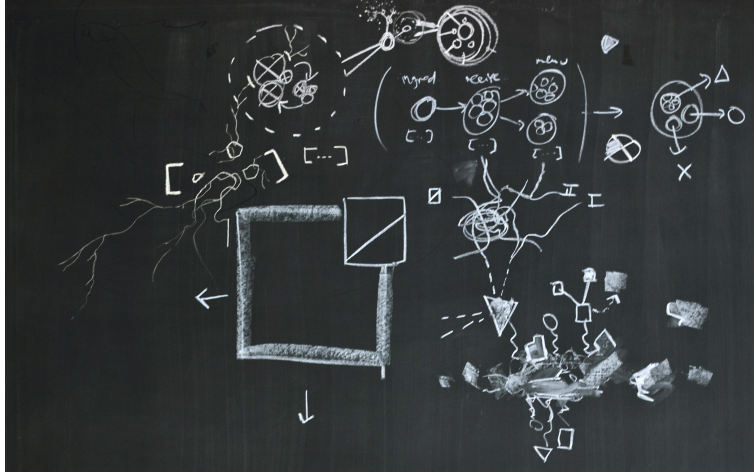


Dance Notation

Bertha Bermúdez Pascual



— *The Map is not the Territory. The Meal is not the Menu*, Nik Gaffney, 16-06-2012

Notation in Context

Defined as the recording of dance movement through the use of written symbols, dance notation remounts itself far back in time. These first notations are dated around 5,000 to 9,000 years ago in the time of early agricultural settlements. Mainly drawings on walls or pottery show bodies moving, in different formations. With the evolution of civilizations, written words became the next step in dance documentation. Pictorial remains were complemented with written records but still the style, pattern, and purpose of these ancient dances could not be depicted out of the document (Markessinis, 1995).

We could point at the XVth century as the century where dance notation appears as such, as a system.¹ After a long period of banning of the Roman Catholic Church – refusing to include dance practice into its ritual – the position of dance inside the society was re-established with the court of Louis XIV (Abad Carles, 2004). During this period different notation systems were developed depending on the styles of the dances. It is not until the XX century that notation systems start to focus on the body itself and not the style of the dance, and as a consequence abstract symbols replace drawings and words.

The book *Choreo-graphics: A Comparison of Dance Notation Systems from the Fifteenth Century to the Present* (Guest, 1989), gives an interesting and complete overview of these different western dance notation systems. Guest has synthesized and separated the different notation systems into five categories based on the way the system looks at movement and the devices used to notate it.

This is an overview of her classification:

1. Words and word abbreviation
2. Track drawings

3. Stick figures
4. Music notes systems
5. Abstract symbol systems

From my observations, I depict a constant relation between type of dance (folk, court, early ballet, ballet, modern, and contemporary dance) and a way of representation (notation system). Inside this relation there are i) notation systems that are bounded with the dance style and ii) notation systems related with the physicality of the human body. For both ways of approaching notation, socio-cultural and historical factors seem relevant to create the relation between the notation system and the human perspective, of the notator, towards movement.

Notation systems related with the dance style tend to die when the dance style changes or is discarded: like the baroque dance notations and many of the music notes systems. While the notation systems that focus on human movement and not a concrete dance style, preserve their life. Those are systems that, interestingly, were developed under the Industrial Revolution and First World War. They are the result of different sciences looking at movement, engineering, kinetics, architecture, dance, and mathematics. These are abstract notation systems where parameters of time, weight, space, dynamics, flow, and parts of the body are represented with symbols. Labanotation, Benesh Notation System, Eshkol-Wachman movement notation, and Axis Syllabus Classification/Notation System are some of the main systems that propose a way of notating where the syntax of the system is not related to a specific type of dance but to human movement.

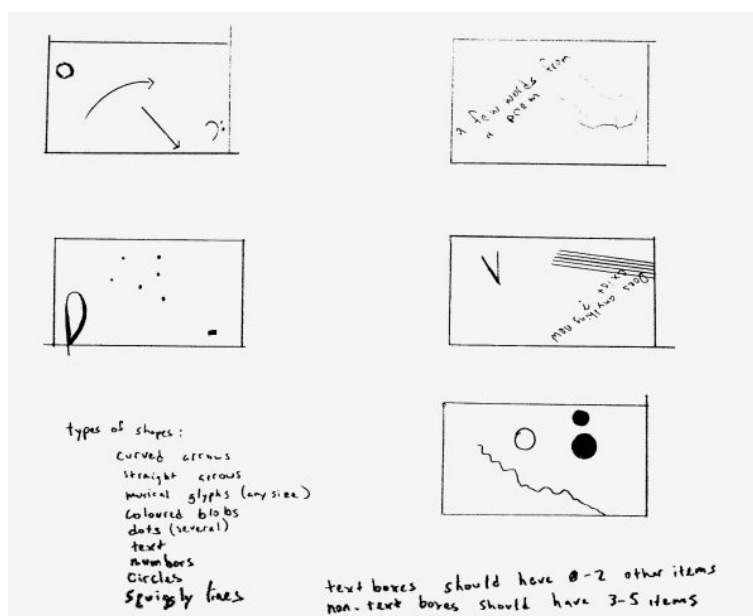
Throughout the development of notation systems their suitability within the practice of dance varies. They are transitory documents that vary in their function throughout dance history. The first systems, like the Cervera manuscript, were meant to accompany the learning of the dance. Many of the systems within the XV and XVIIIth centuries have this informative, memory like function. I guess the track drawings could have added the creative aspect of notating, designing the floor path before creating the dance. But these are personal speculations deriving from the creative relation between drawing and moving. From the XXth century on, it is known that, the notation systems were used to create and document. The systems were included in the studio, as part of the creative process – as a tool to create and reflect upon the choreography. Throughout the XX and XXIth centuries the relation between dance and notation fluxes between developing new non-standard ways of notating and the use of the established systems as tools for documentation and reenactment. New systems are created, where most cases are intrinsically related with the style of the dance. However some developed further the ideas around human movement.

Notation within Dance Teaching

Even though dance notation has existed since the origins of dance (I include here pre-historic paintings as notations), its implementation within the formation of dancers has not been pertinent since the second half of XXth century. Dance educations rarely include notation systems within their curriculums. This trend expands to the teachers since neither in the recent dance teachers departments such subject is included. Thus, it is very hard for dance teachers to insert this tool for reflection, analysis, and creation within their teaching method. Still, efforts are being done to insert notation in some curriculums and great results arise from such initiatives. Since 15 years the National Conservatory of Music and Dance in Paris provides dance students with Labanotation and Benesh Notation. If the students wish they can continue their formation to become dance notators. Since this initiative started a nice group of dance notators is in development,

actively working within dance companies, dance schools, and movement institutions in France. Their knowledge of the systems helps them create notations of contemporary works, assist creative processes, reset dances, and develop and analyze dance material. The accessibility throughout the web also helps in informing upon the systems. And there are plenty of resources to come closer to the systems which you can find at the end of this document as a list of resources on the notation systems.

My personal experience learning the introductory course of Laban and Benesh was extremely rich. After passing the phase of drawing, where handling well the movement of the pencil seemed much harder than expected, I realized how easily my mind was adjusting to this new way of looking at movement. I was mentally following a dancer, looking at her from behind realizing all the directions, transitions, and little details she would do. The weight of my body was taken away by the life of the movements the dancers were creating in space. Suddenly notating them became a beautiful practice. Practicing both systems felt like dancing on a page, an elongation of the embodiment of dance performed by drawings. The amount of analysis, one needs to do when writing movement, is extreme since all parameters need to be accurate. When writing down movement one needs to think of the reader (how will someone understand what is written?) since the syntax of the notation systems allows different writings from the same movement. Definition, synthesis, choice making, accuracy, invention, mistaking, and drawing are skills one can get from such practice. I recommend losing fear or misconceptions on notation systems: they are a symbolic perspective on movement, not on dance styles, which allows space for reflection and creation while safeguarding our heritage for very long time. Finding an entrance into any of the existing systems provides potential for long term documentation of our own practice while enhancing our reflection and analysis skills. Dance notation, is a creative practice that definitely helps the understanding of our actions, purposes, and wishes – always useful to document and develop our own knowledge upon what we do.



— Sketches, Charles Hutchins, 09-09-2013

Resources

BENESH

Centres

<http://centrebenesh.fr/>

http://www.annm.org/documents_liens.html

Software

<http://dancewrite.com/OpenBenesh/Welcome.html>

<http://www.credo-interactive.com/>

In-Formation

<http://notation.free.fr/benesh/index.html>

<https://www.rad.org.uk/study/Benesh>

LABAN

Centres

<http://www.ickl.org/>

<http://www.dancenotation.org/>

<https://dance.osu.edu/research/dnb>

<http://www.lodc.org/>

http://www.annm.org/documents_liens.html

<http://www.annm.org/>

Software

<https://dance.osu.edu/research/dnb/labam-writer>

http://dance.osu.edu/3_research_gallery/labam_reader.html

<http://notation.free.fr/labam/ressources/index.html>

In-Formation

<http://labamlab.osu.edu/>

<http://www.conservatoiredeparis.fr/etudes/diplomes-delivres/danse/#c451>

<http://www.labamnotation.net/>

ESKHOL-WACHMAN MOVEMENT NOTATION

Centres

<http://noaeshkol.org/about-eshkol-wachman-movement-notation/>

In-Formation

<http://noaeshkol.org/books/>

<http://noaeshkol.org/articles/>

AXIS SYLLABUS

Centres

<http://www.nomadiccollege.org/>

In-Formation

<http://axissyllabus.org/resources>

1. The Benesh Institute & Benesh Movement Notation. (n.d.). Retrieved January 10, 2017, from <https://www.rad.org.uk/study/Benesh>
2. Carlés, A. A. (2004). *Historia del ballet y de la danza moderna*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.
3. D. (n.d.). Axis Syllabus. Retrieved January 10, 2017, from <http://www.corpusweb.de>
4. Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation Center – Home. (n.d.). Retrieved January 10, 2017, from <http://noaeshkol.org>
5. Guest, A. H. (1989). *Choreo-graphics: A comparison of dance notation systems from the fifteenth century to the present*. New York: Gordon and Breach.
6. Markessinis, A., & Hightower, R. (1995). *Historia de la danza desde sus orígenes*. Madrid: Librerías Deportivas Esteban Sanz.
7. Notation Laban | contexte. (n.d.). Retrieved January 10, 2017, from http://notation.free.fr/lablan/contexte/bio1_1.html

NOTES

1. Descriptions of dance exist much earlier than this, with beautiful proposals already within the *Nāṭya Śāstra* created around 500–200 BC. Many other descriptions have appeared in other texts since then, but here I am trying to create a difference between a dance description and a notation system. The systems are, for me, a repetitive syntax of symbols that can be applied to many descriptions of movements through time.