

Feminine versus Masculine: The Dichotomies of Movement in Spanish Flamenco

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Abstract

The article is devoted to analyzing gender-related division of movement in flamenco dance. The primary dichotomy: feminine/masculine is a starting point for isolating other crucial binary oppositions: chaos/order, submissiveness/domination, etc. The aim of this article is to illustrate how a gender-specific use of dance techniques reveals Andalusian habitus. Through an anthropological reading of flamenco dance, the condition of masculinity and femininity in Southern Spain can be displayed.

Keywords: Flamenco, Anthropology of Dance, Gender, Habitus, Body

Introduction: Body – Gender – Identity

Physicality of body creates an illusion of natural, organic character of gestures, positions, and activities. Marcel Mauss was the first researcher who acknowledged the seeming nature of this assumption (Mauss, 1979). He argued that the context of a particular culture, conditions the way we use our bodies. Culture determines how we eat, sleep, rest – which positions are considered relaxing or uncomfortable. The context of Andalusia, the land in which flamenco originated, will therefore be a base in the process of imposing body techniques used in flamenco dance.

We own our bodies but they also make us who we are. Body, determining each person's identity, is also the primary means of discipline. It authorizes culturally approved activities implied by, for example, gender. Michel Foucault (1977) asserted that body is subject to the execution of power. He argued that the honing of social control systems leads to the creation of the “despotic body”. It internalizes rules, regulations and external mechanisms of control and supervision. Each individual as a corporal and social being:

Assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. By this very fact, the eternal power may throw off its physical weight; it tends to the non-corporal; and, the more it approaches this limit, the more constant, profound and permanent are its effects (Foucault, 1977: 202-203).

This process results in a voluntary submission to activities, which are socially associated with desired values such as virtue, honor, pleasure, discipline etc., or identities such as femininity and masculinity.

In flamenco, gender identity translates to a culturally codified movement and a repertoire of gestures permitted for a male and female dancer. As Judith Butler (1990) demonstrated, gender is always performative, culturally constructed and reinforced through repetitive corporal activities. In *baile* (flamenco dance) gender as a cultural construction projects certain movement expectations, which are different for *bailaora* (female dancer) and *bailaor* (male dancer). Some of the contemporary hybrid forms of flamenco allow (to a certain extent) the unification of male and female dance techniques. Similarly, in some present-day *tablaos* (flamenco bars or restaurants devoted primarily to tourists), the dichotomies of male and female movement might not be as distinguishable. The “traditional” flamenco, however, implies significant gender-related differences. A female dancer should include in her performance soft, delicate movement (in between a dynamic, rapid, fierce, “furious” dance), whereas *bailaor* ought to avoid distinctly subtle gestures.

Spanish flamencologist Ángel Álvarez Caballero (1998: 16) claims that the novel “Escenas Andaluzas”, published in 1847, was the first detailed account written in the Spanish language, of an early form of flamenco dance (although not stylistically pure yet). Its author, Serafín Estébanez Calderón, noticed these two (subtlety and impetuosity) aspects of female dance: “she twirled around constantly; sometimes delicately like a swan, which cleaves the water and, at times, rapidly and violently like a sylph cutting the air in half” (Estébanez Calderón, 1847: 212). Julio Bravo adopts similar description when portraying Cristina Hoyos’ dance: “her seductive dance – tough as steel and soft like velvet” (Bravo, 2008: 29). The performance of Juana Vargas “La Macarrona” is illustrated as both “elevated” or “heavenly” and “torrid”, “fiery” or “violent” (Álvarez Caballero, 1998: 113).

In order to qualify and portray these statements, I will include below an excerpt from a fieldwork journal written during my research stay in Andalusia (years: 2010 and 2011). The description focuses on a performance delivered during holiday *Feria de Málaga* by *bailaor* Miguel Infante and *bailaora* Reme. *Feria de Málaga* is an annual celebration, which takes place in August in the city of Malaga, and lasts for about two weeks. During that time, members of *Peña Juan Breva* temporarily leave the premises of Museum of Flamenco (their headquarters), put up a large tent in a central square of the city *Plaza de la Merced* and perform flamenco publicly. *Peñas* are communities, which bring together flamenco aficionados and performers. They typically strive toward eliminating external influences; their members often consider themselves members of a flamenco family. The carnival-like reality of *Feria de Málaga* allows an inversion of the conventional social order, resulting in *peñas* opening to the general public, which is otherwise uncommon. The performance described below took place in *Peña Juan Breva*’s public tent:

“Infante is strolling the stage, rippling torso, flexing his muscles. He often pauses, contemplates the music, indulges himself in cogitations. When the female dancer interrupts the performance, her pauses are shorter, less frequent and charged with tension, anticipation for the dance. Male intermissions are part of the act in their own right. Infante’s performance seems to be divided between the (static) self-presentation and “factual” (dynamic) dance. The *par excellence* dance component is focused on *zapateado* (footwork) and *braceo* (arm movements). The remaining parts of his body seem relatively immobile or, more accurately, **tamed**, conquered. Male movements appear to be more choreographed than female ones. Reme’s dance is more unpredictable, wild, unbridled. Her repertoire of gestures seems to be diversified to a greater extent. That might be related to the fact that she uses her whole figure, whereas male movement is concentrated around several areas of the body. Reme and Infante perform solo pieces, after which they move together towards the front of the stage. They are standing next to one another. *Bailaor* initiates the movement; using his body: tense, fraught, charged with advertent, condensed aggression, he enforces female subordination. Reme glances in his direction, follows his lead, surrenders. They perform simultaneously, though

separately, next to each other. *Bailaora* dances in a more dynamic way; her movement is circular, light, flirtatious, seductive, elfin, full of ornaments. Infante uses his body in a moderate, linear, “raw”, temperate, concise and focused way. Every now and then, he allows himself to project aggression, arrogance and imply violence. Their performance ends, Infante accompanies Reme to the backstage, touching her body for the first time by placing his hand on her arm”.

Montage and Rhythm as Markers of Meaning

While discussing few connections between theatre anthropology and anthropology of culture, Eugenio Barba, Italian theatre director, mentioned the problem of transgressing ethnocentrism. He referred to “the spectator’s ethnocentrism” as a tendency, which involves:

A reluctance to consider the point of view of the process. When we are discussing artistic products, our conditioned reflexes lead us to be concerned only with the way in which the result works. It is, however, necessary to realize that in order to understand *the way in which the result works*, it is not sufficient to understand which means must be resorted to in order to *arrive at* a result (Barba, 2005: 108).

Such ethnocentrism, comprising experiencing the spectacle only from the viewer’s perspective (from the point of view of the ultimate result):

Omits the complementary point of view: that of the creative process of the individual performers and the ensemble of which they are part, the whole web of relationships, skills, ways of thinking and adapting oneself of which the performance is the fruit (Barba, 2005: 11).

The acknowledgement of the viewer’s (i.e. viewer-researcher-anthropologist) position and striving for transgressing “the spectator’s ethnocentrism” is what is essential in this research endeavor. This analysis considers cultural mechanisms for “adapting oneself” and performers’ presence in a “web of [gender] relationships”, which determine the dance performance. Therefore, while analyzing the uses of the body in the described performance, I am depending on “the complementary point of view”. That translates into considering a cultural web of meanings as an essential part of the dance performance.

The term montage has been present in film and theatre discourse since 1930s. It is understood as series of autonomous stage sequences (Pavis, 1998: 220). Applying that concept into presenting structure of the described performance, we can argue that it is based on sequences of male and female movement. The montage organizes narrative structure and rhythm structure in a way that they convey concrete meanings. Rhythm is understood as meaningful sequences, organized in time (Pavis, 1998: 313). Montage conditions rhythm, and rhythm determines a performance’s meaning.

Montage organizing dance sequences in Reme's performance provokes organic, fluid, "natural", interconnected movement. Movement, which is frenzied, yet "unified", circular, consequent, without the element of conflict or rhythmic collision. In Infante's case, long breaks and "leisurely" stage strolls follow the dynamic dance. Contrary, the rhythmic sequences and a "torn" narrative structure are an immanent part of his act. This is an example of montage, which includes autonomic, unintegrated rhythmic systems (rhythm exists even in motionlessness). Contrasts and "cuts" are a key structural rule in a male dance's case. Such approach generates tension, focus, and requires great control from the dancer. As will be proven below, these elements are essential in the process of creating social meaning.

Domination versus Submissiveness; Order versus Chaos

American flamencologist, William Washabaugh (1998), describes male dance as aggressive, dominant, brutal, arrogant, sassy, or even impudent when it comes to posture. He also notices tendency to communicate eagerness to compete. These qualities of a male performance can be seen as a form of an aggressive exacting of power through culturally codified gender behaviors. Some of the adjectives mentioned by Washabaugh harmonize with the image of Antonio El Pintor – a *bailaor* from the period of *cafés cantantes* (spaces devoted for flamenco performances in Spain in XIX and at the beginning of XX century). He was referred to as *arrogante bailaor*. Ángel Álvarez Caballero (1998: 76) asserts that the dancer gained the audience's favor with his proud and arrogant posture. Contrary to the characteristics of male performance, Washabaugh qualifies female dance as submissive. *Bailaora* follows male dancer by imitating his gestures or reacts to the movement initiated by him. *Bailaor* accentuates his domination, whereas she tends to express in her dance eagerness to cooperate, comply or even surrender (Washabaugh, 1998). As mentioned before, rhythm conditions the meaning or it is even the meaning in itself (Pavis, 1998, 441). Slowing down, speeding up, initiating the movement (*bailaor*), following it (*bailaora*) – all these rhythmic constructions reflect and generate cultural and social meanings.

The dichotomy: domination/submissiveness is, according to Pierre Bourdieu, a relation grounded in the social construction of gender elaborated in his habitus theory. This concept refers to "a system of schemes of thought, perception, appreciation and action" (Bourdieu, Passeron, 2000: 40), which reflects patterns specific to a particular cultural and social context. Habitus refers to a wide range of social habits, beliefs, demeanors (also those conditioned by gender), which are reinforced through the socialization process. In this theory social schemes of gender-specific roles are intrinsically connected with body-specific attributes. Therefore gender is essentially a result of social and cultural mechanisms for creating meanings by differentiating what is culturally perceived as feminine or masculine:

It is only after a formidable collective labour of diffuse and continuous socialization that distinctive identities, instituted by the cultural arbitrary, are embodied in habitus; which are clearly differentiated according to the dominant principle (Bourdieu, 2001: 23).

Body in Bourdieu's theory is fundamental in the process of creating social distinctions and gender-specific areas of activities. It comprises a base for determining the system of homological oppositions such as domination/submissiveness. Deriving from the context of Kabyle culture, Bourdieu states:

Female submissiveness seems to find a natural translation in bending, stooping, lowering oneself and 'submitting' – curved and supple postures and the associated docility being seen as appropriate for women (Bourdieu, 2001: 27).

Habitus is a theory of **embodying** identity, in which gender is continually reconstructed and renegotiated. The social approval of female submissiveness is possible through its naturalization – its perception as a biological necessity. Flamenco dance reflects that mechanism. Thanks to the perception of movement as natural and organic, *bailaora's* submissiveness becomes socially accepted, or even necessary.

Flamenco (similarly to, for example, Argentinian tango) represents hypermasculinity. Male posture is patriarchal, charged with aggressive, violent movement, and at the same time, focused, tamed, controlled. This combination can reveal deeper semantic layers. Elements of dance such as gesture, posture, hip movement, footwork, etc., are signs, conditioned by the rhythmic structure of the performance. As Pavis (1998) notices, rhythm creates connections between systems of stage signs. These signs reflect the social division of gender-related roles. A corporal sign can therefore reveal social habitus.

William Washabaugh (1998) argues that Andalusian habitus charges men with a certain responsibility. They ought to be guardians of social **order**, lawfulness of public life and combat **chaos**, symbolically associated with forces of nature. Seemingly unfit dance fusion of violence and serenity, aggression and control, exists also in the image of Andalusian bullfighter – *matador* (Washabaugh, 1998). In Spanish *corrida* (bullfighting), bull is a metaphor of Nature – it is wild, ferocious, savage, follows its instinct. Similarly, a woman with her physiology, menstrual cycle, reproductive role, representation as mysterious, intuitive etc., is symbolically associated with Nature (Ortner, 1974). Consequently both a bull and a woman ought to be controlled and tamed by a guardian of Culture – a man (Washabaugh, 1998). This division into gendered dichotomies provokes a vision of Culture as means of asserting control over Nature. Following that, in flamenco, *bailaor* should be aggressive and violent enough to subordinate and tame a woman identified with the forces of Nature. At the same time, he ought to be serene, calm, moderate, focused, self-possessed and

controlled enough to equate the order of Culture. Male corporeality in flamenco dance represents qualities, which go beyond what is corporal. Male dancing body serves as means of emphasizing domination, initiative, intellectual control over female chaos; it is merely an indicator of non-corporal features. By contrast, furious, unbridled female flamenco indicates her strictly corporal qualities. The logic of fusion between aggression and serenity is also reflected in the names of the chapters in “Masculine Domination” (Bourdieu, 2001): “Manliness and Violence” on one hand, and “Masculinity as Nobility” on the other.

In several descriptions of female flamenco in literature, I noticed a tendency to emphasize *bailaora*'s animalistic features (Nature). Juana Vargas “La Macarrona” – “the gypsy empress” was one of the most important figures of “The Golden Age of Flamenco” (*La Edad de Oro del Flamenco* – a period between second half of 19th and the beginning of 20th century). At the age of 19 she went to Paris to perform flamenco. A Persian Shah who spotted her there called her “a charming cobra” (Álvarez Caballero, 1998: 113). The author Pablillos de Valladolid wrote about “La Macarrona” the following: “she displays her teeth, red, like wolf’s fangs” (Valladolid, 1914: 526). In the article “Argentina”, published in October 1928, in “Theatre Arts Monthly” by Andre Levinson, the author describes a *bailaora* in the following way: “the Spanish dancer is like some heraldic serpent, undulating on its tail” (Bennahaum, 2000: 120).

Conclusion

We can conclude on a contrary note – by proving that *bailaora* can also be treated like an equal in an otherwise patriarchal context of Andalusia. *Bailaor* rarely touches a woman while dancing with her. He does not embrace her or keep her too close to his body, although he can briefly place his hand on *bailaora*'s hip to twirl her around him. Sometimes he puts his hand on her shoulder while accompanying her off the stage. His other arm is kept straight, creating a static frame for a dynamic female body. More often he reaches towards an undulant “tail” of *bailaora*'s dress. When he holds the bottom of her long outfit to lead her around his body, the analogies to presenting a cape during bullfighting are striking. A woman is a partner in dance. Due to limited access to her body, *bailaor* does not have immediate and direct control over her. Both occupy a similar period of time on stage; their solos last equally long. Whenever a man signals the need for a solo dance, *bailaora* goes to the back of the stage, accompanying his performance by clapping or using castanets. The male dancer, however, has to do the same when his female partner decides to perform a short solo. For the next few minutes, he will have to allow her to shine, and remain in her shadow.

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