



Round dance

Round dance has been a dance figure in its own right since time immemorial. A myriad of paintings discovered on the walls of caves dating back to the Palaeolithic period (at a time where people were only hunter-gatherers) and to the Neolithic period (around 7000 B.C., when communities became sedentary to focus on breeding and farming) bear witness to this: men formed a circle, performed a round dance around each other or twirled around and around. In these types of gatherings, the question that comes to mind is that of the centre. The centre can be composed of musicians, a totem, a burning fire... Or can be a void, an emptiness, to be filled.

Yet, one thing is clear: this dance is centripetal and not centrifugal. As the performers contemplate the centre, this dance is directed towards the focal point that bonds the community together. The resulting pleasure and/or ecstasy is an elementary experience that every participant feels in their own flesh. Its means of transmission builds on the social aspect, corporal reflexes and a movement pattern that liberates the conscious memory of the group. What Nietzsche called “the body’s great reason” is at work in these dances, created as channels for attaining unity, oneness, in times before the culture of writing, of structuration and of individuation initiated in our modern-day societies.

Should we speak about archaism in this culture of the “not yet” where the subject, which Western thought has been holding so dear since the 17th century, has not been convened? The round is frequently linked, in our minds, to “traditional” dances or to “folk” dances. Does it have a role to play in 20th and 21st century choreographic art, qualified as contemporary and performative? In other words, is it still a key figure of dance today?

1. The round as the expression of a group portraying itself

The round is an ensemble that does not lie within art and does not refer to an artist. Round dancing, enjoyed by everyone, was generally part of everyday life and was even part of community work, like in Brittany where, for example, it was used when threshing an area or when making an earthen floor for a home, where everyone compacted the fresh clay with their feet, stepping in time with the others. In moments like this, participants did not perceive it as a dance, the same holds true when the community got together to invoke (rain dance), to give courage (war dance), or to please the gods, like the Egyptians, the Greeks or the Romans would do. It is the result of a social life that none escape.



For the **Aka pygmies**, dance plays this same role and is inseparable from the community's socio-cultural events. It is part and parcel of ceremonies related to the inauguration of new encampments, hunting expeditions and funerals, and plays an essential role in group cohesion. It is organized according to social connections based within, and it is the "great female figures", responsible for the survival of the community, who enter the scene first. The men follow behind, with initiated master dancers first of all, then everyone circles around the musicians. Choreographic figures usually relate to hunting; dance steps imitate the progression of the group through the forest. Occasionally, a soloist comes on the scene to perform a specific step.

This elementary and archaic structuration, in the sense that the word refers to the tradition of the development process, also exists in practices performed during Amerindian Pow- Wows, or performed by the Batak people of Sumatra or by North American shakers. It is driven by what Nietzsche perceives as a one-of-a-kind, transcending point of reference that offers a society the opportunity to portray itself.

The gesture is, above all, assimilated to hunters, farmers, warriors, but not to dancers. The notion of style is quite imperceptibly evoked; good performers are essentially performers who persevere, who put their energy to work for structuring social life. The approach they take is not defined by an external perspective but by what they, themselves, feel.

The round expresses senses, feelings but also desire: individual pleasure and ecstasy are subject to the desire of the whole group. Dance, as such, becomes a channel that provides access to collective movement through the perception that the dancers have and through the action that they initiate within.

It is this mechanism that is at work in the ***Rond de Saint-Vincent*** (*Saint Vincent's Round Dance*), which became popular in the 90s when Breton fest-noz took off. In the Plouvorn region, for example, the time where everyone gets together to compact the earthen floor to be beaten was considered by the villagers, for a long time, as the only opportunity they had to dance. The Rond de Saint-Vincent, now danced far beyond the boundaries of Brittany, reproduces the steps of country folk, in particular when they trample the ground, and their never-ending backwards and forwards movements between the right foot and the left foot.

2. The round, sacrificed on the officiates' altar

As we can see, the round plays a dual role in the community: social and ritual, both are apparently inseparable. Nevertheless, a clear distinction must be drawn between the two insofar as ritual relates to the figurative representation of a dogma, which is usually magical or religious.



Ritual prescribes a number of behavioural approaches towards the sacred. One of the most archaic forms is sacrifice, which introduces an officiate into the human community. His role is to keep the gods at a distance by giving them offerings, and to ensure that a separation exists between the supernatural world and the human world. To do this, he has to split, divide into two, break up the unity. The sacrificial ritual “sacrifices”, as such, the union, the bond, the togetherness, and favours separation, rupture and dispersion, generally enacted by scattering animate and inanimate offerings. The officiate’s power can be perceived through the gods and, just as much so, through humans. The circle has been broken, the round shattered.

How could it be any otherwise whenever a society substitutes a way of doing things, where every participant is, in their own way, an officiate, for a way where participants are led by a master of ceremony whose role is meant to be representative of a destiny for an entire community?

What happens to the round when the vital, collective impulse yields under the pressure of the spirit that claims to represent it? The sacrificial ritual sheds some light on this, but it is not alone. Between 1350 and 1450, Europe lost half its population. The culprits? The plague and the Hundred Years’ War. People no longer danced round and round in circles but were chained together in a race towards death induced by the all-powerful, the bourgeois, followed along by the masses. This race, which opened unto a hereafter, did not just arrange the performers in some sort of order. It showed a processional head and tail, which provided a good example for non-dancers to contemplate.

The primitive, original dance, indispensable for the group, was henceforth organized based on how the public perceived it and moved towards narration.

A theme, one or several officiates, performers, a public: the ingredients of the dance of death contained the seeds of the ingredients of the Ballet de Cour (*Court Ballet*) whose style flourished during the reign of Louis XIV. It focused, first and foremost, on structuring and on harmonizing passions. Much more than just an expression of taste, for the young Louis, dance was an indication of his status as King. Following the creation of the Académie Royale de Danse in 1661 (the first of all the academies to be founded), it was impossible to know, with Louis XIV, what was a projection of himself (le roi danse, the King is dancing) and what emanated from his status as monarch. As shown in *l’Entrée d’Apollon* (Apollo’s Entrance), the Prince did more than just dance, he let his presence be felt and showcased himself frontally to a gathering, where he had the intention of “shining”, of making his mark. When the Sun King chose the Apollonian Order for one of his appearances instead of the vital impulse of the Dionysian concept, it was no mere coincidence. The art of dance involves organizing steps, establishing an order for ensembles, composing variations, with his soloist performers, his subjects, his



young subjects, based on corps de ballet logic... An entire dance community that was put at risk, to the test. The choreographic art was to become an affair of State and of the image that was desired. The ballet de cour stopped producing in the centre of halls, rooms, and established itself on the Italian stage and, as such, severed all links with “ball” style dance which, alone, pursued its recreational function and ritual quality.

3. The round revisited during modern-day disorders

It was not until the arrival of the Ballets Russes at the beginning of the 20th century and, more particularly, not until the creation of *Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rite of Spring)* in 1913, that the cultural and community sense of dance reappeared. In this choreographic ritual, Vaslav Nijinsky imposed an unprecedented order and precept insofar as the corps de ballet would no longer be organized based on the logic described here above, but would collectively accomplish a ritual in public. Yet, it was undeniably a performance showcased frontally for an audience.

The Rite of Spring is unique, above all because it centre stages a community organization where the circle and the round are the keystones (the togetherness), and at the same time it embraces codes of sacrificial ritual, of separation, of rupture that are played out in front of an audience. Like squaring the circle, in a manner of speaking.

Vaslav Nijinsky's ingenuity lies in the fact that he invites us to journey into an autistic creation. The dance develops constantly around a driving force and shows little or no regard for anything outside of this, be it the body postures (feet en-dedans, head tilted to the side, bodies bent from the pelvis) or in regard to the space vis-à-vis the entire performance venue, as if the production in play on the stage was not really made to be seen. In the statement of intent presented during the creation of the work, on 29 May 1913, it was specified that it was about a community living “in our midst, like at the very heart of a steppe”.

Yet, we are confronted with a work of excess, embodied by the dance of the Chosen One in the last scene (the *Sacrifice* scene), which reiterates and condenses all the gestures of the community and then scatters them around the space to the point of exhaustion, towards an “outside” that still has to be created. Her body language is one of disarticulation, of rupture. She implodes the round once and for all and amplifies a contour-free world.

Eighty years later, we come across this same round again put at risk, to the test, in the exuberant *Impressing the Czar* directed by the American choreographer William Forsythe. The fourth and final scene, entitled *Bongo Bongo Nageela*, is similarly rooted in profusion, as if the perfect circle of the established group threatened to explode at any time, inhabited by the body language of every excess imaginable (these images can



be viewed on Youtube: <http://bit.ly/1Mb9Cg9>).

William Forsythe frequently wished to recall that he lived in the era of acceleration and atomic weapons, the ultimate weapon of dislocation. Nijinsky, himself, wanted to “dance the war” during a private gala that he produced in Switzerland in 1919, as if he was, a posteriori, mirroring back to the premonitory images of rupture that haunted *The Rite of Spring* in 1913.

The issue of rupture is undeniably an issue of central importance in performance art in the 20th and 21st centuries. The round is, above all, the figure of autonomous structures that do not contemplate the relationship with the outside and in which issues of confrontation and friction are not posed. As the contemporary period is, first and foremost, one of exchanges, of culture bumping, of perpetual interconnection and of rejection or withdrawal, which are its reactionary elements, in the true sense of the word, the round is relatively unable to perform this or, if it could, then it would be to be put at risk, to the test.

An exception in the vision, perhaps: Christian Rizzo’s creation, *D’Après une Histoire Vraie* (*According to a True Story*), where the issue of culture bumping is also addressed, where the round is prominent, but where being put at risk or to the test does not exist. Yes, it is definitely her, her recollection that is conjured up in this choreography, whose keystones are not unlike the ones that led to the creation of Nijinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. Here, it is also about collectively accomplishing a ritual in public but, unlike the *Rite of Spring*, no officiate, no chosen one disturbs the community explosion in action on the stage. From the beginning to the end, eight men become one to dance something together, to dance a series of situations based on a true story. Which story? In 2004, Christian Rizzo attended a performance in Istanbul: a group of men suddenly appeared on the stage, performed a few folkloric figures, then disappeared almost immediately. The image is ephemeral, elusive, it engulfed the choreographer and reappeared five years later in his work, as if this dance that expects no approval, this garland of steps, of arms joined together, related the simple pleasure of just being together. The round haunts the entire performance, most often outlined, then immediately undone because Christian Rizzo does not intend to exhume folkloric styles so as to revitalize them but rather to imagine new “primal” gestures, against a backdrop of rock & roll drums, gestures which, beyond cultures and codes, fuel a new contemporary tradition. It is meant to be performed for an audience who, mesmerized, just want to believe.



To go further:

BEAUSSANT, Philippe. *Louis XIV Artiste*. Paris : Payot, 1999. 287 p. (Portraits intimes).

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KAHANE, Martine. *Nijinsky, 1889-1950 : Exposition 2000-2001*. Catalogue d'exposition (Paris, Musée d'Orsay, octobre 2000 - février 2001). Paris : Réunion des musées nationaux, 2000. 286 p.

Credits:

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