



Communication as Performance and the Performativity of Communication

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Proceedings of the 2014 International Colloquium on Communication

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Moving from Performance to Performativity: Reconsidering the Rhetoricity of Mimesis and Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*

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Dance is often overlooked in communication research as a valuable analytical tool. The mimetic movement of dance provides another way of seeing how the rhetoricity of performance can represent worlds, construct ideas, challenge truths, or alter attitudes. This paper investigates the communicative potential of performance and its patterns of public susasiveness by using dance as a concept and object of movement. Specifically, this paper explores the potential for persuasion that attends performance as a mimetic movement between an idea and its representation, an original and its copy, a reality and its imitation, which can offer opportunities for social understanding, ontological reflection, and political inquiry. This paper first proposes an understanding of mimesis as an embodied form of movement that allows for alterity or otherness by making contact with or referring to something different or differently. This “dance” of referents is mimetically processed during performance *and* moved into performativity. In part two of this paper, I examine this double sense of mimesis as a socio-rhetorical process by exploring how Alvin Ailey's seminal dance piece, *Revelations*, mimetically moves referents in performance. The dance's sixty years of repetition—its performativity—provide an opening to investigate the mimetic and rhetorical force of a performance over time. Finally, this paper argues that the rhetorical import of *Revelations* has to do with how its embodied mimetic action fosters persuasive potential in “sensuous moment[s] of knowing” that strive for change, difference, and even revelation (Taussig 1993, 45).

Mimesis and Dance: Moving from Performance to Performativity

Walter Benjamin posits that dance is one of the oldest forms of the mimetic faculty. In cultic societies, the mimetic faculty of dance “was really a life-determining force for the ancients” (Benjamin 1999, 721). To be able to dance like others, to be in common through movement, is a natural behavior and central to the discovery of meaning and experiencing the world. This suggests that mimesis is a way of knowing that affirms human ways of living by repeating experiences, lessons, rituals, etc. It is not a static activity but an active learning that recalls, produces, and communicates similarities. Mimesis is a concept that has ancient origins (Plato and Aristotle). It has been studied extensively in books by Auerbach (2003), Gebauer and Wulf (1992), Halliwell (2002) Potolsky (2006); considered by scholars in communication, performance, anthropology, and dance; and questioned by postmodern theorists such as Baudrillard (1994) and Deluze (1999). Building on these efforts with a dance-

oriented perspective, I aim to direct attention to mimesis as a kind of movement that in performance has potential for rhetorical alterity or otherness.

First, the definition of mimesis as imitation suggests a movement with creative potential. To imitate, copy, or mimic implies the transfer of an original to a reproduction. This mimetic work was once valued as an educational tool (i.e. the imitating of role models) in oratory training, literary production, and poetic practices “between the height of the Roman empire and the end of the eighteenth century” (Potolsky 2006, 50). While this work depends on an original, imitation can result in generating something new with a form of intertextuality that moves between established forms and “other” models, narratives, images, ideas, etc. With such movement, something else is revealed, opened up, or created, which is a kind of rhetorical making. Take, for example, parody. Parody is a form of imitation that modifies and mutates its original in order to create an alternative image of that original. Robert Hariman maintains that the imitative work of parody places language beside itself, thereby showing the original as other: “As the act of replication replicates, everything is potentially both where it is and beside itself” (2008, 254). This movement is rhetorical in that it recasts images and arguments for public reconsideration; it puts on display something different or other.¹ This kind of making functions by imitating differently. Hence, imitation can be understood as a way to make otherness, a creative act of turning something old into something different (without letting go of its referent).

Second, when understood in terms of representation, mimesis functions as a social practice. The practice of representation is an act or action of symbolic expression. This interpersonal activity makes symbolic worlds (Gebauer & Wulf 1992). The representation of worlds, persons, and actions is a primary function of theatrical performance. When viewed from this orientation (as representation), mimesis relates to a particular kind of social action or doing. Whether on a stage or in a courtroom, representation depends on the participation of an audience. In this way, mimesis is “a representation *for* someone, and not only a representation *of* something else” (Potolsky 2006, 74). It is a dynamic action that plays with and moves between symbolic meaning and physical representation. The symbolic is given physical shape and material form. In this way, mimesis transverses between performed happenings and spectators, a

¹ In addition to Hariman’s essay on parody, several other rhetorical analyses of imitation are worth noting. In his essay about imitative power after the Emancipation Proclamation, “The Radical Politics of Imitation in the Nineteenth Century,” Kirt Wilson explains how throughout the nineteenth century African Americans used mimesis to “obtain literacy, assimilate social norms, and pursue personal ambitions” (93). In these ways, mimesis was a mode of transformation: “Imitation was to be the engine that drove social change” (99). In “*The West Wing’s* Prime-Time Presidency: Mimesis and Catharsis in a Postmodern Romance,” Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles focus on how the mimetic representation of the U.S. presidency in *The West Wing* “frequently offer[s] audiences new visions of this political institution or revised biographies of the nation’s chief executives” (212). Such mimetic work fosters a “freedom from tradition and an activation of difference” (212). All three of these essays suggest that imitation as a rhetorical strategy functions to change, create or transform; it is an active movement.

movement of symbolic meaning. In her book on the politics of performance, Peggy Phelan claims that representation produces “ruptures and gaps: it fails to reproduce the real exactly” (2004, 2). As such, the movement of mimesis as representation offers the possibility for political change and, I suggest, an opening for rhetorical exchange. Because a representation is not “real,” the seeing or experiencing of a representation opens up ontological possibilities of the social and political by not relying on established metaphors or referents (Phelan 2004). My point here is that mimesis as representation contains the potential for rhetorical effort in a movement that creates an opening to not only see but also experience other, whether that other has something to do with political/social identity or knowledge (by creating distance from its referent).

As imitation and representation, mimesis comes into view as a faculty of thought that relates to the making and performing of ideas, images, and experiences that are and are not like their originals. This mimetic movement generates opportunities for change, variation, and transformation by resonating with something that has recognizable form, value, weight, purpose, etc. Such reverberations can let go of or stay connected to their referents. In this way, mimesis “speaks to our desire for universality, coherence, unity, tradition, and on the other [hand], it unravels that unity through improvisations, embodied rhythm...” (Diamond 1997, v). Mimesis moves between what is known and toward what could be known. Thus, it corresponds to the dynamic nature of human communication, which is sustained by regularity and modified by innovation. The rhetorical features of mimesis - the persuasive potential of the copy not in terms of truth, but in terms of possibility - appear within this movement.

As the movement of dance is fundamentally mimetic, it can assist in bringing the potential for rhetorical otherness or alterity into closer view. The movement of dance is special in that it relies on a memory of technique (sequencing and timing of steps or positions), while at the same time “forgetting” such technique to activate or release an emotion or idea; it strives for something beyond its referents by navigating between the known and unknown. In acts of performance, dancers embody this movement or choreography - a kind of copying - a form of mimetic action. This copying, however, is not exact; all bodies are different and therefore move differently. Even when movement is repeated, it can't be repeated exactly the same way each time. Hence, the movement of dance can be understood as a mimetic process of figuring how to move. When put on display (made public) in performance, the movement of dance has the rhetorical potential to move thought - make ideas, challenge truths, or alter attitudes.

Consider that dance can be understood as a kind of utterance, an act of speech. Dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz argues that “dance movements contain speech like qualities that contain meaning beyond the formal, aesthetic shapes and sequences of movement detailed by the body in motion” (2004b, 66). Dance is a system of communication, a “corporeal orature,” that contains “performative gestures that cite contexts beyond the dance” (67). Whether performativity is understood through J.L. Austin's or Judith Butler's theories, it refers to the expression of an embodied action in public. As put by Elin Diamond, when a performance gives way to performativity, “we have access to cultural meanings and critique” (1996, 5). In other words, the moving from the thing embodied (performance) to the thing done (performativity) is what enables its potential for rhetorical alterity or otherness. The first level of mimetic action is in how the body speaks by copying, echoing, mirroring or emulating in the dancing of

choreography (i.e. performance). The second level of mimetic action has to do with the presence and participation of an audience that is pulled “this way and that,” registering the sense of both “sameness and difference, of being like, and being other” (Taussig 1993, 129). This double mimetic action provides a way of reading the rhetorical force of Ailey’s *Revelations* in its performance *and* performativity.

The (Rhetorical) Dancing of *Revelations*

Revelations premiered in 1960 at the Kaufmann Concert Hall, 92nd Street YM-YWCA in New York City. It has consistently been on stage since, and has become “the single most-performed work in the annals of modern dance and African-American dance theatre” (Manning 2004b, 211). This note appeared in the program at the 1960 premiere:

This suite explores motivations and emotions of black religious music, which, like its heir the blues, takes many forms – true spirituals with their sustained melodies, song-sermons, gospel and holy blue – songs of trouble, of love, of deliverance. (Manning 2004b, 213)

Such orientation to the dance is also on the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AADT) website where *Revelations* is first associated with “African-American spirituals, song-sermons, gospel songs and holy blues” (*Revelations*). It is only after this mention that the dance is described as a tribute to African-American cultural heritage: “sometimes sorrowful, sometimes jubilant, but always hopeful” (*Revelations*). Hence, the mimetic action between the music and choreography of *Revelations* is important to how the dance communicates. This is the first level of mimetic activity, bodies moving to the music that embody not only the words, but also the worlds the lyrics reference. The second level of mimetic activity occurs as *Revelations* is danced over time. This double mimetic action happens during the dancing in performance and in its repeated performances over the last 54 years. I argue that by reading *Revelations* through this double mimetic action - the movement between performance and performativity - its rhetorical potential contributes to its status as a great work of modern dance. Its capacity to move between particular referents of African American struggles and universal references to the human condition speaks to the endurance of the human life.²

² Scholars in dance and communication studies have mostly studied *Revelations*. Two authors are worth mentioning because their work correlates and transverses with many themes and ideas in this essay. Thomas DeFrantz’s book, *Dancing Revelations*, underscores the importance of the dance to Ailey’s choreographic career as well as the presence of African American dancers and culture to the history of modern dance. Susan Manning’s essay, “Danced Spirituals,” places the dance in context with other dances set to African American spirituals to argue that they not only address “shifting images of whiteness and blackness” but also shifting definitions of masculinity, femininity, and nationality (83). Manning’s ideas are explored in more complete detail in her book *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*. While this essay borrows from both these scholars, it instead uses *Revelations* as a way to think about the rhetorical potential that is possible

To verbally capture performance, dance or otherwise, is a struggle. To account for the liveliness that happens on a stage - the nuance of timing and expression; the subtle gestures of a face, arm, hip; the visceral rhythms of a moving body - is an arduous, seemingly impossible task. Ideally, this paper would come with a performance of *Revelations*, which you would watch right now (a thirty-minute pause). I cannot account for “the whole” of *Revelations*, and my goal is not to do so. My purpose is to demonstrate how the double mimetic movement of *Revelations* moves from performance to performativity, from a referent to an otherwise. I begin with the music because its rhythms and words are vital to the mimetic action in the dance. They are the site of contact that is set in motion by the choreography and dancers. The songs are the referents and, as such, the music is a vital partner in the communicative efficacy of its double mimetic action.

“*Revelations* began with the music” (Ailey 1995, 97). Ailey chose the music for *Revelations* carefully and described the dance as “a gigantic suite of spirituals” (99). He chose the songs because “they are poetic, and the rhythm that grows out of them is black rhythm. They are a truthful and real coming together of music and ideas through dance” (101). In his book that charts the development of Ailey’s career through *Revelations*, Thomas DeFrantz (2004a) notes that the original version included sixteen musical selections and a live chorus, and ran for over an hour. Today, *Revelations* has three sections (“Pilgrim of Sorrow,” “Take Me to the Water,” and “Move, Members, Move!”), each with a different set of spirituals, and runs about thirty minutes.³ The spirituals in *Revelations* are a conduit for the dancers to embody particular kinds of human struggles and experiences, which serve as the first level of mimetic activity. According to Susan Foster (1986), this kind of mimetic effort is a syntactic principle that “gives internal coherence to [a] dance, one that complements and resonates against [a] dance’s [reference] to the world” (93). The bodies that move with and through the music reverberate with the words of the spirituals, and also the *worlds* those lyrics signify. The rhythms of the spirituals amplify these *worlds* by making them visual, aural, and kinetic as the dancers move. At the first level of mimetic action, the embodied movement between bodies, words, and rhythms reverberate between particular and universal referents that produce opportunities for thinking differently.

Due to constraints of space, I provide only one example from the opening scene of the first section “Pilgrim of Sorrow.” This scene, titled “I’ve been Buked,” is accompanied by an African American spiritual of the same name. Its lyrics make reference to the need for spiritual deliverance and guidance.⁴ The dance begins when the curtains rise with a

in cultural repetition (i.e. mimetic action). *Revelations* is indeed an important historical artifact, but my position here is not contributing to that conversation directly.

³ In *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture*, Thomas DeFrantz charts the choreographic changes made to *Revelations* over the years to highlight the dance’s relationship to the politics of dance and society from the 1960’s onward.

⁴ I’ve been ‘buked an’ I’ve been scorned, Yes, I’ve been ‘buked an’ I’ve been scorned, Children I’ve been ‘buked an’ I’ve been scorned, I’ve been talked about sho’s you’ born. Dere is trouble all over dis worl’, Yes, Dere is trouble all over dis worl’, Children. Dere is trouble all over dis worl’ Dere is trouble all over dis worl’ Ain’ gwine lay my ‘ligion down,

group of dancers standing motionless in a wedge formation, while the chorus hums slowly, a cappella. Once the chorus begins to sing, “I’ve been buked, and I’ve been scorned,” the dancers in unison roll their heads to their sides, while bending their knees and leaning their torsos also to the side. One arm follows the torso, reaching out past the bent leg (fingers fully extended), and the other arm moves to hold the back, as if in pain. The movement from the opening stance to the side bend embodies the slow, contemplative tempo of the song as well as referencing the action of “being” scorned. Once the tempo quickens with the words “there is trouble all over this world,” the dancers disperse separately all over the stage; they move their scorned bodies out into the world they share. Whether the dancers leap in the air, undulate on the ground, or transverse the stage, they continue to embody the lyrics, which signify a world that struggles and strives. The bodies on stage move not with abandon, but with restraint, as if being tugged in different directions. At the end of the scene, they repeat the opening group wedge formation and movement: “The repetition suggests that no matter how far away the dancers travel, they must come together physically, as pieces of a larger sculptured mosaic, to complete the communal expression of spirituality” (DeFrantz 2004a, 6). Their last movement, accompanied by the lyric “sho’s you’ born,” is one of simple, communal devotion, arms, heads, and eyes looking up toward the sky, heaven, God; one by one, they each lower their arms down to their sides in sharp, percussive accents, while still keeping their faces lifted. It is “as if” they could be (re)born, made different or other. The embodied mimetic effort of “I’ve Been Buked” in performance puts on display a movement between communal struggle, individual devotion, God, man, Heaven and Earth. The otherness generated by the movement of these referents suggests that even in struggle, sorrow or scorn, there is the potential for human movement. This mimetic movement references an experience of human suffering that is striving toward a different world.

The first level of mimetic action in *Revelations* – the performance of movement to African-American spirituals – is an active embodiment of songs and rhythms that make contact with two different referents. First, the spirituals reference a past of inhumane suffering. According to Ailey, the spirituals reflect his own “feelings about being pressed into the ground of Texas” where he grew up (1995, 101). His childhood experiences in Texas, “a charter member of the racist South,” involved not only racism and poverty, but also church and song (1995, 19). Ailey heard many of the spirituals chosen for *Revelations* during his time in Texas. Second, the bodily presence of African Americans on stage in 1960 referred to a future wish, a hope that the world could be different. When *Revelations* first premiered in 1960, the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. was well underway, and it is no surprise that the presence of African-American dancers on concert stages during Ailey’s time was rather limited and bleak. Although some could find work in dances with ethnic themes, many classically trained dancers

No, Ain’ gwine lay my ‘ligion down, Children. Ain’ gwine lay my ‘ligion down, Ain’ gwine lay my ‘ligion down. I’ve been ‘buked I’ve been scorned, Yes I’ve been ‘buked I’ve been scorned, Children. I’ve been ‘buked I’ve been scorned. I’ve been talked about sho’s you’ born (“Study Guide”).

left New York to perform in Europe (Dunning 1996). In her book about American modern dance, Julia Foulkes (2002) suggests that the lack of opportunity for African-American dancers was a key reason why Ailey started to choreograph. With *Revelations*, Ailey put African-American bodies on stage and in motion. DeFrantz notes that performances of *Revelations* after its premiere “trumped derisive speculation about the possibilities of African American concert dance” (2004a, 15). Manning maintains that this success has to do with how the dance blurs the boundaries between modern dance and Negro dance (2004b, 211). Hence, music and bodies make reference to particular past experiences, which demonstrate the *human* struggle in the efforts of African Americans for rights and recognition politically, socially, and artistically. My reading of *Revelations* has sought to highlight how the dance mimetically and rhetorically moves difference or otherness as it shifts from performance to performativity.

This argument becomes clearer as the dance is examined at the second level of embodied mimesis, the repetition of *Revelations* over time. Shortly after the success of *Revelations*, AAADT became a resident company of the 51st Street YWCA’s Clark Center for the Performing Arts. Essentially, *Revelations* paved the way for an accessible venue for African-American dance: “Ailey did identify a community of black dancers and allowed his work to address a black audience and, through this increased visibility, set in motion increased opportunities – social and political power – for African diaspora dance artists” (DeFrantz 2004a, 21). In 1962, the U.S. State Department chose AAADT for its Southeast Asia Tour. Ailey (1995) believed that the popularity of *Revelations* was the primary reason for this choice. The tour was part of President John F. Kennedy’s “President’s Special International Program for Cultural Presentations.” These tours were designed to “correct and humanize the image of the American people held by other peoples” (Martin 1998, 91). *Revelations* received rave reviews throughout the tour and several that pointed toward an embodiment of universality in its audiences. In Sydney, Australia, one reviewer remarked that after *Revelations*, “[he] was not the only one who felt the urge to rush up on stage and join in the hand-clapping, singing and dancing” (Dunning 1996, 151). In Japan, Ailey’s choreography was hailed for its “stupendous sensitivity,” humanity, and imagination (163). Upon his return, Ailey (1995) suggested that most of what Asians knew about African Americans was generally negative, but felt that his work, *Revelations* in particular, enabled Asians to identify with the African-American struggle as they too had been involved in similar struggles. The rhetorical import of *Revelations* has something to do with its performative movement, as the dance is repeated. Performances of *Revelations* facilitated a social process of human understanding about particular and common struggles of living as well as embodying the potential for change, for something other. Hence, the persuasive qualities of early performances of *Revelations* (its performativity) pointed beyond its referents.

AAADT’s website describes *Revelations* as a cultural treasure, beloved by generations of fans: “The dance is positioned as “an enduring classic,” a tribute to one of America’s richest treasures, the African-American cultural heritage – “sometimes sorrowful, sometimes jubilant, but always hopeful.” *Revelations* is still understood and presented as a dance articulating (and performing) a humanizing message embodied by spiritual songs by referring to past African American experiences. Recent dance

reviews of *Revelations* testify to this claim. Carol Cling (2012), writing for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, notes that *Revelations* burst forth with a “heightened energy” that gathered the cheering, clapping, and singing along in “an outpouring of infectious kinetic joy.” In reference to a Moscow performance of the dance, Kathy Lally (2011) concludes that “the performance was powerful, the dancers beautiful, elegant, and intelligent, and the Russian audience felt it, clapping and clapping and clapping again.” Recalling dancing *Revelations* for AAADT, Renee Robinson comments “[a]udiences know that dance ... The electricity that comes from the audience and that we give back to them, that happens every time. Who could get tired of that kind of vibration?” (quoted in Seibert 2012). It seems that the mimetic action in *Revelations*, its repetitions of otherness, still speak fifty-five years after its premiere.

Between Rhetoric and Performance

One might ask, then, what separates *Revelations* from other “classic” dance performances? There is something different (or “other”) about *Revelations* that is not like *Swan Lake* or *The Nutcracker*. *Swan Lake* is a powerful demonstration of the technical skill of the ballet form. Generally, audiences are drawn to the ballet not for its message, but for the quality of its dancing. Dance companies both big and small perform *The Nutcracker* all over the U.S. It has become a holiday tradition; for many, it is the only dance performance seen on a regular basis. *Revelations* seems different, which might have to do with its mimetic action(s). *Revelations* demonstrates the capacity of dance to foster a “sensuous moment of knowing” and the rhetorical force of the performative (Taussig 1993, 45). In this way, *Revelations* is indeed a masterpiece. Its multiple levels of embodied mimetic actions foster the potential for otherness that holds over time because they communicate in a manner that maintains contact with past particular struggles, emotions, or institutions that make reference to basic, universal human experiences. In other words, the referents at play in *Revelations* speak to something different, something beyond their points of contact.

I maintain that this mimetic movement in *Revelations* has rhetorical form. This is not a movement that results in a public display of persuasive speech, but a movement that fosters what Thomas Farrell calls social knowledge. Farrell argues, “the over-arching function of social knowledge is to transform the society into a community” (1976, 11). In particular situations, new social knowledge can be generated that reflects the social and political changes for particular groups by “providing pertinence, form, and context to the data of our experiences” (12). Thus, social knowledge contributes to how communities understand events, imagine alternatives, and change directions. As *Revelations* demonstrates, the mimetic faculty is one way social knowledge can be produced. Consider that the early performances of *Revelations* functioned to bring about positive images of African-American culture with the aim of altering perceptions about African Americans during a time of social discord. Ailey noted that his aim with *Revelations* was to show the coming, growth, and reach of African-American culture and to project a “proper” African-American image (Ailey 1995, 98). Such rhetorical action suggests that the mimetic function of dance “is a corrective one” that “yields a better version of life [and] imitative of the ideal and not the actuality” (Martin 2004, 51). In addition, as DeFrantz has noted, the dance also made “black bodies visible, if not dominant in the

discourse of modernist American dance” (2004a, 21). In this way, the rhetorical production of social knowledge in early performances of *Revelations* spoke to the potential for change, difference, or otherness. Can the same be true today? *Revelations* does not change (choreography, costumes, music), but the world around it continues to shift. Even so, *Revelations* still moves rhetorically by maintaining contact with its past while repeating the possibility that life could and should be other, made better or different. It refuses to give up.

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