

## The Analysis of the Intention and Reception of a Television Dance Program *Dancing* (1993)

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*Dancing*, an eight-hour documentary series on the role of dance in world culture, premiered on May 3, 1993, and was aired for four consecutive Monday evenings in most regions in the United States. Filmed by Thirteen/WNET in association with RM Arts and BBC-TV, it was distributed for broadcast to more than 300 public TV stations nationwide and even abroad. The scale, preparation, and cost of the program were unprecedented in the dance field. The research had already begun in 1985, and production began four years later when film crews visited 18 countries on 5 continents. Costing 10 million dollars, *Dancing* is referred to as a “public-television blockbuster” and is generally considered as the first major TV series to approach dance with the depth and substance given to other fields such as the visual arts, sciences, nature, and public affairs.

Yet, when *Dancing* was actually aired, viewer reception was lukewarm. Many of the reviews showed mixed attitudes, while others were quite negative toward it, expressing descriptors of “conceptually skewed” and “pathetic.” Since the expectation for the program was unprecedentedly high in the dance field and since the producer and participants of the program were committed to making the best of this rare chance, the less-than-positive responses to the program suggest a gap between the intentions behind and the expectations of a TV program related to the dance field.

Intrigued by this gap, I premised that the gap has to do with the differing perspectives and conventions of dance representation on TV. No matter how novel and trailblazing, *Dancing* was produced and viewed in the convention of how dance had been represented on TV. *Dancing* should be read against disparate contexts of how dance has been represented on television, how anthropological documentaries were received by television viewers, and how knowledge on world dance forms had been transmitted to the masses. These traditions existed in a distinct and yet interconnected fashion, which were intertwined in *Dancing* as the unique products of anthropological TV programs on dance.

Commercially available since the late 1930s, TV quickly spread in American households. Dancers were among the first to be on TV when live shows were introduced before World War II, while Sunday night dance programs became regular offerings. At the beginning, what comprised the majority of the TV dance boom were variety shows. Initially aired as live programming, variety shows much resembled vaudeville shows in which dancers were briefly featured along with crooners and comedians. As dance programs were continuously produced and aired on TV, they formulated a few patterns and styles, which I recognize were divided into aesthetic vs. anthropological interests, as well as entertaining vs. educational goals. Although there existed a few cases of fusion and grey areas, in which theatrical dance forms and ethnic dance forms were appeared in the same program, this categorization generally represents the scope of dance programs on TV.

Under the conceptual catchphrase of “[celebrating] the power, pleasure, and meaning of dance throughout the world,” *Dancing* aimed to “explore the wide- world of dancing and view dynamic dances which embody traditions of cultures throughout the world.” If this sounds like a catchall phrase, *Dancing*’s team concretized this ideal into tangible goals. *Dancing* was anthropological in that it aimed to alienate the average American public’s preconceived notion of dance—that Western dance is art, while non-Western dance is culture. Indeed, the early stage of the field of dance anthropology in the United States was focused on problematizing this dichotomy between ethnic dance and art dance. In this sense, not only *Dancing*’s subject but also its worldview determined its characteristics as anthropological.

In order to challenge these dichotomies within Western dance view, cross-cultural representation of dance became a major strategy to urge audiences to reconsider their preconception of dance. *Dancing* paired non-Western dance phenomena with Western dance phenomena that were familiar to American audiences. In so doing, it aimed to challenge the dichotomies between art dance and ethnic dance, as well as between Western dance and non-Western dance, and to help the American public rethink their preconceived notion of dance and culture. In sum, *Dancing*’s intention was to be anthropologically valid in its way of representing dance cultures. Juxtaposing Western and non-Western dance forms within a single episode on the same theme, it tried to challenge the long-seated dichotomies between art dance and ethnic dance within the American public. Also, mindful of political correctness on one hand and considering the intricate layers in non-Western dance forms on the other hand, it tried to avoid the pitfalls of representing the Other.

Despite that *Dancing* was a self-committed project devoted to dance, however, its general reception was ambivalent; while the ambition and commitment were acknowledged, the particular choices in structuring scenes and programs drew negative remarks. In this regard, focusing on the critiques rather than praises on *Dancing* published in U.S. dailies and weekly and monthly magazines, I discerned three major critiques on the premises and rationales of the program as follows.

First, many critics found *Dancing*'s viewpoint of world culture and dance rather romantic. The only dismal side of this romantic view was Western culture's negative influences on non-Western indigenous cultures. Moreover, some reviewers criticized the cross-cultural representation of dance itself for being a shallow representation. Some criticized its particular result as being an "unorganized hodge-podge," while others criticized that "The collage trivializes everything."

Second, many reviews complained that *Dancing* leaned toward anthropological messages while neglecting the aesthetic aspects of dance. Of the series' eight programs, only two programs primarily featured Western dance, and only one of those was exclusively devoted to Western theatrical dance. Thus, most reviewers of U.S. dailies and magazines complained that the program was not "aesthetic enough"; for them, it wandered around before dealing with "real stuff."

Third, while some found it educational AND entertaining all at once, others found that *Dancing* leaned so much toward the educational direction that its entertainment value as a TV program was lost. For them, it is boring because too many "experts" explained it instead of showing the actual dance.

*Dancing*'s lukewarm reviews reflect the general dilemma of anthropological TV programs that the anthropological content collides with their mass media form. On one hand, anthropological TV documentary producers wish to address a topic that the viewers might not know or possibly feel uncomfortable with. On the other hand, they also acknowledge that TV viewers tend to favor what and how they already know. This is why popular, and academically ill-informed, portrayals of other societies by writers such as travelers and missionaries easily infiltrate an anthropological program's script. However, in order to avoid such misrepresentation, anthropological TV documentary has to deliver conceptual information. Delivering anthropological knowledge about the unfamiliar culture, it is required to provide conceptual information.

So far I have pointed out that *Dancing*'s anthropological intention was either misunderstood—thus, unfairly judged on aesthetic measures—or it simply reflects the general dilemma of an anthropological TV program. However, what I found fundamentally damaging to *Dancing*'s integrity was the inconsistent pursuit of cultural critique and dance advocacy. Despite its anthropological stance, *Dancing* also adopted the discourse of dance advocacy, in which TV had been welcomed as a means to enhance dance awareness and to enhance its social presence in American society. Naturally, *Dancing* was vulnerable to the feel-good wisdoms of dance. No matter how *Dancing*'s wordiness can be excused as the perspicuous nature as an anthropological TV documentary, its intermittently retraction to rather clichéd beliefs on dance weakens its anthropological footing. Consequently, although it challenged some prejudices against dance, it perpetuated others.

It seems that the cross-cultural and exalting approaches toward dance, found in both Havelock Ellis's *The Dance of Life* as well as Curt Sachs's *World History of the Dance*, resonate with *Dancing*'s fundamental dance view. However, this unique dance view is not only the reason for their popularity among dance aficionado but also why they have been criticized for an academically invalid concept of dance. Consequently, the all-too-easy reliance on these "authority materials" resulted in *Dancing*'s ambivalent combination of academic zeal and ungrounded truism.

In conclusion, *Dancing* held a dual goal of cultural critique and dance advocacy. Challenging the dichotomies of Western and non-Western dance and of art dance and ethnic dance, it tended to make recursive detours to ready-to-use wisdom on dance. As a result, *Dancing* as an ambitious project did not make as big a ripple effect as its producers expected. It was also not commercially successful, perhaps due to the mixed and negative reviews it received. Today, the accompanying book for *Dancing* is out of print and VHS sets are not updated into DVDs. While those VHS tapes may be still used in local schools and universities, their future is gloomy due to what is referred to the Magnetic Media Crisis. Sifted out from the format update, *Dancing* became a specimen of the large-scale anthropological TV documentary on dance.

## Reference

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