance performances today originate from cultures that were either conquered or colonised by white western culture. I have introduced in this paper African, Aboriginal Australian, Māori, Native American and Latin American cultures. Anthropologist Edward Said (1978) argues that our ideas of other cultures are “manmade”. Western culture, Said points out, is the dominant culture and can, therefore, create images of other cultures to appeal to the West. Consequently, our conceptions of other cultures are not necessarily correct. For example, often our generic idea of a Native American is that of a Plains Indian Chief on horseback with a long feathered headdress; or we think everyone in Spain dances flamenco; or we conceptualize only one style of dance to characterize the vast African continent and we simply call it African dance.

In essence, there is nothing wrong with being enchanted about the wonders of other cultures, but Said (1978) and Appadurian (1988) argue that western ideas tend to become hegemonic as they do not correspond to the ideas that people have about themselves. Subsequently, Westerners' reconstructions begin to represent the “truth” as we fail to see how our cultural biases direct our thoughts. Often these conceptions perpetuate the idea of western superiority over other cultures. Renato Rosaldo (1988) connects the idea of western domination to our unwillingness to accept change in other cultures except our own. Nostalgic conceptions represent a form of cultural dominance which Rosaldo labels as “imperialist nostalgia”. Through imperialist nostalgia, Rosaldo elaborates, the domination appears innocent and pure: our interest in protecting other peoples' heritage is a disguise, an excuse to maintain our dominance. Nostalgic views of unchanged primitive” cultures give us a position of control over other cultures. Accepting cultural change would imply accepting progress. This progress, from Rosaldo's standpoint, would threaten our hold of power as these cultures would start competing with us for an equal footing.

The world of dance illustrates Rosaldo's theory. We are sad to see, for example, Native American cultures vanish, we like to reserve certain places within our culture for Native Americans to display their honoured past. Only we want to see selected parts of their culture, like their dances. We do not allow, however, Native Americans or Latinos in the United States to demand other special rights; the dominant culture defines a convenient place and an appropriate form for these ethnic representations. My experience during the performance of Ballet Hispanico hints of such dominant thinking. At the theatre, I was upset that I could not follow a story line that was only, as I thought, told in Spanish. Did I have any right other than the right of the dominant culture to demand an English translation? Shouldn't I have learned Spanish if I wanted to know what was happening, just as native Spanish speakers have to master English to manage in this culture?

It was curious that I was bothered by a missing Spanish translation. As a Finn, I have been forced to learn English to survive in today's globalised world. I, a speaker of an obscure minority language, should have felt sympathetic with the Spanish peoples' attempts to hold on to their own language. But

why was I upset? Why did I expect them to change? I had, obviously, bought into the dominance of the English-speaking world.

Nostalgia per se is not negative or positive. Through an “authentic” dance performance we can gain respect for other cultures by watching their traditional dances. The performers themselves can celebrate their identity and gain self-respect through their heritage. In this sense, it is sad that traditions are disappearing and we should work on preserving the past. However, when we preserve a certain image for other people and insist that they behave, perform and dance according to that image, we no longer allow space for their voices.

Rather than being upset when cultures are changing, we should be sad if they are staying the same. Like James Boon (1991) who is hit by “museomy melancholy mirth” when he enters museums that, as he claims, present fragments of cultures in a halted, dead and sterile state, we should be sad if dance did not engage in new influences. Perhaps, Baudrillard (1983a) is right when he says that our western lives are meaningless; perhaps there is nothing worth saving in a culture where everything is a replica; leaving us to reach for other times and other cultures to find meaningful events or original art. Baudrillard adds that in an age of simulacra, there is an escalation of lived experience as a desperate attempt to grasp a hold of the elusive reality. Am I then, as a western academic, trying to give meaning to my existence and environment by writing a paper about a day of my life in Academia? Is this my contribution to the “panic-striven production of the real and the referential” (Baudrillard, 1983a, p. 13)?

The really meaningless academia

We academics have not recorded our own experiences very extensively. Instead, we have focused our analyses on the experiences of the marginal, the Other, resulting in an extensive literature on the everyday life of the Other. Recently, I read John Fiske’s (1992) paper about the need to study the culture of everyday life where he accuses academics of creating a distance between their own “high culture”—the ahistorical, theoretical texts produced within academia—and “the low” culture of everyday life—the bodily, the subjective, the material. He urges academics to discard our high culture and embrace the study of everyday life as “the culture of everyday life is concrete, contextualised, and lived” (p. 155). Fiske is, naturally, talking about the popular creativity of the Other and is, consequently, bipolarising academic life and everyday life. There are few ethnographies regarding everyday life at the university, states Paula Treichler in a comment to Fiske:

It seemed obvious to us that academics found the everyday activities of their own lives extremely uncomfortable and difficult to write ... certainly uninteresting and unproductive. We also have a certain kind of leftist politics that prevented academics from writing about themselves as though it were too bourgeois, too professional, too narcissistic, too self-indulgent. (p. 167)

But couldn’t academics have as dense everyday practices as Brazilian peasants or some other “exotic” group academics long to study?

By ignoring our own experiences, we academics create cultural gaps in our analyses of Others. When we study Others we construct concepts that increase the distance between Others and us. Therefore, while aiming to make sense of the world, we also create a larger cultural rift between ourselves and the everyday life of Others. Why do we, I wonder, need to distance ourselves?

Baudrillard (1983b) explains that postmodernity is characterised as a process of dedifferentiation: differences between groups in postmodern society have increasingly vanished (also Rojek, 1995). We no longer can conveniently group people into distinct categories based on their social class, gender, sexuality, ethnic background or career. Postmodern society, according to Baudrillard, is a society of “hyperconformity”. Dedifferentiation has resulted as distinctions between people have imploded in the

society of simulation (Kellner, 1988). Simultaneously, meanings have become decentred: there are no “true” or “real” meanings as everything in simulacra is constructed by language. The meanings, therefore, are permanently unstable. In this society of abundant signs, the meanings are so redundant that “we have become gorged with meaning and it is killing us” (Baudrillard, 1987, p. 63). We have become a spongy mass, a black hole, that absorbs all meanings apathetically without comprehension (Baudrillard, 1983a). Therefore, meanings disappear “into” us. To reconstruct these vanishing meanings, we have to rely on relicts from earlier times: we have to turn to past cultures.

To bring back all past cultures, to bring back everything that one has destroyed, all that one has destroyed in joy and which one is reconstructing in sadness in order to try to live, to survive ... All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces. Playing with the pieces—that is post-modern (Baudrillard, 1984, p. 24).

Following Baudrillard's argument Academia, as part of the postmodern world, is also faced with dedifferentiation and the disappearance of meanings. Our option, it appears, is to reconstruct differences by creating Other cultures. To feel comfortable in our theoretical, logical and rational academic world that is unreal—should I say meaningless—in today's postmodern world, we, through our research, embrace nostalgic longings of the exotic, authentic, real culture of the Others.

In the process of postmodernism, I as an academic have also lost my meaning. I am, like the masses, dead as a subject. But to live, to survive, I construct my meaning from the pieces still available to me. Through my analysis of the exotic dances of the Others, I am creating meaning for my own academic experience. In addition, I reconstruct an authentic cultural meaning for myself. As a Finn, I actively assume an exotic, postcolonial Otherness to regain a difference from the rest of western academia. However, this difference is a decentred reality created through the simulacra of academic signs. What are Otherness, post colonialism and exoticism but language constructions whose meaning remains unstable as Academia struggles to understand the world. But like Baudrillard (1987) argues, “everywhere one seeks to produce meaning to make the world signify, to render it visible” (p. 63). Through these academic concepts, I have obtained, if not quite a visible identity, at least a readable identity. Perhaps the search for visible meanings manifests in the cultural dance performances? Through such spectacles, possibly, we aim to make sense of the multitude of meanings and signs connected to groups of people. Or possibly we aim to make sense of ourselves? We begin to recreate the difference between ourselves and the performing Others.

Epilogue

I still have one class left to teach today: my graduate class on Leisure and Physical Activity. My class meets at night to accommodate the schedules of our many part-time masters students who work during the day, tonight I have to cut my class short because Jim and I are driving up to Auckland to see *Riverdance*. We are going to meet the other members of my five-member contemporary dance company at the performance. I'm looking forward to watching a dance performance with my dancer friends. We've already spent significant time discussing the intricacies of Irish dance technique after the televised performance of *Riverdance*. However, I also have my reservations about *Riverdance* due to its very extensive and visible advertising campaign and its subsequent popularity.

I had forgotten that *Riverdance* wasn't only about Irish dance but also about flamenco, tap and Russian dance. As a matter of fact, alongside the passionate flamenco, the lightheartness of tap, and the flawless technicality of the Russian dance, the Irish dancing appeared robotic and repetitive.

Over coffee after the concert, my friends and I are bursting with impressions.

“Why have they merged these particular dance styles into one programme?” I wonder.

We enthusiastically begin to point out the similarities between the different dance pieces.

“It’s gotta be the shoes; all the dancers were wearing shoes unlike us contemporary dancers”, Barbara points out.

“And the rhythms, they needed the shoes to create the fascinating range of rhythms,” Debbie continues.

“The unison performance of the fast rhythms by the Irish dancers was impeccable,” Mia adds.

We conclude that all the dances have a strong rhythmical component resulting from shoes tapping concurrently. Somehow rhythm makes them popular, we theorise.

“But what about the story behind all the dancing?” Jim challenges. “As half Irish, I was impressed how the performance depicted the historical development of Irish culture and the influence of other cultures on the Irish tradition.”

“The plot was definitely simple enough to capture,” I say. “I understand that Irish culture was influenced by the Spanish. And then the Irish encountered African-American culture during the mass immigration to the States. But what about the Russian influence on Irish culture? When did that happen?”

Barbara reads from the programme: “The Irish dancers represent their past in a very stylised, popularised manner. In this process, traditional Irish dance has been modified to speak more to today’s audience. Contemporary Irish dance is sexier, faster and more spectacular”.

“Is that why contemporary dance hasn’t reached mass popularity in New Zealand?” Randy comments. “Aren’t we sexy enough, spectacular enough, fast enough and rhythmical enough?”

I suggest that for our next performance, we should choreograph pieces that have sexy costumes, simple plots and fast, unison rhythms. “We could get more audience and visibility that way.”

We all laugh at this suggestion, feeling a bit sad that art is subject to the commercial forces of popular culture. Then, experiencing unexplainable melancholy in the face of contemporary culture, I think about my paper on ethnic dance performances.

I realised that like the other cultural dance performances I want to write about, *Riverdance* is a reproduction of the traditional, made to correspond to the image of glorified, nostalgic Irishness. While it might boost the national spirit of Ireland, it is also a creation of capitalist forces to popularise dance and make money. Is this one way of making sense of Irishness in today’s commercial, postmodern society? I also ponder, my thoughts peppered with envy, why so many Others—the ordinary audience member—find this capitalist construction of Irishness so appealing while our contemporary dance performances interest a handful of people? Baudrillard (1983b) helps me make sense of my confusion. He asserts that the masses in the era of postmodernity concern themselves with spectacles like the mass produced *Riverdance*: “Messages are given to *them* (the masses), they only want some sign, they idolise the play of signs and stereotypes, they idolise any content so long as it resolves itself into a spectacular sequence” (p. 10, italics mine). *Riverdance* was definitely a spectacular performance and I considered it stereotypically Irish. Perhaps Baudrillard is right with his analysis of consumer behaviour today, but it is also interesting that he talks about “them” as if he himself is not included in the “mass”. Similarly, I create a distance between myself, the dancing academic and the Others, the non-dancing, easily impressed, “normal” audience. As an academic spectator, I make sense of the Others’ behaviour through my concepts of “exotic difference” and “nostalgic longing”. Since I am able to construct these meanings, does it mean that I am no longer dead as a subject? That I am again capable of creating difference and the lost meanings will reappear to me?

For Baudrillard, imagining oneself outside of “mass” does not mean the end of postmodern confusion. Rather, my sense of difference is itself a postmodern construct created within the simulation models that constitute the world (Kellner, 1988). Baudrillard argues further that models and codes structure

our everyday lives and such code systems, not us, constitute a system of differences for us in the society of simulations. For example, TV producers and producers of spectacles like *Riverdance* utilise TV codes to produce programmes. Obviously, academia produces its own coded system of differences. Individuals are mobilised in these coded systems of similarities and dissimilarities, of identities, and of other programmed differences (Kellner, 1988). Therefore, I also live within a coded system of academic concepts that map out differences in the world for me. Through these codes I am inscribed into the simulated order instead of breaking out from it. Therefore, I create difference from the other spectators through an academic code system (Other, mass, popular, commercial) like the producers create difference for the Irish from other ethnic groups through their commercial coding (sexy, spectacular, fast, rhythmical). I am as immersed into my coding system as the other spectators are in their modes. What can one do? asks Baudrillard himself. Tumble into total hopelessness, as in postmodern society one is unable to find any meaning outside of modulations of codes? Play with the remnants, suggests Baudrillard (1984), and rediscover pleasure in this game, a pleasure of irony. Instead of sexiness and rhythms, perhaps my next dance piece should be about irony—the irony of Otherness.

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