**Mass Dance**

**Summary**

The early years of the twentieth century saw a proliferation of mass spectacles, grand events with thousands of participants, frequently involving non-professional performers. These spectacles often re-enacted historical events (*Paterson Strike Pageant, The Storming of the Winter Palace*) or celebrated technological innovation or national achievements (*18BL, Olympic Youth*). Performances crossed both geographical and political borders, encouraged by parties from across the political spectrum and taking place in various countries, including Germany, Italy, Russia, and the United States. The aim of these mass spectacles was to unite a crowd, which could number thousands of people, behind a particular position or idea. By attempting to unite a majority, these performances often ignored, isolated, or marginalized others. Dance and movement techniques were at the very forefront of this genre. The body became a central motif, functioning as an emblem of political emancipation, ethnic superiority, nostalgic tradition, and/or as a mechanized symbol of modernity.

**Exposition**

Fascism’s celebration of mechanization led to one of the most fascinating yet flawed examples of mass spectacle: the Italian *18BL* (Florence 1934). Twenty thousand spectators watched this event, which gave the principal, heroic role to a truck. Yet the moving human body was equally important. Choreographed by Angela Sartorio, the movements were influenced by gymnastics and brought the characteristics of the machine directly into the performance. Given the mass spectacle’s innate connection with large-scale sporting events, such movements seemed inevitable. In fact, the link between gymnastics and mass performance was made clearer in Mary Wigman’s co-choreographed *Olympic Youth* (Berlin 1936). While presumably celebrating internationalism and explicitly celebrating German culture, this mass spectacle, produced in conjunction with the Berlin Olympic Games, also divided the participants between young and old, male and female, ‘Aryan’ and Jew. The choreographed movements were vital to this. Certainly there was a sense of united community, made explicit by the formation of the concentric Olympic rings. But it was a particularly gendered performance with boys and girls fulfilling entirely separate roles in keeping with Nazi convictions, the girls almost static and using props while the boys freely moved across the playing space.

Nazi Germany placed considerable emphasis on the moving body as a celebration of national superiority. This was clear in the 1934 and 1935 German Dance Festivals, organized by Rudolf Laban, at this time a key player in the Nazi *Gleichschaltung* (reorganization) of dance. In the 1920s Laban had devised the *Bewegungschor* (movement choir), a form that brought together hundreds of participants performing choreographed movements, advocating ‘dance for all’. Despite the Nazi attack on ‘degenerate’ modernism, German dance retained avant-garde characteristics and these were celebrated in the dance festivals. The aim was to make dance an integral part of German cultural society; Laban travelled across the country in order to locate new performers. Under his influence mass dance in the German Reich was expressive, free-flowing and connected with local community. After 1937, however, Propaganda Minster Joseph Goebbels decided that Laban’s style no longer reflected the central tenets of Nazism.

The connection between dance and nationalism was explored further in an indigenous mass performance genre created by the Nazi party: the *Thingspiel.* Performed in large outdoor spaces, the *Thingspiel,* like *Olympic Youth*, celebrated a mythical German identity. The body was again a vital motif and there were a number of examples of choreographed marching which suggested harmony and moral regeneration. The performances were both historical in focus and modern in scope, as seen in an example like *The German Destiny* (1935), which celebrated history and modernity with a wheel dance formation, symbolising ongoing tradition and infused with a joyous vigour resulting in quickening circle movements. But this self-proclaimed choric dance was also described as emblematic of modern times and sensibilities. The performance, reflecting Nazism as a political system, nostalgically looked backwards while simultaneously striding forwards.

In many ways, these essentially fascist performances were remarkably similar in scope and scale to celebrated examples of mass spectacle in Russia. The Russian mass performance, *The Mystery of Freed Labour* (Petrograd 1920), used dance to make a satirical comment akin to a *commedia dell’arte* play. Watched by 35,000 people, the enormous groups of workers collected together on a set of steps so that they resembled gymnastic troupes while those representing the exploitative rulers were at the top using clowning and acrobatics to represent their previous position of authority. The comparison between the disciplined movements of the workers and the ridiculous gesticulations of the exploiters meant that the individual and collective bodies were used to make a visually arresting political point. In the same year came Nikolai Evreinov’s *The Storming of the Winter Palace* (Petrograd 1920), perhaps the most well-known modernist mass spectacle. As in *The Mystery of Freed Labour*, dance was used to satirical effect. Re-enacting the battle between the Reds (the Communists) and the Whites (the Tsarists), the former maintained rigorous disciplined actions throughout. However, the movement of the Whites, directed by Alexander Kerensky, became more chaotic and disordered, thereby visually commenting on the two sides.

Mass dance was also used to promote the interests of minority groups, particularly in America. For example, the Jewish people in *The Romance of a People* (Chicago World’s Fair 1933), using Nathan Vizonsky’s choreographed movements, promoted a profound sense of unity, particularly as the chorus moved as one to suggest mankind’s universal emergence from the same centre point. Similarly, in W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Star of Ethiopia* (New York 1913) the dancing African figure was meant to transport the audience back to a pre-slavery landscape. The *Women’s Suffrage Pageant* (Washington DC 1913) also used symbolic dance between the historical period narratives creating the very sense of freedom and bodily emancipation enjoyed by many of the early twentieth-century dancers on the professional stage.

Mass dance continues to be used to uphold political utopias, as in North Korea’s mass games, or to celebrate particular occasions, such as the opening ceremony for the London Olympics (2012). Using the connectivity potential of technology, one could even claim flash mob events as twenty-first-century incarnations of mass dance.

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**References and further reading**

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**Paratexts**

Poster for *18BL,* Alessandro Blasetti Archive, Rome

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Design by Yury Annenkov for Evreinov’s *Storming of the Winter Palace*

<http://web.mmlc.northwestern.edu/~mdenner/Drama/plays/agit/agit1.html>