

Visual culture of efficiency and dance diagrams (Paris, 20 Jun 22)

Paris, INHA

Deadline: Mar 21, 2022

Pauline Chevalier, INHA

Visual culture of efficiency and dance diagrams (1910-1940)

In July 1914, the first mentions of a new dance, the Foxtrot, appeared in the New York Times. On December 22, the same newspaper described a process of “standardization” of modern dances “reduced to scientific formulas”. A new form of reduction in art is then imposed: one praises the possibility of unifying the steps, but the standardization and the notation also made it possible to assert a copyright, to diffuse manuals and to normalize practices often judged too free. The iconography of social dance manuals from the 1910’s-1940’s shows an exponential use of diagrams, some of them showing a remarkable technical and aesthetic research.

Henry Jacques, in his book *Modern Ballroom Dancing*, expresses this same need to put social dances into books, in a recurring scientific and technical analogy: “For some inexplicable reason pupils imagine that the movements and principles of ballroom dancing cannot lucidly be explained on paper. Accountancy, engineering, mathematics, banking, and draughtsmanship are set out in textbooks, and students pass examinations after taking correspondence courses in these subjects. What is even more apposite, books on how to play lawn tennis and treatises on physical culture are best-sellers. Why, then, cannot the art of the ballroom be assimilated in the same manner ?”

This workshop will focus on the iconography of social dance manuals, diagrams, photographs, and will seek to understand how certain graphic choices and their evolution are part of the visual culture of the efficient gesture, in the Americas as in Europe. The press very frequently used the designations “mathematical dances” and “scientific dances”. As early as 1907, the techniques of analysis and measurement developed by dance masters, such as Giraudet in France, were theorized in various manuals. The technical illustration of the manuals and the underlying analysis of the dancer’s movements compare dance as a science that reminds us how much the modern engineer becomes a social and cultural model: he is the one “whose special destination is to organize the relations between theory and practice”.

From the State’s and companies’ administrations to the industrial world and private life, the quest for efficiency generated representations of knowledge, as well as movements and bodies. Advertising sometimes incited to “apply to oneself this watchword of the XXe century ” that is efficiency. Scientists, ergonomists and, above all, engineers, played a central role, reinforced by the institutionalization and professionalization of industrial engineering and the concepts derived from the

scientific organization of labor, inaugurated by F. W. Taylor. The concepts, terms and representations of factories' managers can be analysed far beyond working environments. If we designate "Taylorism" as "a set of techniques for the preparation, measurement and control of work in workshops and for the payment of tasks thus divided and standardized, which professionals in the separation of design and execution of work develop from specialized offices" (FRIDENSON, 1987), can we examine a "visual culture of Taylorism" which would include both the graphic and technical tools of its application, after Taylor, and the reinterpretations in a broader field (private sphere, cultural practices, etc.)?

Felicia McCarren points out how much the Taylorist organization of labor was based on "two elements also found in contemporary reflection on dance : first, the essential gesture, calculated to help the worker work at his « best speed » ; and second, group coordination. Both depended on a kind of anonymity, with the worker's body being subsumed by the rhythm of his own gesture and that of the group." (McCARREN, 2003). The imagery of efficient gesture, largely due to the work of F. B. Gilbreth, had a profound impact on the iconography of physical culture, sport, dance and beyond.

By crossing history of science and technology, social history, history of dance and history of art, this workshop would like to make a focus on the circulation of concepts and images between social dance and the industrial world. In addition to a visual culture of the efficient gesture, it will be a question of analyzing the way in which the schematic iconography, the technical images of social dances are also the echo of a process of moralization, of an "aesthetics of restraint" studied by Danielle Robinson, from ragtime to modern dance : "what had been full-bodied dancing became restricted to the lower limbs ; what had celebrated pleasure and sexuality became reserved playfulness; what had emphasised invention, difference, and individuality came to emphasise uniformity" (ROBINSON, 2010).

In what way diagrams that tend to make the bodies disappear to privilege only the footprints attest a process of moralization and an erasure of the sources of most modern dances, putting forward science and mathematics?

Proposals for papers could relate to the following axes (non exhaustive list):

- Images of efficiency for the rational organization of labor. While image and photography became tools of rationalization, we will be interested in the modalities of representation of labor and movement in an industrial context, with images that give little to see the body, only to focus on the traces and their sequentiality.

- Efficiency at home: images of home efficiency and leisure: ergonomics manuals, magazines, journals dedicated to leisure activities and home organization. The use of footprints, diagrams and sketches can be observed well beyond dance manuals. What iconography of everyday efficiency?

- Learning by yourself and the technical image: can one learn to dance alone with a book? The forewords and introductions to manuals abound in comments on the possibility or not of learning alone or learning from a book: beyond dance, we can address the conceptions of learning without a master in a context that paradoxically values the teacher and the engineer. How does the techni-

cal image contribute to the myth of self-teaching, in dance as in other practices? Contributions that focus on other body techniques, sports or disciplines are also encouraged.

- Ways of reading: while the diagrams are often intended to be relatively transparent in their reading and do not require complex deciphering, many show the limits of such a representation. The aim is not only to analyze the ways in which these diagrams are read, in the relationship between text and image, but also to consider their presence not for their didactic intention but in the scientificity they seek to assume. How does the technical image become the instrument not of a transmission but of a validation of the pedagogical efficiency of the textbook? We will also consider the variety of uses of these diagrams, sometimes designed to be "transposed on the ground, with chalk" (4).

- The production of technical drawings and dance diagrams, the illustrators: most of the drawings' authors are not mentioned. Sometimes they are the teachers and authors of the manuals themselves, but illustrators were also commissioned work. Despite a lack of sources, we would like to try to identify the context and the practices of the illustrators, who also show real artistic and aesthetic choices in the way the dance steps are represented. We will also be interested in the circulation of images and their reuse from one edition, or even from one author to another.

- "Mathematics of the tango", "scientific dance": the terms used by the dance manuals' authors and by the contemporary press evoke the control, the standardization, the measure, the normalization in an analogy with science, mathematics, while sometimes raising the paradoxes of a "mathematical dance": these expressions say as much of the perception of dance as of science. We will try to understand the evolution of terminology in the press and in the manuals themselves, between science, technique and mathematics.

- Paper movies: Modern Dancing by Irene and Vernon Castle is illustrated with plates from the films made by Waterson R. Rothacker, a pioneer in the field of advertising films for the industry. The book refers to the moving image while proposing a decomposition of the movement that is not very effective from a didactic point of view (JACOTOT, 2013). Some manuals also refer to film as the only real tool for the transmission of dance, inspiring certain technical drawings produced from moving images. In this case, drawings, photographs and references to film are mixed together on the same page.

- Scores, books, flipbooks, record sleeves, and the diffusion of dance diagrams: in addition to the manuals, various media offered diagrams and drawings of dance steps. Record sleeves, specialized magazine columns, advertising media and commercial gifts (flipbooks, cards, etc.). This workshop wishes to propose an analysis of the variety of these media and the graphic choices they generate.

- The absence of images and the criticism of diagrams: the abundant use of diagrams was not without criticism, and certain manuals (Eve Tynegate Smith's, for example, in 1933) claim the absence of images when only the text can provide the necessary precision for the transmission of steps. The theorization of the image and its criticism also make it possible to understand the aesthetic and commercial stakes of the production of diagrams beyond the didactic stakes.

Proposals for papers, not exceeding one page, followed by a brief bio-bibliographic presentation,

should be sent before March 21st 2022 to the following e-mail addresses:
pauline.chevalier@inha.fr and juanpablo.pekarek@inha.fr

Organizing Committee:

Pauline Chevalier and Juan Pablo Pekarek (INHA)

Scientific Committee

Laurent Barré (CN D)

Sarah Burkhalter (SIK-IESA)

Lou Forster (INHA)

Marie Glon (University of Lille)

Laurent Guido (University of Lille)

Sophie Jacotot (CHS - Paris 1 / CNRS)

Thierry Pillon (University of Paris 1)

Juliette Riandey (CN D)

Laurence Schmidlin (Cantonal Museum of Fine Arts of Lausanne)

This workshop is part of a wider research projet on dance drawings and dance notations at the
I N H A :

<https://www.inha.fr/fr/recherche/le-departement-des-etudes-et-de-la-recherche/domaines-de-recherche/histoire-des-disciplines-et-des-techniques-artistiques/choregraphies.html>

Reference:

CFP: Visual culture of efficiency and dance diagrams (Paris, 20 Jun 22). In: ArtHist.net, Feb 13, 2022

(accessed Jul 8, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/35901>>.