Psyche Embodied;
an exploration of modern dance through a psychological lens

by

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Introduction

“The modern dance is not a system; it is a point of view” (Martin 20).

Dance may be seen as a perspective, a lens with which a human being may examine the world. This idea of modern dance as a perspective has been prominent for decades within the dance community. Yet in the literature, it has not been thoroughly discussed in the way I find most resonant, as a comparison in terms of psychological thought. Modern dance provides a form with which to explore the human experience, just as psychology offers a way in which to do the same. While the choreographic process may be unique for every choreographer, it ultimately serves the same purpose for each; exploration. Personal experiences within the educational fields of dance and psychology have made me realize a parallel between psychological and choreographic processes. In both dance and psychology there is an innate search for meaning, an exploration of human thought and behavior, and an element of self-reflection. Therefore, modern dance can be seen as another perspective similar to any other psychological perspective because it serves virtually the same purpose. I believe that dance is simply another way to explore the human condition, and the parallels between psychological therapies and choreographic processes are so immense that they are worth recognition.

Psychology and dance are intricately related. Human experience informs movement practice, and has been recognized as a source of inspiration throughout history. Movement provides a nonverbal means of communication and expression through which a choreographer may be heard. For centuries, dance has enabled the persistence of cultural traditions, spiritual beliefs, and physical representations of
emotional reflections. Thus it has been widely recognized as a way to explore the curiosities of life. Even the most simple of gestures has the ability to portray the emotions or experiences one cannot find the words to express. Movement provides a means of communication in a physical realm, as opposed to a cognitive one. For many, dance is not a simple art form but instead a complicated array of psychological processes, a way in which to portray or express the human experience and connect with others in a way that is otherwise impossible.

Choreographic processes can be seen as parallel to psychological processes, just as movement can be seen as a psychological perspective with which to explore the human condition. A choreographer, whether inspired by movement itself or by an emotional experience, goes through a process quite similar to that of a psychological therapist or patient. A dance is created purposely and results as a comprehensive work that explores the human condition, just as a psychological therapy seeks to understand and explain human behavior and thought.

Historically, psychology has been incredibly influential to the formation of modern dance. Early modern dance choreographers used psychological theories and thought processes as a foundation for much of their work. The earliest modern choreographers such as Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham studied and were inspired by the human spirit, the psychological drives that make us who we are, and the traditions and aspirations of cultural dance. They looked to nature, the past, and the present psychological theories for inspiration and choreographic direction. The human experience played a large role in their
choreographic processes, and psychological perspectives of the era swayed their methods of creation.

The style and choreographic process of Martha Graham perhaps provides the clearest example of the interaction between psychological and choreographic processes. In 1927 Graham stated, “Out of emotion comes form” (Jowitt 164). This emphasizes her belief that movement truly comes from within, and in order to create choreography, one must have emotional content to portray. The popular Freudian theories of the era encouraged self-exploration and reflection, and Graham’s methods of creating dance drew directly from these ideas. Her works embodied psychoanalytical theory, and popularized this idea that psychology was integral to choreographing movement.

Relevant Literature

This thesis is not introducing an entirely new concept, but is instead looking at an already recognized one from a more specific and direct angle. A simple conversation with any dancer will reveal that dance is not just moving through space, but can offer much more than meets the eye. This is how I was first inspired. I felt an immediate connection with dance, as I felt as though movement allowed me the freedom to explore space and even myself in ways I had never thought possible. I went through the same realization with psychology. Psychology has many branches, and each branch offers a new way with which to explore human behavior. I discovered that as I was choreographing a piece, I was using similar methods of composition as psychological theorists had done whilst organizing their therapeutic processes. Dance offered me a new way to think, a new way to perceive the human experience, and a unique way of establishing connections and community with others.
In this way, dance and psychology seemed intertwined, as they function in different fields to do essentially the same processes.

Psychology has been discussed many times in dance literature, but most often as an explanation for a choreographer’s inspiration. During my research process I have only come across dance critics and authors discussing psychology as a potential gateway to understanding inspiration, in reference to the practice of dance therapy, or as a way of interpreting the meaning of a particular dance. Additionally, the most prominent branch of psychology discussed within the dance literature is psychoanalysis. Many authors tie the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung to modern dance choreographers, but do not tend to venture out into other branches of psychological thought.

As previously mentioned, the choreographic works of Martha Graham are frequently written about in connection to psychoanalytic theory. As one author puts it, “…Graham’s self-professed goal was to “make visible the interior landscape” (Copeland 83). Her inspirations were never a mystery, as she grew up with a psychologist for a father, and as an adult she proclaimed psychoanalysis to be extremely influential. Graham incorporated the unconscious, dream sequences, archetypes, and memory into her works, all direct consequences of her psychological background. Many authors discuss her connection with psychoanalysis as crucial to her growth as a choreographer. Perhaps most critical, is the amount of psychological input she herself placed into her dances. As Robert Horan stated in 1947, “But there is never a figure outlined with the same human scale, and portraying anything like the complex range of psychological motivation which she reserves for herself” (Jowitt
Dance critics, historians, and even Graham agree that psychoanalytical thought gave her modern aesthetic its own unique flavor. Martha Graham knowingly brought dance and psychology together, and inspired the American modern dance movement to do the same.

After Graham’s time, dance critics have often compared her psychological style of working to the lack or presence of it in subsequent choreographers. In reading about the methods of Cunningham for instance, he is described as the opposite of Graham, as a choreographer seeking to run from psychoanalytical thought. In contrast to Graham, his “approach to composition effectively disengages movement from a specific meaning or emotional referent” (Foster 38). During this era, the modern dance community was very much aware of psychological theory and choreographers often embraced its influence, whether that was to explore or reject it within a choreographic framework.

The same topic of relating psychological thought to dance also occurs in discussions concerning Pina Bausch. Her choreographic process and dance works are often critiqued with a psychological premise in mind. Many sources credit Bausch as having an incredibly psychological aesthetic, and as having been inspired by other psychologically driven choreographers. Choreographers such as Tudor, Sokolow, and Jooss are said to have a “psychological style” (Climenhaga 6), and to incorporate “everyday movements heightened and stylized to reveal psychological states” (Climenhaga 7). Bausch’s unusual choreographic method of researching and choreographing with inspiration from her dancer’s personal experiences has been repeatedly accepted as deeply psychological. Although she rarely spoke about her
dances, she did admit, that “I loved to dance because I was scared to speak. When I was moving, I could feel” (Climenhaga 39). Just as psychoanalysis explored the unconscious through free association, Bausch explored it through movement and self-reflection processes. Going further than many, Bausch’s pieces inspire the audience members to go on their own psychological journey and “demand of the audience an inner search for a way to approach the images she unearths” (Climenhaga 65). It has been widely accepted in the dance community that Pina Bausch’s emphasis on personal stories, portraying real emotion, and inner reflection do indeed coincide with psychoanalysis. This branch of psychology relates quite obviously to Bausch’s method of working.

Yet psychoanalysis seems to be the most prominent branch of psychology that is discussed in the modern dance literature. While I do admit that I have come across random mentions of other branches, psychoanalysis is overwhelmingly the most recognized connection, and one of the most accepted ways in which to connect psychology and dance.

The other most popular combination of these two fields of research is present in the practice of dance therapy. Dance therapy is a “form of psychotherapy in which the therapist utilizes movement interaction as the primary means for accomplishing therapeutic goals” (Schmais 7). This development was inspired by changes in modern dance, such as Isadora Duncan’s emphasis on emotional expression, and Graham’s exploration of the unconscious. Dance therapy has a strong connection to psychoanalysis and was deeply influenced by the psychological theories of Reich, Jung and Sullivan (Schmais 9). One particular dance therapist inspired by Jung’s
ideals describes her patient’s movements as “the flow of unconscious material coming out in physical form” (Schmais 9). This method of therapy has been changing through the years, but is still a well-renowned method of psychological treatment. It is one of the most concrete ways that the fields of psychology and dance have truly come together as one.

My Takeoff Point

As a dance and psychology double major, I was incredibly intrigued by the possible connections between the two fields of research. I was also surprised by the lack of literature on the topic, other than the relatively new practices of dance and movement therapy, and historical references to choreographers such as Graham and Bausch who were clearly inspired by psychoanalysis. I chose to examine two choreographers with opposing methods of working, and relate their choreographic processes to psychological processes. I used psychoanalysis as a comparison for both, and then chose behaviorism and humanistic psychology as contrasting viewpoints.

The following chapters examine the history of modern dance and its ties to psychological thought, followed by an up-close look at two very different choreographers and how they worked in similar ways to psychologists. Merce Cunningham and Pina Bausch offer contrasting methods of choreographing, and represent two different periods of time in the formation of modern dance. Cunningham is often seen as the beginning of the postmodern era, but nowadays it seems as though he was somewhere in the middle of modern and postmodern. Either way, his style broke out of the norms of modern dance, and he created choreography that was movement for movement’s sake. Instead of trying to portray a certain
meaning, Cunningham choreographed dance to simply be movement through space. In the complete opposite mindset, Pina Bausch created work for its meaning. It was important not how her dancers moved, but that they were moved and moved others, emotionally. She drew inspiration from her dancer’s recollections of their own life experiences, and put pedestrian movements and emotions on the stage. While these choreographers have nearly opposite methods of working, both retain parallels to psychological processes. Both choreographers, no matter how different they may seem, choreographed for their love of movement and in order to explore the human experience. Even though they approached the process in separate ways, they went through similar experiences. Their choreographic processes were an investigation of the human condition, and a search for meaning in life.

Modern dance can be seen as another psychological perspective. It can be perceived as a way in which to examine the human experience in the world. Choreographic processes of creating dance exhibit many parallels to the psychological processes of multiple psychotherapies. Dance and psychology often see the human experience in similar ways, and together have created a rich vocabulary with which to explore.
Chapter One: Historical Connections

*A brief history of the relationship between modern dance and psychology*

How does a human being find meaning to life? As a dance and psychology double major, I have found myself asking this question quite often, and within both these fields of research. But how could this be a curiosity within both perspectives? Psychology is considered a social science, and dance an artistic endeavor, thus how could they be so closely linked? Perhaps they ask the same questions, and search for meaning of the human experience with very similar processes.

Psychology is defined in a multiplicity of ways. According to the American Psychological Association, psychology is, “the study of the mind and behavior. The discipline embraces all aspects of the human experience — from the functions of the brain to the actions of nations, from child development to care for the aged. In every conceivable setting from scientific research centers to mental healthcare services, "the understanding of behavior" is the enterprise of psychologists” (APA). In other words, psychology is the scientific study of people and how they function in the world.

Similarly, the definition of dance spans a large grouping of ideas, and is hard to pinpoint specifically. The Oxford dictionary states that to dance is “to move rhythmically to music, typically following a set sequence of steps” (Oxford). But modern and postmodern dance choreographers and dancers alike will argue long and hard about this narrow definition. Does dance have to include music? Does it have to be rhythmic? Do the steps have to be predetermined? Every dancer will have a unique answer, and for many the answer might be no, that dance does not necessitate rhythm, music, or a set sequence of steps. One eloquent dance historian describes this dilemma, “the term “modern” dance is obviously an inadequate one. It is not
synonymous with contemporary dance, for it is by no means that inclusive. It is only
of temporary accuracy insofar as it is accurate at all, for to-morrow when a more
advanced type of dance shall have arisen it will be impossible to refer to the dancing
of to-day as modern” (Martin 3). While it is nearly impossible to find an acceptable
worldwide definition for what dance is, people can generally agree that it is
movement through space, or at the very least, an engagement or recognition of or
with the body in the human experience.

While psychology studies people’s minds and their behavior, dance can too. In many ways, both psychology and dance can help form an understanding of a
particular person or circumstance, and may help in the process of finding meaning in
life. Throughout history, both of these disciplines have been embraced as informative
in studying and understanding the human experience.

But how do psychology and dance interact? Historically, choreography has
been inspired by the changing social, moral, and philosophical ideals of an era.
Throughout the formation of modern dance, there has been an ongoing theme
concerning the investigation of the human experience. From portraying internal
emotions through movement, to using psychological theories as inspiration,
psychology has been a part of choreography since the start. Prominent psychological
theories have helped people to understand themselves as well as their society, and
have therefore naturally contributed to the formation of modern dance. The following
chapter will examine the beginnings of modern dance choreography and the role that
the philosophical and psychological theories of the time played in the growth of the
art form. From the very beginning of modern dance, it’s relationship to psychology
and the exploration of human nature has been integral. It is no coincidence that the recognition of psychology and the breakthrough of modern dance occurred during the same time period. This chapter will focus on the influence that the rise of psychological thinking had on some of the most prominent early modern dance choreographers, and why psychology has been such an essential part of the foundation of modern dance.

No individual choreographer can be said to have begun the modern dance movement, as this topic is still a source of ongoing debate. Yet the person who was first to inspire the movement is not actually too important. It is important instead to understand that the origin of modern dance coincided with abrupt shifts in modernist philosophies. In fact, it even coincided with the formation of the field of psychology. There was enormous social change in the air, and as these new morals and values began penetrating society, dance changed its identity as well. Instead of the traditional structure of ballet and the rules of social dancing, modern dance began to form its own new identities. Breaking free of previous dance norms, modern dance embraced the contemporary social philosophies, which offered new focus, purpose, and inspiration.

Psychological Perspectives

For many years, psychology was just another branch of philosophy. In fact, psychology was not recognized as its own social science until 1870, at which point Wilhelm Wundt established the first laboratory for psychological research and wrote the first psychological textbook. At this same moment, modern dance was going in a new direction, forming new ideas and creating a new identity for itself. During the
exact same time in history, modern dance and psychology were becoming recognized as their own fields.

_Psychoanalysis:_

Theories that stem from the psychoanalytic branch of psychology are often interpreted as having been influential to the formation of early modern dance. Sigmund Freud is credited as the founder or “father” of psychoanalysis. While this branch of psychology is now considered more of an interpretation of human life than a truly scientific perspective, and many of Freud’s theories are no longer accepted as scientifically valid, much of his work does provide insight into the human experience, and over time has influenced an enormous number of psychological theorists. The American Psychoanalytic Association describes psychoanalysis in two ways, as both a theory as well as a treatment method. Psychoanalysis is based on the understanding “that each individual is unique, that there are factors outside of a person's awareness (unconscious thoughts, feelings and experiences) which influence his or her thoughts and actions, that the past shapes the present, [and] that human beings are always engaged in the process of development throughout their lives” (APSAA). These four concepts are central to this specific branch of psychological thought.

During treatment, psychoanalysts foster an incredible bond of trust with their patients. A typical psychoanalytical therapist will listen to the unconscious thoughts and memories of the patient’s past in order to understand the patient’s current state and then offer ideas for positive growth based on these thoughts. Therefore, the patient-to-therapist relationship is integral to the outcome and benefits of psychoanalytic therapy. Without a sense of comfort with regards to the therapist, the patient may not reveal what they are truly thinking or feeling. The premise for this
method of therapy is that this unconscious trail of thinking will lead to an understanding of whatever is bothering the patient, and eventually to a solution of some kind. According to psychoanalysis, the innermost thoughts of a person are essential to examine, and the unconscious can reveal an enormous amount about an individual. Individuality is also central to this branch of psychology. Psychoanalysis recognizes that everyone is unique and that there is no overarching way to explain everyone’s behavior. In this way, it broke away from the hard sciences in which the same treatment was often given to everyone, regardless of differentiating factors. Psychoanalysis looks for meaning from “beneath the surface” (ASPAA), as it takes into account even one’s completely unconscious thoughts.

Modern dance and psychoanalysis have overlapped in a multiplicity of ways throughout history. They were formed during essentially the same era, both offer a search for meaning within and an exploration of the human experience, and are even quite similar in how they conduct this endeavor. Psychoanalysis is often perceived as parallel to modern dance in many ways, and has provided inspiration for a multitude of dance choreographers. In discussing the history of the modernist movement in America, Roger Copeland explains,

The prescribed escape route for the visionary modernist led in two principle directions: the unconscious and/or the primitive—both of which were presumed to be pristine, unspoiled, uncolonized…For Freud and Jung, the unconscious, the primitive (and the infantile) were closely connected. But, in actual modernist practice, the unconscious and the primitive offer alternative
paths toward authenticity. The first leads to the innermost recesses of self; the second to the outermost reaches of exotic “otherness”. (Copeland 58)

While this is indeed an accurate perception of the philosophical modernist route, it is inaccurate concerning modern dance and psychology. In this way, modern dance and psychology may be more similar than modern dance and modernist philosophy. While philosophically, there may be two recognizable pathways to modernism, in dance and psychoanalysis they are in fact interrelated. The primitive pathway, inspired by ritualistic practice cannot be considered entirely separate from the exploration of the self, as traditional dance was inspired by emotions and desires of the unconscious. In fact what Copeland says concerning Freud and Jung believing that the primitive and unconscious were closely related is much more exemplary of the modern dance perspective. Just as psychoanalytical thinking combines the importance of the past and the unconscious in the search for meaning, so does the practice of modern dance.

Other branches of psychology can also relate to modern dance. While psychoanalysis was forming with the influence of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, among others, other branches of psychology were being created at the same time. Each one offers a different perspective, but all offer insight into what makes people who they are and how people find meaning in their lives.

Behaviorism:

Behaviorism is a branch of psychology that offers many perspectives similar to those of postmodern dance choreographers. In contrast with psychoanalysis, behaviorism does not search inside the person, but instead relies on outside observation. This form of psychology originated from the idea that psychologists
should be interested in observable behavior, and not on unobservable occurrences within the mind. The “first explicit behaviorist was John B. Watson, who in 1913 issued a kind of manifesto called *Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It*” (Skinner 3). He argued in his writing that psychology should be redefined as the science of studying human behavior. John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner believed that a person’s behavior could be explained in scientific terms rather than hypothetical ideals. In many ways, this branch of psychology is similar to postmodern dance. It does not emphasize the unconscious, or the innermost emotions of an individual, instead it focuses on a person’s external behavior and on changing that behavior. Postmodern dance began as a break from modern dance, in that the choreographers did not feel like making dance for meaning, they instead aspired to create dance for the sake of movement, and nothing more. Suddenly dance became more than emotional expression, movement narratives, or explorations of the self or society. Even the most pedestrian of movements could now be considered dance. Behaviorism and many postmodern dance choreographers shared ideals regarding the ways in which the human experience should be examined; as removed from emotion and existing in its own place.

*Humanistic Psychology:*

The final psychological perspective that I will relate to modern dance is the humanistic branch of psychology. This is the third major form that originated after both psychoanalysis and behaviorism had been established. Humanistic psychology focuses on the idea that people are inherently good. It emphasizes a holistic approach, that the whole person is greater than the sum of one’s parts. Unlike psychoanalysis and behaviorism, it does not concern itself with others, but instead
with understanding oneself through immense self-exploration. It recognizes the importance of creativity, free-will, and the human potential (Piotrowski 843).

Humanistic therapy works to explore the patient’s inner thoughts, and ensure that all of their feelings are taken into consideration. Some early approaches to therapy included Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, in which each step in his hypothetical pyramid led to self-actualization, as well as the client-centered therapy of Carl Rogers in which the patient’s needs were the priority of the psychotherapist.

One specific form of humanistic therapy is the Gestalt approach, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the present. It can include role-playing in which feelings that may not have surfaced in other situations can be released. The Gestalt approach also perceives nonverbal cues as integral, and perhaps an indication of how an individual actually feels. Therefore, the humanistic approach offers an entirely separate way of searching for meaning than either psychoanalysis or behaviorism.

A very brief history of the intertwined pathways of psychology and dance in America

Choreographers who were creating dances during the philosophical modernist revolution in America are currently considered the primary choreographers of early modern dance. Isadora Duncan, the Denishawn collaboration of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham were among the most influential modern choreographers exemplifying this beginning. Each of these choreographers incorporated modernist philosophies into their styles of movement and successfully portrayed these innovative ideas to their audiences. Psychological theory was important to modernist thinkers, and therefore it became integral to the choreographic processes of modern dance.
The choreographic works of Isadora Duncan evoked reactions that had not been encountered before, and inspired a shift of what was accepted in the world of professional dance. Her style was unprecedented, full of freedom, and involved great risk. Duncan’s exploration of nature through the expression of the human body, and her use of the Greek arts and traditions as inspiration were all the modern dance audience needed to accept that dance could broaden its horizons. Her expansive body of work initiated the modern dance movement in a novel way. She moved dance ideals away from ballet and introduced the American public to expression through natural, instinctual body movement.

By all accounts, Duncan provided a fresh perspective on what modern dance represented. She was “not a steely-legged virtuoso whipping off pirouettes, not a coquettish quasi-virgin, not a disembodied nymph, but a noble-spirited woman, bold, yet pliant—free to use her imagination and her body as she wished” (Jowitt 69). Unlike the traditional ballet dancers, Duncan moved freely through space, letting her body move with and against gravity, as bodies do naturally. Her costumes were light, long, and flowy, and she danced barefoot in both indoor and outdoor venues. She introduced a new sense of beauty to the world of dance. Duncan embraced the natural beauty of the human spirit, rather than the age-old ideals of beauty, which involved being dictated by form and structure. She made a statement, as she held strong personal beliefs that women should be heard, and demonstrated her stance through both her choreography and her way of life. Feeling restricted by social norms, Isadora “made herself into an emblem of freedom—freedom not only from conventions of dance, but from conventional ideas about how women ought to dress
and conduct their lives” (Jowitt 70). Instead of using movement to tell a traditional narrative, she expanded modern dance into a tool with which to spread her specific beliefs, such as her stance regarding women’s position in society. It was with this sense of purpose that her choreography resonated with her audience. As opposed to the jam-packed choreography of traditional ballet, Duncan’s performances allowed “plenty of time for the spectator’s eye to take in the dancing figure, to follow her motions as she bounded into the air or fell to the floor, acknowledging the weight of her body, complying with gravity as no ballet dancer did. And the fullness of her gestures in space increased this sense of amplitude, of generosity” (Jowitt 71).

Duncan’s style of moving was completely foreign and new. Her choreography was unlike any other the American public had ever encountered.

Isadora Duncan’s childhood played a huge role in her choreographic and stylistic development. Her earliest years were spent in California, with days full of art and exploration of nature. Her father “wrote poetry” (Jowitt 74), and she and her siblings began teaching dance when her father and mother separated. Her background and therefore teaching focused on social dance, and she let this interpersonal aspect of instructing and creating choreography influence the way in which she moved for the rest of her life.

Duncan’s choreographic style has a definitive fingerprint. One will immediately recognize her free-spirited, seemingly “natural” sense of space and time. Her pieces were appealing to some and hideous to others. For certain viewers, her incorporation of emotion and dance was wonderful, while for others it felt nonsensical. She let the current artistic movements influence her work, and “like
many of her day, Duncan prized above all art that appeared to be a spontaneous expression of feeling, and so successfully did she create the illusion of spontaneity in her performing that many people supposed she was improvising” (Jowitt 75-76). It was this sense of improvisation that truly broke boundaries in the dance world and continued as her legacy for future generations. With nature as her guide, she created pieces that seemed as though she were making them as they went along, although this was almost never the case. In speaking about her lack of true improvisation, she stated, “...even in nature you find sure, even rigid design. Natural dancing should only mean that the dance never goes against nature, not that anything is left to chance” (Jowitt 76). She believed that choreography should be predetermined, but for the audience the feeling should be one of effortless, poignant movement, inspired by nature and sudden impulses.

Duncan’s sense of bodily coordination and strength was fostered by her early introduction to gymnastics. Yet it was not only the physical aspect of her training that deeply influenced her style of dance. This was because, ...gymnastics, like almost every other area of American cultural life, was tinted by a new craze: Delsartism. In his native France, Delsarte had developed an intelligent and systematic way of analyzing posture, gesture, and vocal expression by linking these with corresponding mental and spiritual states, intending his system to serve professional orators, actors, and singers. (Jowitt 78)

Thoughts concerning the human body began to change in America, following Delsarte's lead. Unlike previous fads concerning avoidance of the body, “Delsartism
made thinking about the body not only advisable but fashionable” (Jowitt 78). Once
Duncan understood his theory which focused on dividing the body into
three zones, the head, the torso, and the limbs—corresponding to the three
“essences” of human behavior: the mental, the moral, and the vital—and
understanding that action occurred in three corresponding ways—away from
the center (excentric), balanced (normal), and toward the center
(concentric)—she could proceed to the myriad of permutations. (Jowitt 80)
Perhaps most influential to Duncan’s personal growth as a choreographer was
Delsarte’s idea that emotions could be expressed through movement of the body. His
theory established a “system [which] provided a splendid base for the expansion of
expressive gesture into dancing” (Jowitt 81). Duncan “could be made aware of the
moral function of art: Francois Delsarte considered that to value art for art’s sake was
as absurd as to value the telescope for the telescope’s sake instead of for what it
brought into focus” (Jowitt, 80). In other words, dance was not just movement
through space, but provided a deeper meaning for the dancer, choreographer and
audience member.

Isadora’s beliefs about how dance should progress were heavily swayed by
Delsarte’s writings. She publicly announced her gratitude to the French philosopher
when she declared “the master of all principles of flexibility, and lightness of the
body, should receive universal thanks for the bonds he has removed from our
constrained members” (Jowitt 78). The public now had a novel frame of mind with
which to “consider new forms of dance. Duncan stretched that framework; still, at
the core of her art form always lay the idea that a Delsartean gymnastics teacher had
bluntly expressed in 1889: “Strength at the centre; freedom at the surface”” (Jowitt 81). She was extremely persistent in stating her opinions about dance, and braking boundaries that had been established by her predecessors. She would say, “I use my body as a medium just as a writer uses his words. Do not call me a dancer. Her quibble was not really, I think, with being a dancer, but with being what people thought a dancer was” (Jowitt 81). Isadora Duncan wanted to be perceived as different from the rest.

Duncan’s legacy is one of freedom of the body and of the mind. She brought modern dance away from stiff ballet technique into an organically inspired way of moving. She gained her initial inspirations from nature itself, “The true dance must be the transmission of the earth’s energy through the body” (Jowitt 90). But this soon progressed into gathering inspiration from the human being’s innermost thoughts and emotions. In working with the idea of representing an entire Greek chorus as one dancer, “she presaged the abstractions of early modern dance, in which the dancer would eschew impersonation and equate her own persona with universal human feelings and drives” (Jowitt 89). She believed in dance as an art form that anyone could connect with. According to Mikhail Fokine, “Duncan proved, that all the primitive, plain, natural movements...are far better than all the richness of ballet technique, if to this technique must be sacrificed grace, beauty, expressiveness” (Jowitt 101). Despite the beauty and tradition of ballet, her dance form provided a whole new perspective of beauty without the rigidity and formation of years of teaching. It allowed the audience to realize dance was more than just memorizing some steps, that it was about representing the human experience. Isadora Duncan
gave dance “the idea that the body itself, and not just the choreographic scenario, ought to reflect the creator’s private response to the world, and could be altered to do so” (Jowitt 102). She began the integration of the mind and the body working together in movement.

Following Isadora Duncan’s lead, Ruth St. Denis was another force for change in the modern dance world. She helped shift the ideals of modern dance to a new place. While her choreography was perhaps not as controversial or considered as unique as Duncan’s, St. Denis brought a new perspective to modern dance in America. Similar to Duncan, she was at first inspired to dance by embracing nature and the human experience. Yet her choreography was inspired predominantly by Eastern culture, and focused on the writings and teachings of Indian and Egyptian traditions. This Eastern influence brought a renewed sense of spirituality into modern dance choreography. Her work introduced personal and spiritual meaning into movement and further enabled the American public to broaden their perspective of the meaning of modern dance. After St. Denis became a popular force in modern dance, movement was accepted as a means by which one could express human ideals of religion, nature, and even personal dilemmas.

The main inspirations for St. Denis’s works came from her research into foreign cultures, ones that she and her audiences believed to be “exotic”. She blended her own dance experiences and local influences with those from afar. Taking after Isadora Duncan,

St. Denis brought to dance a reformer’s zeal and a taste for philosophy. Her glamorous, enigmatic presentation of herself depended not only on personal
beauty, a limber body, an astute theatrical sense, and a familiarity with all the manifestations of fashionable Orientalism, but on a blend of these with ideas culled from a variety of interrelated sources: Christian Science, Buddhist texts, Vendanta, the writings of the American Transcendentalists, and the teachings of Francois Delsarte. (Jowitt 127)

Just as the writings of Delsarte and the later works of Stebbins enthralled Duncan, St. Denis dove right into these philosophies as well, and the “ideas of evolution, transformation, and the circular nature of existence” (Jowitt 128), persisted as her inspiration throughout her career as a choreographer.

Much of St. Denis’s work strove to communicate her personal thoughts to the audience rather than to just complement the musical notes. In comparison with Duncan, she once said, “I’m not a music dancer; I’m an idea dancer” (Jowitt 136). Her dancing was more than simply moving however it felt natural to move, it truly tried to recreate narratives for her audience. Time and time again she cast herself as a goddess, and by doing so, “beyond human desire, she could stand for the enlightenment she sought” (Jowitt 137). Thematically, the works of Duncan and St. Denis are connected, but in opposition. Suzanne Shelton once eloquently stated, “They followed the polar paths of mysticism: one seeking the Self in the Universe; the other seeking the Universe in the Self” (Jowitt 139). Both were seeking further meaning through modern dance, just in contrasting ways.

Ruth St. Denis’s career as a choreographer demonstrates further growth in the field of modern dance in connection with psychology. She brought Eastern spiritual practices into the mix of choreography that was accepted in America, and gave
audiences a novel cultural influence. St. Denis broadened the horizons for modern dance, while also remaining still. Although she branched out in style, nearly all of her pieces held a common theme, ironically the theme of change. With this theme, St. Denis further proved to the public that the human experience was worth expressing through movement, and that it was essential to do so in order to progress. Her theme of change is one that still fascinates many modern dance choreographers.

She perceived “dance as a vehicle for showing change, rather than for displaying the status quo, [she believed] that one didn’t end quite as one began” (Jowitt 147). Instead of using dance to display what she knew, she let it express growth, change, and the unknown. Modern dance could not be stationary, just as life is not stationary. People are always growing and changing, and St. Denis believed dance should do so too.

While Ruth St. Denis and her longtime partner and collaborator Ted Shawn paved the way for future choreographers, they also developed another form of dance technique with which to protest. Many of the dancers who attended their company, Denishawn, would go on to create works that completely rejected their ideals. Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman and Martha Graham were perhaps the most influential dancers to come out of the company. These new choreographers set out to establish a new modernization of dance, away from traditional beauty, aesthetic, and form, and to create new techniques that could further expand the boundaries of modern dance.

These choreographers working in America during the 1930’s sought to break away from the traditional ways of thinking about dance. Doris Humphrey’s “Life of a Bee” and Martha Graham’s “Heretic” “asserted the modernists’ preoccupation with
serious subjects, with elemental drives and emotions” (Jowitt 156). They became less interested in telling stories and more interested in expressing the human condition through movement. They too, drew from Delsarte’s teachings, which they had been exposed to while under the instruction of St. Denis and Shawn. The choreographers accepted these theories “not as a “system of expression,” but as an aid to understanding and analyzing how the body responds to emotion” (Jowitt 161). Their personal lives suddenly became influential to their processes, and understanding themselves became a goal in their movement practices. Just as Pina Bausch did later on, Rudolph Laban told his dance students “to tap personal sources” (Jowitt 159), to draw from inside reflections rather than outside influences.

Recreating modern dance was not a simple process. Choreographers had to break the expectations of the public and shift away from the already established ideals introduced by Duncan and Denishawn. Heavily inspired by the current works of the new German choreographers, they began creating their own techniques in order to compete with the old modern dance tradition. In other words,

Rather than plundering an extant vocabulary and imbuing it with originality and expressivity via sequence or brilliant performing, they tried to invent their own vocabularies. Their method was first to intensify the connection between emotion and form as had the Expressionist artists (“…the form is the outer expression of the inner content,” Wassily Kandinsky said in 1912; “Out of emotion comes form,” echoed Martha Graham in 1927). (Jowitt 164)

Following the lead of the modern philosophers, modern choreographers began to incorporate emotional exploration into their works. As Jowitt explains, “The
procedure fit the times: Freudian theory encouraged self-exploration. And the deliberate search for an emotional center produced a correlative physical principle: “moving from the inside out” also means initiating movement in the center of the body and letting the limbs follow” (Jowitt 164). With fresh movement vocabularies human nature was exposed, their movements became universal ones, and “by distilling and magnifying their own responses [they could] make themselves stand for humanity” (Jowitt 165). Modern choreographers “discovered that the basic processes that ruled their bodies could, by analogy, express the aspirations and struggles of mankind” (Jowitt 165). Modern dance was drawing from the human experience and offering new perspectives on life in general.

Both Graham and Humphrey created techniques based upon natural human occurrences. Working with the breath, Graham discovered her "contract and release" method. Humphrey’s “fall and recovery” was a reference to the connection “between the desire for stability and calm on the one hand and, on the other, the passions that throw you off-balance, the call to danger” (Jowitt 165). It was in fact a reaction to the ancient Apollonian versus Dionysian tension she had researched. Each of these newly established techniques helped these choreographers create their own language of movement, and further their impact on society. Due to the natural inspirations of these techniques, people across the country were able to pick up on the movement and style, and replicate Graham and Humphrey’s aesthetics. Drawing from natural sources of movement aided the growth and popularization of their techniques.

Modern dance choreographers of the thirties were not afraid of risks. They pushed boundaries with their choices of costumes, their uses of space, their music
choices, and their movement styles. The sheer difficulty of dance was recognized, and the athleticism necessary to perform well onstage was emphasized. Unlike ballet, for modern dance choreographers “Any distortion, angularity, or imbalance resulting from emotional verity or physical struggle was not only acknowledged, but affirmed” (Jowitt 167). The strength and physical health needed in order to dance was displayed instead of hidden as ballet had done for so many years. The human experience was openly portrayed. Dance emphasized the connection between everyday life and choreographic movement. Moving forward, “They didn’t plunge too deeply into abstraction—committed as they were to articulating human feelings, relishing the concreteness of the human body” (Jowitt 169). Acknowledging the state of being human became an essential part of modern dance at this time.

The expansive choreographic work of Martha Graham may perhaps be the most widely recognized beginning to the era of modern dance. Her work has been influential to choreographers and dancers alike, from the very beginning of her career. Today, her style is still taught in dance classes, full of eager students wanting to experience the legendary Graham technique of “contract and release”. Graham’s movement style was most definitely inspired by the primitive notions brought up by the psychoanalysts of her time, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Her pieces featured many aspects of psychoanalytical thought, an exploration of ritual, and an emphasis on storytelling. Her works often followed a certain narrative, and frequently evoked strong reactions from her audiences. She is a prime example of a choreographer who let psychological thought influence her choreographic process, and searched for
meaning to the human experience in ways similar to the processes and ideas of
psychoanalysis.

Graham’s fascination with psychology began very early in life. Her father
worked as a psychologist, and he often shared bits of wisdom with her. His personal
experiences began to heavily impact her beliefs about the world. One quote that she
kept with her and shared with critics and dancers was one directly said by her father.
In his words, “bodies never lie” (Copeland 69). This aspect of her father’s
psychological perspective translated into her choreographic process. She perceived
dance as a way of expressing the inner self. She strongly believed that the way a
person moved was the essence of truth, and it could always expose one’s innermost
emotions. Her father’s quote gave her a strong basis for a perspective that she carried
with her throughout her career as a modern dance choreographer.

As the child of a psychologist, she was exposed to the psychoanalytic theories
of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung at a young age. She studied their theories and dove
into movement expression that embraced their ideals. Freud introduced the
therapeutic practice of free association, a process in which his patients said anything
that came to mind out loud, no matter how embarrassing or shameful. He theorized
that releasing inner feelings would be therapeutic and beneficial for the patient. He
believed that whatever was said was crucial in discovering the true underlying
psychological problems. In line with the central concept of Freud's theory,
“…Graham’s self-professed goal was to “make visible the interior landscape”
(Copeland 83). She believed that dance was a perfect way to express emotions and
internal struggles. Since movement was truthful, it would convey only the honest
feelings of the dancers. Her pieces were created in counterpart to her psychological beliefs and desire to express the human experience on stage.

The style of movement Martha Graham created was groundbreaking. Following Isadora Duncan’s lead, Graham decided modern dance was about expression, the exploration of the person, and the narrative of a tradition. Her legacy has continued this essence, as her technique is one of a kind and has been incredibly influential in the growth of the modern dance era.

The idea of primitive human nature as essential to further exploration of the human experience fueled much of Graham’s choreography. This complements Freud’s concept of the id, the powerful natural instinct. Artists of the time were inspired at many levels by this idea,

Both abstract expressionism and modern dance were motivated by Freud’s belief that below the culturally conditioned ego lies the “natural” id (or in Jung’s version of this concept, “the collective unconscious”). In order to reestablish contact with this unacculturated and “primitive” region of the self, the artist must loosen the stranglehold of rational consciousness and cultural conditioning. (Copeland 87)

Graham was no exception. She saw dance as an escape from consciousness, as a means of expression beneath everyday understanding. Even during her technique classes with her company, she explored the unconscious and emphasized the essentiality of one’s emotions. Some of her dancers even expressed concern for the effort she put into her work, explaining “Graham’s floor-work flooded her with emotions she was unprepared to deal with” (Copeland 92). Her classes allowed her
dancers to release and express their feelings through their movement, even when it was too much. Often her audiences expressed how honestly the emotionality of the movement felt during her performances.

The initial pieces that Graham and her company created were based upon mythological stories. Yet this theme was not that uncommon at the time. In fact, “‘The interest in myth was in the air,’” remarked New York painter Adolf Gottlieb, recalling the 1940’s in an interview. The artists had discovered Carl Jung. …they found both liberation and discipline through his theory of the collective unconscious” (Jowitt 206). Jung embraced the idea of an archetype bringing clarity into the minds of people with mental struggles. For Graham, Jung’s theories truly resonated and his “idea of the collective unconscious and the collective power of the archetypal images that dwelt there stimulated her as they did the painters” (Jowitt 207). Her mission became “to define the archetypal images of woman in herself and in relation to her world, and to set them dancing” (Jowitt 207). Her phase of creating dance based upon Greek myths was quite clearly inspired by Jungian theory. During this period, Graham’s “dances were narratives, requiring her dancers to play roles” (Copeland 209). She would ask her dancers to tap into the archetypes within the myths in order to create a connection between the movement and the back-story.

Works such as Night Journey demonstrate Graham’s devotion to psychoanalytic thinking, and her quest to replace “‘sight’ with ‘insight’”’ (Copeland 134). She believed that an in-depth examination of the internal lives of mythical characters was essential to her choreographic process. In preparation for her roles, she spent weeks getting herself and her dancers into the correct mindset. It was not
just about the costume, hair, and makeup, but also about including all the elements of a character in the portrayal. Graham took this aspect of her work very seriously, and it was a psychological journey each time she or her dancers entered a new role. Graham believed in sharing her character’s life struggles, and in the importance of externalizing human thought, “If identifying herself with archetypal females objectified her own feelings, it also imbued the characters she played with enormous intensity and specificity” (Jowitt 209). Whatever was going on in the mind was integral to understanding the person, and therefore was essential to include in her choreographic framework. Indeed, “The image of human thought in Graham was heavy, organic, brooding, and altogether nineteenth century” (Copeland 210). The internal rumination of her characters was integral to her work, as she greatly valued the human mind and all of its complexities.

The role of memory in many of her pieces also makes clear her ties to psychoanalysis. Indeed, “Memory was the path to the heart of the maze, as it is in psychoanalysis—memory and intimations of the future. Graham’s task became to find the theatrical symbols through which she could externalize this inner search and make it visible and comprehensible onstage” (Jowitt 211). Her piece Deaths and Entrances was her first exploration with memory being portrayed through choreography, but Night Journey also displays the impact that memory can have on a person, and for the first time, the audience experiences the narrative through the eyes of one character. While each one of her dancers enthralled themselves into her process, Graham stood out as the one most invested in becoming one with her character. As Robert Horan put it in 1947, “there is never a figure outlined with the
same *human scale*, and portraying anything like the complex range of psychological motivation which she reserves for herself” (Jowitt 227). None of her dancers, no matter how hard they worked, could compete with her full embodiment of whichever role she was assigned to dance.

Following myth, sexual interactions and desires were overwhelmingly present throughout Graham’s choreographic career. It is likely that her fascination with sex began with her intense interest in the psychoanalytic theories of Freud. Freud’s interest in the intentions of sex and desire began after his visit to Paris, where he studied underneath Charcot. According to Charcot, “the root of many, if not all hysterias…was something sexual” (Everdell 134). Freud took this idea and ran with it. Suddenly all of his work was related to sex. His diagnoses became based upon sexual dysfunction, sexual abuse, sexual repression.

As the cases came in between 1893 and 1898, Freud had become increasingly sure that all the neuroses were based on sexual dysfunction. The “neurasthenia” epidemic, he had then believed, was due to the increase in masturbation, and “anxiety neuroses” to the abstinence and *coitus interruptus* to which the rising middle class was being driven in its attempt to avoid syphilis and reduce its birth rate. As for hysterias, he thought, they came from unassimilable sexual experiences perpetrated on innocent children. (Everdell 136)

This is only a small sample of his beliefs regarding psychological troubles as due to sexual problems.
Dance critics and historians cannot ignore the obvious sexual references within Graham’s choreographic portfolio. Even her influential technique can relate to sexual instinct. Her *Night Journey* (1947), is a solid example of one of her most sexually driven pieces. Plentiful phallic symbols such as the trident, as well as her explicit scene onstage with her real-life lover of the time make her obsession with sex quite apparent. Yet she was proud of this aspect of her choreography. In speaking about her work she stated, “I know my dances and technique are considered deeply sexual, but I pride myself in placing onstage what most people hide in their deepest thoughts” (Aloff 27). She was content knowing that her dancers were able to express something that the majority of people were not able to, their sexual instincts, in quite a public but acceptable manner.

Just as expressing troubling emotions were integral to the process of choreography, so was expressing one’s sexual desires. Her studio gained a nickname based upon this fact, but it did not bother her at all. “It bemuses me that my school in New York has been called “The House of Pelvic Truth,” because so much of the movement comes from a pelvic thrust, or because I tell a student “you are simply not moving your vagina” (Aloff 27). Instructions such as this one were exemplary of her goal in movement technique. Her “Contract and release” was inspired by breath but also by sexual drive, and provided her dancers a way in which to engage their entire body in movement. Graham is described by many of her former dancers as a very sexually-driven person, and her lovers were nearly always the fuel for her passion on the stage. Her dramatic love life most definitely influenced her drive for sexual
expression, and her interest in Freudian psychoanalytic theory only encouraged these ideas.

If one looks carefully at Freud’s and Graham’s beliefs and values, a multitude of similarities becomes obvious. First, both of these prominent figures had highly influential fathers. While Freud’s father is a mysterious presence in much of his biographical literature, it has been hypothesized that Freud may have been sexually assaulted by his own father. This may account for his perception of one’s relationship with one’s family as integral to one’s psychological well-being. Graham also had a father of great importance, and remembers her time with him as overwhelmingly positive. His psychological work intrigued and inspired her, and she believed his accomplishments to be beneficial to human kind. Many of her values later in life were derived from ideas she learned early on, possibly from her father’s psychological studies.

Myth was important for both Freud and Graham. Freud created theories based upon Greek myths that had existed for thousands of years and used them to explain human nature. His famous Oedipus Complex was named after the myth of Oedipus Rex falling in love with his mother and killing his father. A large phase of Graham’s choreographic life consisted of movement inspired by Greek myth. Many of her pieces were direct interpretations of these myths, with complete costumes and sets adding to the mythical narratives. Sex was also a common theme of inspiration for both Freud and Graham. As stated earlier, Freud believed sexual issues to relate to psychological difficulties. He believed that many disorders and psychological problems could be traced back to sexual repression, dysfunction, or general
misfortune. Graham was a highly sexual individual, allowing her sex life to be displayed in public, and creating technique based upon sexual influence, as well as encouraging her dancers to be sexual beings in her pieces.

Freud and Graham believed repression to be a large problem in life and sought to relinquish it. They saw it as a potential trigger for difficulty later on. Each of them was also influenced heavily by tradition and primitive instincts. In Freud’s theories and Graham’s choreography, the importance of ritual and going back to one’s roots is heavily emphasized. Stripping the human being from modern influences, and bringing them back to old traditions was integral to both belief systems. Freud and Graham may have been working in two separate fields, yet they had a lot in common. Is this because Graham studied Freud so intently? Or were these values important in the culture of the time and she was simply expressing them through her choreography unlike anyone else? Each one was an incredibly influential force in their respective field. While Sigmund Freud changed the route of psychology, Martha Graham changed the face of modern dance.

The relationship Martha Graham had with psychology is of course, only one example of how modern dance has historically interacted with psychological thought. But it is an incredibly important one to recognize. Many people view Graham as the true pioneer of modern dance, and therefore her connection with psychology was integral to the formation of this new form of dance creation. Her emphasis on personal expression, and connecting on an emotional level with choreography is further evidence of her feelings towards the importance of psychological thought. Incorporating such highly psychological topics made for complex works, as for “the
intellectuals and artists from all disciplines who had always been part of her audience, as well as to all those with the same awareness of psychoanalytic theory that she had, and with a similar literary heritage…her work must have looked like dance for grown-ups” (Jowitt 212). She believed that emotions were incredibly important to the choreographic process, and that without that layer of complexity, the dance was incomplete. Preceding “Graham, few defined the female dancer as passion-driven, yet intellectually complex; fated, yet capable of choice. In creating a theater of the mind where modern women and men jousted with their archetypes for the illumination of contemporary society, she construed herself as both celebrant and priestess, bringing Western theatrical dancing as close to ritual as it has ever come” (Jowitt 233). Her movement concepts inspired modern dance in novel ways.

Modern dance originated as an exploration and rejuvenation of tradition. Early modern dance choreographers created their own respective styles of movement but also continued a sense of ritual. Dance was a performance, a story being told to an audience, an exploration into the human experience, and into the mind. It is in that sense that emotion was influential. In order for a narrative to come across to an outside agent, some form of emotion must be displayed onstage for it to come through as intended by the choreographer. Early modern dancers were told to access their emotions as a place for inspiration and strength. Inspiration for dance began to come from internal experiences, and universal emotions. Expressing emotions through movement became a major part of the modern dance movement.

Modern dance and psychology are intricately related. Both began sprouting roots during about the same historical period and greatly influenced each other in
their processes of formation. Modern dance choreographers were influenced by the prominent beliefs of the era, and modern dance occurred at a time in which psychology was incredibly present within society. The earliest modern dance choreographers drew inspiration and meaning in the same ways that psychologists did. Both dancers and psychologists search for explanations and reasons why we experience life the way we do, and many similarities exist between the way in which psychology and dance answer their deepest questions. In the following chapters, I will examine two choreographers with contrasting choreographic processes, but who can both be perceived as searching for greater meaning in life, and exploring the human condition through practice of modern dance. Three branches of psychology will be used to compare the methods of psychological and choreographic processes and beliefs; psychoanalytic, behavioristic and humanistic. Each of these three perspectives searches for meaning in quite similar ways as modern dancers and choreographers do, and have done since the formation of modern dance. Psychological and choreographic methods are not dissimilar, and both examine the human experience in practice.
Chapter Two: Glimpse/Chance

“The body shooting into space is not an idea of man’s freedom, but is the body shooting into space.”
-Cunningham, (1955)

Chance. It is by and through chance that Merce Cunningham left behind a truly innovative legacy. One may even say that his work triggered the postmodern dance era with his unconventional style and fresh ideas surrounding the movement of the body. Cunningham’s approach to choreography and the works that resulted left a lasting imprint upon the dance community worldwide. His style broke away from traditional concepts and introduced a novel way of contemplating dance. Cunningham thought of his company members simply as dancers, and not as characters in any particular story. Dance was just movement of a body through space. No hidden meaning was necessary, and no extra narrative involved in order for an audience to “understand” a piece. For Cunningham, dance was an art form concerned with movement through space and time. It was almost scientific, carefully calculated, something he planned so articulately yet left entirely to chance.

In many ways, Cunningham’s ideas regarding chance were representative of his search for meaning in life. His dances may not have been representing a story or character, but his dancers produced movement with a method that was very much an exploration of the human experience. In his own way, he connected movement of the body with a search for greater purpose. In this way, the social science of psychology was very much present in his career. In fact, certain psychological theories and therapies coincide with Cunningham’s technique, ideas regarding the body and methods of creating movement. Both psychoanalysis and behaviorism hold parallel
views to his dance style. These branches of psychology explore the human experience in very similar ways as Cunningham did with his choreographic process.

Cunningham’s Inspirations

Abstract Expressionism:

Modern choreographers are frequently inspired by the artistic and philosophical movements of the current era. Early on, Merce Cunningham was introduced to the artistic lens of postmodern art, and therefore became fascinated with the budding movement of abstract expressionism. This new movement spanned all forms of artistic expression including painting, writing and music, and therefore was easily adapted to dance as well. Abstract expressionism emphasized the idea that art could be art for the sake of being art. A further meaning or inspiration was not essential for something to be considered true art. Jackson Pollock’s drip painting is a fleeting example of a method invented during this artistic period that exemplifies these ideals. Pollock would splatter paint onto a canvas without planning, and without ever touching the paintbrush to the canvas. During this movement, painters were painting for the act of painting, and not for any higher purpose.

At the same time, composers such as John Cage were making music that questioned everyone’s sense of the word “music”. He would sit in silence at a piano for four minutes and thirty-three seconds while his audience eagerly awaited his playing. He would then get up and leave, without ever having made a sound. The piece questioned the meaning of music, was it the noises the audience made in their suspense? Or was it the silence of the piano he never touched? In conjunction with artists such as Pollock, Cage, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, “Cunningham [was] widely regarded as a choreographic formalist who believe[d] that movement
[was] no longer obligated to represent anything other than itself’ (Copeland 13). He choreographed dance to create dance, not to instill emotions into anyone. For Cunningham, “the principal emphasis for both artist and audience [was] on “seeing clearly” rather than “feeling deeply” (Copeland 12). For Cunningham and the abstract expressionists, it was more important for an audience to have a visual experience rather than an emotionally compelling one.

Cunningham’s partnership with John Cage, both personally and professionally, had an enormous influence on the ways he thought about dance and on the formation of his own aesthetic. Cage gave Cunningham a framework with which to think, an inspiration for a process with infinite possibilities. Both artists decided to veer away from the common philosophies of the time and to focus on the act of the art form they were participating in. Cage often spoke out against the current modern ideals, “As Cage wrote in a program note for the 1968 BAM season, “By not relying on psychology, this ‘modern’ dance is freed from the concerns of most such dancing. What comes through, though different for each observer, is clear—since one can only approach it directly, not through an idea of something else than itself and [the dancers] do not cover themselves with disguising costumes” (Copeland 37). Unlike those who had come before, Merce Cunningham’s aspiration was for his choreography to be recognized as dance, and not as anything more. Cage gave Cunningham the boost he needed to pursue his novel methods regarding choreography. The two artists inspired each other. Without Cage’s experimental musical endeavors, Cunningham’s works might not have been the same. His pieces would not have pushed the audience to such extremes, or to such vulnerable places as
they did with the combination of Cunningham’s chance methods and Cage’s musical experiments.

Martha Graham’s Influence:

While modern philosophies and artistic movements played a significant role in Cunningham’s perspective of modern dance, it must be recognized that he was once a Martha Graham dancer. Her creation of the “contract and release” technique, as well as her choreographic methods gave him a strong background rooted in psychological thought. Many of Graham’s pieces required her dancers, such as Cunningham, to become people other than themselves and to completely immerse themselves within their character. With Graham’s instruction, Cunningham was exposed to the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, and therefore was taught early on how to incorporate human emotion and to emphasize expression in his dancing.

Martha Graham introduced Merce Cunningham to psychoanalysis. He and his fellow company members were taught many of the psychoanalytic theories that Graham believed in during her classes and rehearsals. She found it important to share her psychological beliefs with her dancers. Cunningham sought to escape from her psychoanalytic thinking when he began creating his own choreography. Yet in doing so, he was able to recognize the importance that the human psyche has on dance, and his dancing acknowledges this importance by rejecting it. In some ways, his pieces are almost more lifelike, more realistic than any choreographer, as life is full of randomness and chance, and is often incredibly unpredictable just as his works are each and every time they are performed.
Merce Cunningham’s first works as an independent choreographer were deeply influenced by Graham’s way of thinking. Her influence on him is quite obvious in the initial pieces that he choreographed on his own. One of the first works he created after leaving the Graham company was, *16 Dances for Soloist and Company of Three*. This piece marks his transitory phase of moving as a Graham dancer into moving within his own form. Cunningham combined his newfound knowledge and ideas inspired by abstract expressionism with his years of training and experiences with Graham. Therefore, while this piece is recognizably different from Graham’s work, some of her choreographic elements remain. “Cunningham’s “16 Dances...” is an important transitional work...because its structure was derived at least as much from psychological archetypes as from chance operations. Each of its separate sections was intended to embody a specific emotional archetype” (Copeland 71). In creating this piece, Cunningham did not venture too far away from the choreographic methods that he had been taught by Martha Graham, but allowed his new ideas to take part as well. For this new endeavor,

Cunningham had decided to determine the arrangement of sequences by tossing coins, thereby utilizing an “impersonal” (and much more objective) mode of aesthetic decision making, rather than structuring the dance according to the subjective dictates of his own instincts or taste—which is another way of saying that, unlike Graham, he made little or no attempt to draw inspiration from the pristine, “primitivist” sanctuary of the unconscious. (Copeland 71)
He was drawing from past experiences yet open to new ones, blending his past with the Graham company with his quest for a new method of creating movement through space.

Inspirations for Psychoanalysis

As Cunningham was beginning his career as an independent choreographer, psychological thought had already encroached upon American society. Sigmund Freud had popularized psychoanalysis, followed shortly by Carl Jung and others. Psychoanalysis emphasized the importance of the unconscious and the essentiality of psychology recognizing each person as an individual. American modern dance and psychoanalysis had become intertwined, “the paradoxical…world of the “unconscious” is now seemingly an accepted area for exploration” (Horst 91), and Cunningham strove to be different. Psychoanalysts were exploring ideas about human behavior, such as, what might the unconscious tell us about a person? How much do people realize the influence of their past? Psychoanalysis was the first majorly accepted form of psychology to gain ground in America, and was founded on the basis of exploring and examining the human condition through the unconscious. Questions surrounding human behavior, in combination with the current societal ideals helped to inspire this emphasis on psychoanalysis. Questioning the human experience helped to motivate psychoanalysis, just as the novel idea to dance simply in order to move through space inspired Merce Cunningham to create his own choreography.

Inspirations for Behaviorism

Behaviorism came about as a reaction to psychoanalysis. Psychologists such as John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner did not agree with Freud and his fellow
psychoanalysts that the unconscious was all that important (Skinner 3). Behaviorism brought the focus of psychology to a new area; to observable behavior. According to these researchers, psychology had to be scientifically proven and observable. In many ways, this break away from psychoanalysis is quite similar to Cunningham’s break from Martha Graham. He wanted to choreograph in his own way, without the influence of the unconscious or the narrative. Behaviorists began to search for answers about human behavior with science, gathering data and observations, rather than prodding the unconscious mind and making theories and assumptions regarding an individual’s mental health based upon their recollections and vocalizations of their own experiences.

Cunningham Technique: Chance and Circumstance

“Choreography...is all paperwork.” -Cunningham, 1999 (Daly 215)

Not only did Merce Cunningham break away from the psychologically-driven, narrative pathway of Martha Graham-inspired modern dance, but he also expanded its movement vocabulary. He made famous a creation technique that was very different. Similar to Isadora Duncan, he perceived the most natural of movements as essential in the process of creating choreography. Even just a simple walk could be placed onstage and perceived as dance. According to Copeland, “In the early 1950’s it stood in marked contrast to both ballet and the prevailing conceptions of modern dance. Cunningham… spoke during that decade of his “eight basic movements, with variations: bending, rising, extending, turning, sliding, skimming, and brushing, jumping, and falling’” (Copeland 77). Cunningham perceived even these ordinary movements as integral to his new dance techniques, and he would incorporate them effortlessly in a choreographic manner. The most normalized of steps were just as
essential to a dance as were the most choreographed. This is not to say that he allowed improvisation into his pieces, simply that he embraced movements that were natural to everyday human beings.

Instead of building his pieces upon drama or an involved narrative, Cunningham allowed simple movements to tell a story in themselves. Pedestrian movements intertwined with highly stylized ones gave his work an original feel. In contrast with much of Graham’s work, his was at first taken as almost monotone. As Copeland states, “Cunningham’s dances rarely “build” to any sort of climax: sexual, narrative, or otherwise. In Cunningham’s choreographic universe, steps that are conventionally regarded as “preparatory” are no more or less significant than the steps that precede or follow them” (Copeland 78). He believed that dance was about movement, not about telling a story based on fictional experiences. For him, dance was to be seen as itself, as a way of moving through space as a human being. Cunningham once said, “Climax is for those who are swept by New Year’s Eve. In that way, I do not think of each dance as an object, rather a short stop on the way” (Daly 214). He believed dance to be a part of life. Instead of drawing from the human psyche for inspiration, Cunningham dove into the human experience, how people actually live each day, with risks, chance, and unpredictable outcomes.

Inspired by abstract expressionism, breaking free of psychoanalytical ideals, and embracing natural everyday movements, Cunningham decided to choreograph using chance. He called his novel method of creation, “chance operations”. This choreographic process was at first so foreign to those who viewed it, that his style was initially hard to grasp.
Despite his background in psychoanalytic thinking and abstract expressionism, he found science, and especially the study of physics to be incredibly influential to his process. Cunningham once said that he “read that sentence of Einstein: ‘There are no fixed points in space.’ [and]…said to [himself], if there are not fixed points, then every point is equally fluid and interesting” (Jowi 289). He began seeing movement as scientific, dancers as particles, and space as infinite. His choreography embraced this idea, that no one point is more important than another, and suddenly his world was turned upside down. Complexity of movement became his central goal, and his work thoroughly embraced the infinite possibilities of movement. The center of the stage was no longer special and instead, every part was essential. Natural gestures were embraced, and movement sequences were created thorough randomness, just as they would have been created in nature. In a great sense, Cunningham was working to express reality in real life circumstances. He was letting whatever came to be, stay.

The process of creation is unique for every choreographer. Merce Cunningham was eventually open about his choreographic process, and spoke about his struggles and accomplishments during interviews. According to one of his dancers, Carolyn Brown, his *Suite by Chance* was the first piece to use chance from the start, as Cunningham explained, “its composition was unprompted by anything other than its own life” (Brown 40). At first, the audience did not know what to expect from his methods, but towards the end of his career, it was almost predictable that chance would play a role in his pieces. Although he first began choreographing on his own in 1942 and started his own company in 1953, on August 17, 1958 at the
American Dance Festival at Connecticut College he was “still considered an outsider, and this [was] the first time he and his dancers [had] been invited to teach and perform in this bastion of modern dance” (Jowitt 277). His mode of working was not yet understood nor accepted by the dance community and therefore this was the first time he was truly able to showcase his choreographic process and be acknowledged by the modern dance world. One of the two pieces he showed to the public that summer was *Summerspace*, a work that has now been universally recognized as revolutionary to the field of modern dance. This work was created and inspired by the surroundings of that summer in which he and his dancers spent at Connecticut College. Cunningham used the rehearsal space he was given as a tool for chance operations to occur.

The dance was created in an immense empty parlor in one of the dorms—a beautiful, airy room, the dancers recall, with three sets of doors opening onto the hallway and French windows opposite them, looking out onto the summer lawn. Perhaps it was these many portals that inspired Cunningham to make entrances, exits, and the paths between them the structural principle of the dance…Cunningham plotted twenty-one paths connecting the six possible entrance points on the stage and devised twenty-one phrases to travel along them. (Jowitt 279)

He used the numbers he found within the space he was given for movement inspiration and allowed chance encounters with gesture and coin tossing to take shape as choreography. Just as people deal with everyday events that happen as they are
happening, his dancers embraced the environment in which they were situated and created dance through chance occurrences.

Chance operations were revolutionary and controversial. Cunningham was upfront about his process with his audience, and therefore gathered a great deal of critics who did not understand how his dance could even be considered true modern dance. While many viewed his methods as cold, unapproachable, or machine-like, he had a different point of view. “Some people think it is inhuman and mechanistic to toss pennies in creating a dance…But the feeling I have when I compose in this way is that I am in touch with (something) far greater than my own personal inventiveness could ever be, much more universally human than the particular habits of my own practice” (1968, n.p.) (Copeland 111). Instead of choosing how a dance would be created, he let it create itself. For him, this way of working was a much more organic way to incorporate the human experience into movement.

Cunningham’s ideas regarding gender are an excellent example of how he perceived his dancers and his art form. Males and females often wore exactly the same costume and danced the same choreography. Men may have carried women more often, but only due to strength. No gender roles were portrayed in his pieces, and the two genders were equally integral to his work. “Cunningham’s determination to cut through the “fog of meaning” was especially evident in his approach to male/female partnering…often executed in such an impersonal way that it’s divested of such connotations” (Copeland 36). Men don’t act like men, they act like dancers. Women don’t act like women, they act like dancers. Each dancer is quite simply a person moving through space with no instructions to be anything more. As Jowitt
writes, “…there is nothing radical about Cunningham’s view of the relationship between men and women” (Jowitt 299), he just used people he knew were the best dancers for his choreography and it did not matter their gender. He looked past stereotypes and preconceived notions regarding gender, and gave both males and females an equal presence onstage.

Numbers were crucial to the development of a technique that relied on chance. Cunningham would assign numbers to sides of a coin or dice, and whatever happened with the flip or roll, the numbers held meaning. That many turns, in that direction, on that foot, with that many dancers, and it could go on and on. Later on in life, he was introduced to an ancient Chinese artifact that helped him to organize his fascination with numbers and randomness. Indeed, “If Cunningham has a “favorite number,” it’s likely to 64, the total of symbolic hexagrams in the I Ching, the ancient Chinese book of divination, one of the five classic texts of Confucianism” (Copeland 74). His dances were never absent of numbers, dancers always going multiple directions at a time, in various manners. He embraced mathematics and physics as inspiration for what might occur in natural progression of movement. While to many, chance seemed to distance one piece of choreography from the next, for Cunningham the aspect of chance was in fact what tied his pieces together. Each work was so different, yet was created in a nearly identical way, therefore a connection could exist between them. In talking about chance, Cunningham saw “chance as a method of finding continuity, that is, continuity thought of as being the continuum of one thing after another, rather than being related by psychological or thematic or other cause-and effect devices” (Copeland 78). Just as time or space can be a continuous
presence for an individual each day, chance acted as a connection from one piece to the next. The fact that each piece was created through randomness exhibits his true motivations for allowing the world to act as it naturally would, as an acceptance of the natural. Therefore instead of forcing movement upon an audience, Cunningham was simply showing movement as movement itself, in its most natural form and allowing the numbers and shapes to reach out to those who sought meaning in movement. In a way, he was rejecting the Graham ideals of psychoanalytic thinking, but in other ways he was recognizing the importance of the audience’s perspective and the fact that no matter what an audience member sees, human beings always try to apply meaning to what they perceive.

*Infinite Possibilities:*

Cunningham never ran out of inspiration. Chance operations allowed him more possibilities for movement than could ever be imagined. The amount of work that he produced far outnumbered that of his predecessors and colleagues, due to his method of creating dances.

Cunningham has made a startling number of dances—nearly one hundred since he began choreographing in 1942—as well as innumerable films, videotances, and open-space Events: and at least twenty-five of his group works would qualify for major status, though few of them survive in current repertory. (Siegel 292-293)

He never ran out of ideas due to the vast amount of possibilities that were available to him through the use of chance operations. Chance came naturally, and he once expressed that he felt as though “Dancing is of divine origin, and to try to express that divinity is like pinning jelly to the wall. It only escapes you. It expresses itself if one
gives one’s life to dancing out of love for it, out of reverence for the nature of its action and the discipline necessary to allow for that action” (Jowitt 302). He believed chance operations were a celebration of randomness. According to Cunningham, what came about through the use of chance was sometimes impossible to grasp, yet was still essential to express. Whatever came out of his work with dice, numbers, or randomness, was meant to be exactly as it was created. Working with chance was fulfilling, and resonated with his sense of self, as he expressed when he said, “The feeling I have when I compose in this way is that I am in touch with a natural resource far greater than my own personal inventiveness could ever be, much more universally human than the particular habits of my own practice, and organically rising out of common pools of motor impulses” (Jowitt 286). Instead of searching for inspiration, he just let dance happen and worked with whatever came about, much like people do with their passing thoughts on a daily basis.

Psychoanalytic Technique

Psychoanalysis is based upon the exploration and examination of the unconscious. This form of therapy was established in order to release the patient’s innermost emotions out into the open. Similar to many other psychological therapies, a typical session of psychoanalytical therapy involves a talking process. One process in particular is known as free association. During free association, the patient speaks their thoughts aloud, and whatever comes to mind they vocalize. No matter how random their stream of consciousness, all is shared with the psychologist. As Freud describes, “every impression about [the issue at hand], without any exception, which occurs to [the patient] should be imparted to the doctor” (Freud 3). After the patient has shared, the psychoanalyst examines the thoughts that the patient has let out of
their system and establishes reasons for why they are feeling the way that they are. Freud created several theories based upon how the remnants of the past impact the present mental state of the individual; such as how repressed sexual feelings could lead to mental disabilities and struggles, or how a troubled childhood could lead to insecurities in adulthood. The relationship between the patient and the therapist therefore, was incredibly integral to the success of this form of therapy. Psychoanalysis could not heed any beneficial effects without a strong bond between psychoanalyst and patient. In order to truly dive as far deep into their thoughts as is necessary, a person must trust the professional who is listening.

In many ways, the process of psychoanalytical therapy is similar to Merce Cunningham’s process of creating choreography. In both circumstances, randomness and chance is used in order to search for meaning. In psychoanalysis, the therapist lets the past and the unconscious thoughts determine what is established regarding the present and future. For Cunningham, the randomness of the universe decided what came next. Psychoanalysis and the technique of chance and circumstance recognize and embrace the integrity of random occurrences and allow these occurrences to lead to greater significance. Even though Cunningham was not necessarily looking for a greater narrative from chance, his dances pulled from randomness came together as a whole, just as the unconscious thoughts from free association are brought together to create a theory. Also, the relationship between dancer and choreographer echoes the relationship of psychoanalyst and patient. In both cases, an enormous amount of trust and understanding must be established in order for the process to work properly. Without dancers who were willing to experiment with coin tosses and numbers
determining their choreography, Cunningham would have been at a loss, and the bond between his movements and his dancers would not have been so highly praised. In order for his chance processes to work, his company dancers had to put their complete trust in him and his method of creation. In both psychoanalysis and chance operations, trust was essential to the process.

Behaviorism Technique

In contrast to the technique of psychoanalysis, behaviorism is much more focused on the scientific aspect of psychology. John B. Watson, Carl Rogers and B.F. Skinner were among the first psychologists to branch away from Freud and Jung’s perspective, and emphasize the importance of the outside world on an individual’s mental health. They created a technique in which the patient’s thought processes were examined through a much more scientific lens than psychoanalysis would allow. Instead of talking about the unconscious, the patient would share daily experiences with their psychologist. Yet behaviorism does not entirely reject the unconscious as Skinner states, radical behaviorism “does not deny the possibilities of self-observation or self-knowledge or its possible usefulness, but questions the nature of what is felt or observed and hence known” (Skinner 14). It was recognized that the unconscious thoughts of an individual may influence their mental state of being, but this was not of central interest. Instead, these unconscious thoughts were secondary and would be influenced by biology and the environment. Behaviorists were content to study “a person’s genetic and environmental histories. What are introspectively observed are certain collateral products of those histories” (Skinner 15). In other words, a behaviorist seeks to establish meaning through the examination of outside
forces, such as social and environmental factors, while still keeping in mind the unconscious thoughts of the individual, as consequences of their nature.

Psychotherapeutic techniques within the field of behaviorism have been tested again and again with the scientific method. These techniques and theories are ones that can be proved with evidence, and are not theoretical implications shaped by common sense. B.F. Skinner’s operant conditioning is one example. Operant conditioning can be positive or negative. If a positive reinforcer is given, the behavior will likely be repeated and if a negative reinforcer is given, then the behavior is likely to be diminished. The positive one strengthens the likelihood that the behavior will occur again, while the negative one strengthens a behavior that reduces the current behavior. For example, giving a glass of water to a thirsty person will lead to them drink water when they feel thirsty in the future, while giving someone a shoe that pinches will make them less likely to try that size again (Skinner 40). This is just one example of a behaviorist theory that occurs in everyday life and has been scientifically tested and proven to be true. Unlike psychoanalysis, behaviorism focuses on actual human behavior and what causes it, through a scientific approach.

Behaviorism relates to Cunningham’s choreographic process in an entirely different way than psychoanalysis. Both behaviorism and chance processes base their meaning off of the universe. Science was a huge inspiration to Cunningham, and is a central focus of behaviorism. Cunningham looked at his work in a very scientific manner, free of emotion and deeper meaning. He saw his movements as movements and nothing more. Just as behaviorism created theories based upon scientific
experiments regarding more than just the unconscious or random thoughts of an individual, Cunningham created choreography that held science to a great value. Exploring movement of the body became more important than exploring the unconscious self.

Dancers as People

Cunningham’s ideas regarding an ideal dancer evolved as his career progressed. At first, the body shape of his company members did not matter, and there was significant diversity among the dancers in terms of body sizes and shapes. Yet he is widely acknowledged for the later part of his career, in which each of his dancers developed the same body type, eerily similar to his own. At this time, they were all incredibly in-shape with elongated legs, a large buttocks, wearing tightly fitted costumes, and moving gracefully yet grounded. With such an emphasis on form and such meticulously created choreography set completely by chance, how did these nearly identical dancers come across? As human beings, or as robotic species moving as though they had no control over their own bodies? Because the dancers were shaped so similarly, did this detract from the perception of them as people? Considering his method of chance, without his dancers explicitly expressing emotions, were they considered machines? Were they hard to connect with on a personal level? Did the process of chance-based choreography impact the way in which the audience processed the movements and purposes of the dancers? Of course, the answers to these questions varied among audience members.

Dancers were people. Real, ordinary, flesh-covered, muscle and boned people (Foster 43). Cunningham saw dancers not as objects, but as human beings moving through space. He paid attention to how the body moved, how one muscle triggered
the next, and always asking the question, was it possible? Could the human body move that way? Instead of emphasizing the internal thoughts of the dancers, he emphasized their external features. Human bodies were capable of moving through space, and so that was what they would do. There was no background meaning or reflection of why they were moving that way, just that they were doing so.

Cunningham took risks with the present. He was interested in what could happen without any previous planning, and incorporated everyday movement into his pieces to demonstrate the accessibility and reflection of real life within dance. Incredibly, Cunningham instructed his dancers to be themselves during a performance. It is in this way that they were able to be seen as human. They became relatable to an audience because they were never asked to be someone who they were not. His choreography might have been abstract, but “Their individual humanity is revealed through how they perform the steps he has chosen to make for them or that chance has dealt them. (“Enlightenment,” the saying goes, “consists merely in becoming what we already are from the beginning.”)” (Jowitt 293). In allowing his dancers to be themselves, the movement was neither forced nor difficult to perceive just as it was, as movement for movement’s sake. His dancers were dancing for the act of dancing, and because it was what they wanted to do. They were moving through space as themselves, and not as an other, as a character or persona.

In many ways, the meaning of his process of creation was more important to him than the meaning one got from perceiving the final product.

It seems he’d rather have us pay attention to how a sequence was arrived at than to the effect it creates or what it “means.” His dancers are very
straightforward; one of the main things about them that impresses us is their lack of artifice or preordained structures in time and space, their intense concentration on making the present real rather than on re-creating some experience that is past. His movement is its own metaphor and, as such, has a very direct, uncompromising expressiveness. (Sieg 293)

The utilization of chance operations, and by being themselves during a performance, his dancers allowed the audience the freedom to connect to the randomness and chance associated with regular, everyday human life. Since there was no “right” way to perceive his dances, everyone was correct with their own interpretation. Just as is true in everyday life, every person is unique, and finds meaning in a personal way. Therefore, is he perhaps even more conscious of an audience’s thoughts than those choreographers who were trying to force a message upon others? Was he aware that he gave the audience such freedom of thought?

Cunningham’s work demonstrates that depicting an emotion or story was not essential in getting the audience members or the dancers to connect with the choreography. Even though his dancers were not portraying emotion, his choreography was all about the here and now, the current state, the present. And “..how tricky it must be for even the most daring of them to remain flexible and not attempt to decide on the “meaning” of a gesture or how it is best played, and so thwart the idea of dancing as responsive to the instant. Cunningham himself takes more liberties with the steps than any of the dancers, and powerful images of feeling emerge through his dancing” (Jowitt 295). In rehearsals, his company worked hard not to fabricate stories or emotions connected with the movements due to the
essentiality of his dances as art, as simply movement through space and nothing
more. Cunningham strove to experience dance as part of life, just as Marcel
Duchamp said, “Art…must be part of life—not an interpretation of life, not a
description of life, not an attempt to comment or improve on life, but a piece of life
itself” (Jowitt 283). Instead of portraying life through dance, Cunningham strove to
exhibit life through dance.

Dancers/Patients–Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis recognizes a human being as a whole person, not just as a
mind or a body. Every aspect of an individual is important to acknowledge and
analyze. It is not a harsh scientific reality, but a method with which to study a patient
through their unconscious thoughts, dreams, and desires. Akin to Cunningham’s
instructions to his dancers, Freud asked his patients to be themselves, and not to hold
anything back. Every thought was taken into account, and meanings were sought
from any direction that the patient offered.

Often, physical symptoms were acknowledged as a result of mental stress. A
psychoanalyst might attribute a headache to a personal struggle with oneself, about
some unconscious thought of great importance. Freud even gave many sexual
problems the cause of mental insecurity (Everdell 136). He believed that internal
problems could lead to physiological problems. This is a common view in modern
day psychology as well, that physical symptoms can stem from unhealthy mental
states. Therefore, the body was of great importance to psychoanalysis. It was
perceived as a way to visualize the internal issues.

Just as Cunningham recognized his dancers as dancers, psychoanalysis
recognized its patients as patients. There was no hiding one’s thoughts or motivations
in therapy, just as Cunningham didn’t allow his dancers to shy away from randomness. In both psychoanalysis and Cunningham’s choreographic process, nothing was discrete. Cunningham’s dancers put all of their technique out in the open and let chance take it where it may, while psychoanalysis examined a patient’s thoughts, no matter how strange. Both techniques respected the person as a human being, and as a body in space. The physical and mental body was of great importance in both circumstances.

Dancers/Patients--Behaviorism

The psychological perspective of behaviorism offers a contradictory view of the importance of the person in the psychological process than psychoanalysis. Behaviorism sees each person as an individual, yet in an incredibly straightforward, scientific manner. Much like Cunningham’s perception of dancers as movers through space, behaviorism perceives people as independent thinkers, whose behavior can be predictable and scientifically explained.

For a behaviorist, the outside world has an immense importance to the mental state of an individual. Instead of seeking information from within a person, behaviorists observe behavior and try to predict how people will react based on research with scientific evidence (Skinner 3). Cunningham was incredibly inspired by science, and physics led him to explore dance in a new way. He worked with his dancers just as a behaviorist would work, through observation and chance occurrences. He was inspired by movement, not by inner emotions or thoughts, and the unconscious was not a source of inspiration for his pieces. Both behaviorism and Cunningham perceive people as scientific beings, rather than emotional thinkers.
Audience Perceptions

In many ways, Cunningham’s process of creating dance was more related to human psychological processes than many previous modern dance choreographers. Although his methods of working with chance rejected any narrative or connection to emotion that had been present in preceding choreographers’ works, there is still an immense element of humanity present within his work. Perhaps those who saw Cunningham himself dance understood this more than anyone else. His sheer love for the art form and his appreciation for its ability to express the human condition were incredibly evident from just a minute of observation. While at first his pieces might seem disconnected, cold, and even machine-like, one must recognize how truly akin to life they are. Taking chances with movement was a way to create choreography, just as people take chance in their daily lives. In fact, “Cunningham’s dances don’t cry out for psychological or thematic “interpretations.” But that is not to imply that his works aren’t imbued with a distinct emotional texture. Indeed, as Cunningham himself once put it, “I don’t think that what I do is nonexpressive. It’s just that I don’t try to inflict it on anyone” (Copeland 171). His dancers put just as much of themselves, if not more, into his pieces, as they were simply being who they were naturally. As they danced, they put all of their thoughts, sweat and tears into each and every risk they took and this made his work truly human, and definitely psychologically relatable. Watching a Cunningham piece can be an exploration into how life works, into how randomness can come together into a cohesive form that a person from any background has the possibility to relate to. Cunningham made dances because of his love for dance, “the dancing that he composed for himself went beyond any such rational notions. The critic Walter Terry said that”…five minutes of
watching his dancing convinces one that ‘to dance’ is his equivalent of our ‘to breathe’.” (Jowitt 280). Merce Cunningham expressed his love of movement through the incredible variety of work that he created with a method that seemed so foreign but truly representative of the human experience.

At first, modern dance choreographers and audiences were unsure of Cunningham’s legitimacy. Many were confused by his pieces with no emotional content, no narrative, and no obvious message. Some critics marked his pieces as “escapist formalism” and failed to relate the humanity of his work with their own. But author Roger Copeland expresses his discontent with this view when he states that, “No contemporary choreographer has done more to honor the complexity of contemporary experience than Merce Cunningham; and that’s why it makes so little sense to me when I hear him accused of “escapist formalism”” (Copeland 261).

Unlike the majority of choreographers of the era, Cunningham was making movement for movement’s sake, but this did not make his dancing less relatable than the others. He was “a choreographer who speaks openly of his desire to create a variety of dance “unprompted by references other than to its own life” (Copeland 19). Dancing was the important part of his career, no narrative or particular goal seemed inherently necessary.

Cunningham did not tell audiences how to perceive his work. Audiences at Cunningham’s performances were given the freedom to create meaning for themselves. Even the same individual might perceive his works differently each time. Those who saw Cunningham’s work were often inspired. Whether one enjoyed the dance performance or not, he allowed a kind of freedom that had not been offered.
Up until Cunningham premiered his pieces onstage, modern dance had been about tradition. It had followed Isadora Duncan into a new type of art form distinct from ballet but just as graceful. It had then gone into the exploration of traditional dance by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn with Denishawn. Dancers who came out of Denishawn broke free of what they had learned and created their own techniques, people such as Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Martha Graham. But Cunningham was different. He took a chance with his work. He did not plan exactly what would happen onstage, and he let fate decide how his dances turned out. He saw the beauty of human movement and decided that it was enough to put on as a dance performance.

Watching a piece by Merce Cunningham truly opens one’s eyes to the possibilities of dance as an art form. His careful decisions regarding costume, the body shape of his dancers, music, lights, spacing on the stage and the movements, mesmerize the viewer through the complexity of it all coming together as one piece. Yet somehow, it works to create a sense of freedom for the audience, no pressure for them to see this or that, but for the perceiver simply to see.

Many of Cunningham’s innovations—the independence of movement, sound, and décor in his dances, the decentralizing of stage space, the physical obstacles that sometimes impede or obscure one’s view of the dancers—serve the ultimate goal of increasing the spectator’s perceptual freedom, of providing us with opportunities to choose when and where to focus our visual and auditory attention. Cunningham and Cage practice (quite consciously) a politics of perception. (Copeland 16)
One’s interpretation of his dance was based purely upon the viewer’s experience. In this way, each of his dances may have a different meaning for every person.

Exemplifying this viewpoint, Cunningham once said of his choreography, “What is seen is what it is” (Copeland 38). It was not important what people saw or obtained from his work, but just that they saw it for what it was, movement through space.

Just as his dances had no narrative, they also had no predictability. Watching a Cunningham dance could not have been described as a comfortable experience, but “instead, like being placed in the middle of a complex intersection where many roads cross and all are under construction, and where direction and travelling speed are left to the audience” (Dell 15). Sometimes the dancers did not know what they would perform until it was happening onstage. He would mix costumes, music, choreography, lights, and leave it up to chance which combination the audience would see. His dances give the audience an experience of following the dancers every which way, not knowing what might possibly come next. Instead of going along with tradition, he broke boundaries with space, time and movement concepts. “With Cunningham, body sculpture is not just a matter of which direction the dancer is traveling but also which way the performer faces while moving there. (Many choreographers think in terms of four directions: upstage, downstage, left and right. Cunningham routinely utilizes at least eight)” (Copeland 30). Therefore, an audience member is an active participant at each performance. Depending on many different factors, every individual every night of the show, will get a unique perspective. He does not tell the audience where to look, or how to think. Instead, each individual has the freedom to perceive the movement in whichever way they decide.
“Width” replaces “depth” in his work just as surely as it does in most examples of collage. The eye of the spectator is not automatically guided upstage center. One’s attention—auditory as well as visual—moves in a “collagelike” fashion between shifting points in space. Cunningham frequently cites Einstein’s declaration that “There are no fixed points in space”. (Copeland 177)

This can even be perceived as another way in which he represents psychology through dance, as each person’s experience is different, and no one should think the same way as another.

In contrast with many modern choreographers, Cunningham saw no point to increasing the importance of neither the center nor any part of the stage for that matter. It is impossible to look in only one direction when observing his works. “While watching a Cunningham piece, one tends to scan left and right rather than zooming in on a single point set in deep space” (Copeland 45). Yet his work was never hard to distinguish. His style was all over the place, yet held common ground. He created a recognizable form that touched each viewer in a unique way. It was cohesive, and “Despite the number of aesthetic decisions that are determined by chance operations, Cunningham’s choreography is never so “objective” as to feel anonymous. His quirky, idiosyncratic way of moving is never entirely disguised, and it’s as apparent in his group pieces as in his solos” (Copeland 107). So despite the fact that his choreographic choices were absent of emotional ties or narrative cues, he managed to establish a style that can be recognized through its personality and artistic composition.
Instead of emphasizing the center of the stage, the story of the characters, or the beat of the music, Cunningham created new boundaries. He broke out of what was expected and entered the postmodern. As an example, in Winterbranch, the dancers move around the stage in a disorderly, unpredictable manner. The music could barely be perceived as music, and might better be labeled noise. No one dancer held any more status on the stage than another, and no characters were portrayed. Yet although there is a disarray of ideas, “This is Winterbranch—images of struggle, meaningless accomplishment, loss, beginning again. Images of a modern man” (Siegel 299). In his own way, he creates a reflection of the modern world, of the way people live each day. Life is just as unpredictable and mindboggling as Cunningham’s most extravagant works. Through chaos, he portrays the modern image of a person, of the hectic and unpredictable life we can all relate to.

Using the mind:

Intelligence was a consistent motivating force throughout Merce Cunningham’s dance career. Much of his well-known choreography originated from entirely random circumstances, but he and his dancers put a great deal of thought into the construction of each piece, and in the end, portrayed thinking people on stage. Being within a thoughtful, decisive human body was integral to his aesthetic. Indeed, “Cunningham’s dances demand an unprecedented degree of alertness and mental agility on the part of those who perceive them as well as those who perform them” (Copeland 216). It was essential for his dancers to be worked mentally and physically at the same moment. “Whereas the image of human thought in Graham was heavy, organic, brooding, and altogether nineteenth century, in Cunningham, it is permutational, corrolational, strategic, exact, rarefied, and airy. This is not to say that
Cunningham presents a pantomime of the mind, but that he presents the body as intelligent in a specifically contemporary way” (Copeland 210). A Cunningham dancer was expected to understand how to move their own body, and to be themselves in the space. Dancing aimlessly around a stage, attempting to reenact a personal story was the opposite of what Cunningham wanted. He very much intended for his dancers to use their brains whenever they danced. And “…by paying as much attention to the head and the mind as to the rest of the body…Merce Cunningham gives us a much more complete and convincing image of “human nature” than do his predecessors in the world of modern dance” (Copeland 228). Cunningham believed in the body as intelligent, but the mind as just as important. While he recognized the importance of the intelligent body, Cunningham also appreciated his dancers for how they thought, and portrayed their abilities to contemplate and process information within his choreography.

His technique truly embodied this ideal. Cunningham dancers went through an incredible amount of dance training, and this was evident in the way they moved. “Every section of every body can become a soloist as well—for Cunningham often sets the head, arms, torso, and legs moving in opposition to one another” (Copeland 140). To do this properly, a dancer must be thinking, engaging with the movement and making decisions about how to go about it. According to one of his seasoned dancers, Carolyn Brown, “Cunningham technique is designed to develop flexibility in the mind as well as in the body” (Copeland 150). According to Copeland, “…when considering the way Cunningham uses chance-operations, we should always bear in mind the implications of Louis Pasteur’s famous aphorism: “Chance favors the
prepared mind” (Copeland 161). Cunningham used chance to create choreography, but he never went unprepared. He always had a plan about how he was to use chance, and went about his process in a deliberate manner. In watching his pieces, “What we see are thinking bodies in the business of frequently “changing their minds”—perhaps even “contradicting themselves”—the very opposite of “free” flow” (Copeland 114). It was in this manner that his dancers never went without thinking and were prepared for whatever came their way.

Incredibly, Freud may have had an impact on Cunningham’s perception of the mind as integral to body movement. “The “upward” journey from body to mind is the traditional path of Freudian sublimation. In Cunningham’s choreography, we find an art firmly rooted in the body that nevertheless celebrates…the analytical propensities of the intellect” (Copeland 213). Although his methods did not stem from the unconscious mind, he followed his intrigue of psychology through the way in which he taught his dancers how to focus. “Cunningham emphasizes the extent to which his dancers are propelled only by their own willpower and concentration…you must in a sense push yourself…rather than something outside of you” (Copeland 150). The movements might have come from chance, or places elsewhere, but the physical act of performing those movements was very much internal. His dancers always had to be alert and ready to move in order to perform.

Even his technique may have been in tandem with some of Freud’s evolutionary theories. Much of Cunningham’s style originates from a standing position. As Copeland explains, “there’s an important connection between the evolution of upright posture and the increasing prominence of the visual sense. In
Civilization and its Discontents, Freud speaks of “the new form of life that began with the erect posture” (1930, 78)…Erwin Straus calls the “gaze of upright posture”” (Copeland 216). Cunningham aligned his perspective with these ideas, believing that standing upright was essential to a dance form. The visual experience one gets by watching any of Cunningham’s choreography is incredibly mesmerizing. In contrast to Graham, Cunningham states, “I start from a standing position because that’s mostly the way we move. We don’t really move sitting down much…” (Copeland 215). (1985, 60) For him and his dancers, it was crucial to portray reality, their place in the world as human beings, and using standing as a baseline, it was more obvious for the audience to connect with this idea. “Cunningham’s movement is based…on who we are as a species, on where we stand…in relation to the rest of the animal kingdom” (Copeland 215). He did not create movement to disguise his dancers as something other than who they were, he used movement to express the art of moving through space as an individual, as oneself.

This combination of embracing the mind as well as the body is in itself quite highly psychologically based. In making dances, he was very much aware that dance is impossible without thought, and therefore every piece that he created asked his dancers to never stop thinking. As an example, his pieces went against

The Thinking Body, a classic work about body alignment for modern dancers, [which] is—first and foremost—a critique of upright posture, the very evolutionary advance that Freud associates with the development of intellectual detachment and its perceptual first cousin: a visually based method of surveying the world, i.e., “the gaze of upright posture”. (Copeland 227)
His pieces such as *Summerspace* and *Winterbranch* embraced the standing posture as part of the choreography and not just an image of a person. He does not ignore that we are thinking, breathing, creatures as do many choreographers of his era. His dancers are people, who make decisions for themselves and contemplate the world all on their own.

Cunningham was never seeking to create a message in particular. As he once said, “The body shooting into space is not an idea of man’s freedom, but is the body shooting into space” (Copeland 275). He loved to dance, and lived to dance, and his goal was to create dance without any political undertones, emotional ties, or narrative implications. This is not to say that his work is not full of depth and intellect, nor devoid of meaning, but that he was not trying to force a message upon anyone. Someone may perceive a message after seeing a piece of his, but that would be due to their own interpretation. “Having been guaranteed his or her perceptual freedom, the spectator can freely choose to “make connections” between otherwise autonomous parts” (Copeland 274). Each audience member had the freedom to perceive his work however they would prefer. People are moved by dance, and there really is no way to predict how they will be moved. Cunningham would have agreed with Copeland’s statement, that “...many of today’s choreographers have chosen the wrong medium for what they need to “say” or else they greatly underestimate the expressive and communicative powers of movement” (Copeland 253). For Cunningham, movement was enough. “Cunningham’s work is about the beauty and pleasure of escaping one’s identity and personality. As Cunningham himself once wrote, “If one’s concern is self-expression, then the proper area is psychoanalysis” (Copeland 257). (1957, 22).
He was very sure that his choreography was just art, and not something more, not something full of expressiveness or undertones of emotion.

How does understanding his process/psychological background influence our perceptions?

Merce Cunningham exemplifies the beginning of postmodern thinking. He took an outlandish idea and jumped completely into it. Yet without the knowledge of his background in philosophy and psychology, a viewer might perceive his work in an entirely different way. Understanding his choreographic process is integral in understanding his works, and perhaps even more important than seeing the final performances. Viewing a final work of a choreographer can tell an audience member a certain amount, but it will all be opinion-based. In examining Merce Cunningham’s works through a psychological lens, we are able to perceive his methods in a novel manner.

Those unaware of Cunningham’s history often view his dances as machine-like. They see his dancers as unemotional, technique-centered beings. Because no narrative plays out onstage, there is no easy pathway to follow. This makes some people confused, uncomfortable, even scared. Before Cunningham, lots of modern dance was predictable, and people knew what to expect at a performance. But he struck a cord with the public that had not before been struck. His dances challenged their ideals concerning modern dance, for what dance was and how one could connect to life through movement.

Abstract expressionism led Cunningham to create dance that spoke for itself, as dance. It made him realize that dance did not need to have a significant agenda, it could simply be movements put together within a space, and be considered art. Artists working within this movement inspired Cunningham to step outside of what
had been done, and work in a new direction. Instead of using dance as a means to communicate a message to a viewer, dance could just be.

His history with Martha Graham made him even more motivated to break away from the choreographic trends of the time. He had been taught the theories of psychoanalytic thinkers, and how to embody a character through movement onstage. But this was not interesting to him. He wanted to explore what dance could do as dance, not as drama or replication of age-old stories. He began creating dance from upright positions due to a human being’s natural state as standing. Instead of forcing his dancers upon the floor as Graham had done, he began from standing and was much more upright in his choreographic decisions. This may have been due to Freud’s ideals, or perhaps just as a rebellion against the old traditions. In going against Graham’s methods, Cunningham created new techniques of choreography that can now be seen as even more realistic than hers.

In many ways, Cunningham’s chance technique is more lifelike than any other choreographic process. Working with chance is what people do each and every day, and it is how life works out in reality. While many audience members saw Cunningham’s work as inhuman and mechanical, it is in fact more similar to life than one might at first perceive. He works with randomness in order to come up with his movement. Randomness is how our universe is, it is how we interact with one another, and it is how human beings act on a daily basis. Instead of trying to replicate some sort of story, he let the story come about in randomness and chance. Einstein was correct when he said “There are no fixed points in space”, and therefore, the fact
that there are no set points in his dances makes Cunningham’s work remarkably lifelike.

Even though his movements might seem disconnected or unemotional, Cunningham’s dancers were themselves on the stage. Instead of acting out a character or an emotion, they were no one but themselves when they set foot out into the performance. This is something many viewers fail to recognize about Cunningham’s pieces. They are not inhuman, as his dancers are being more realistically human than any other choreographer could have asked. They put all of themselves into doing the movements, and let the emotions come and go as they naturally do. Instead of forcing a narrative upon his dancers and audiences, he lets the movements create an organic sense of life and realistic feelings occur. As it is impossible for a dancer to have no emotion, his dancers simply expressed their feelings through how they performed each night, and each time was different. In this way as well, his pieces were incredibly accurate to life, and allowed the realities of randomness, chance, and unplanned emotion come into the dance.

The mind is incredibly important to Cunningham. Therefore, his works always involved thinking on the part of both the dancers and the viewers. People who believed that his dances had no meaning or purpose, failed to recognize the sheer amount of thinking that was taking place on the stage. Each dancer had no idea what a piece would look like until the night of the show, which involved an immense amount of training and a high level of intellect. His audience members had to be constantly shifting around in their seats in order to see all of the different occurrences happen on stage, and therefore, used their brains to interpret whatever they chose to
take in. His work embodies psychology, as his dancers and audiences had to use their minds to find meaning for themselves. People are searching for meaning in everything they do, and Cunningham recognized this. He knew that even without throwing out ideas concerning the meanings behind his dances, his audience members would come to a conclusion themselves. And for each person, it would be different. Just as people experience the world differently than others, every viewer and dancer experienced his works differently than anyone else. There was no “right” way to see his work, and no correct way in which to give them meaning. Instead, it was up to the individual how and what they got out of his choreography, if anything.

Through a psychological lens, Merce Cunningham’s work is anything but inhuman. His choreographic process is inspirational, and embraces life as it is. He did not force movement upon his dancers, or ideas upon his audiences. Instead, he let chance determine how his pieces would turn out, and enjoyed the freedom this gave to his work. Chance operations allowed dance to be created to be dance, but at the same time enabled a humanistic view to be placed upon it. Cunningham’s choreography embraces life as it truly is; different for each individual, thought provoking, and risky.

Searching for Meaning with Psychoanalysis

Psychology is a constant study of the human experience. We might never know everything there is to know about human behavior or interactions, yet it continues to interest us in many ways. The branch of psychoanalysis was the first step in considering the human experience in a methodical way. It paved the way for other branches of psychology to form, and provided a baseline with which to work. While many of Freud and Jung’s theories are no longer considered scientific fact,
they provide a multitude of ideas that have inspired an incredible amount of further study. Psychoanalytic therapists are still in practice today, and use Freud’s ideas as a base with which to draw from.

Just as choreographers explore the human experience through their process of choreography, psychoanalysts explore through their analysis of the patient. The processes of choreography and therapy are in fact quite similar. In the case of Merce Cunningham, his process of choreographing was based on randomness and chance, just as the psychoanalytic therapists listen to their patient’s random words from their unconscious. Cunningham’s dancers were themselves on stage, just as psychoanalysis emphasizes individuality and being completely vulnerable during therapy. Both Cunningham and Freud left their respective fields with a legacy of a particular way in which to search for meaning to the human experience.

Cunningham’s pieces may have been unemotional or scientific, but they were actually quite representative of the actual human condition. Freud and his colleagues also searched for the meaning behind behavior, in that they believed in the strength of the unconscious and the importance of individuality. Psychoanalysis and Cunningham’s works both took risks within their fields and began a renewed search for meaning within life.

Searching for Meaning with Behaviorism

In contrast with psychoanalysis, behaviorism explored human nature through much more scientific means. John B. Watson, Carl Rogers, and B.F. Skinner established paradigms concerning human behavior, which could be studied again and again using an experimental method. Information about the human mind and interactions between people were studied based upon outside observations, not on
whatever came from within. Behaviorism was believed to be more valid than
psychoanalysis, as the studies could be replicated and therefore examined further.

Cunningham’s methods of working can be compared in many ways to the
process of behaviorist therapy. Cunningham believed in the importance of science,
and drew much of his inspiration from Einstein, and the randomness of the universe.
His dancers did not show emotion onstage, instead their unconscious was left
completely to themselves. The audience could only connect with the dancers through
observations of their movements through space. The connection between the music
and the dance was not important, just as the connection between the unconscious and
the behavior was left unknown to the behaviorist. Only observable information could
be taken into account, and then scientifically examined. Cunningham’s work
searched for similarities between dance and the human everyday experience, just as
behaviorism sought to explain human behavior based upon observation. Both
behaviorism and Cunningham’s breadth of work are methodical and scientific.
Behaviorism offers many similarities to Merce Cunningham’s mode of expression
and process of choreography.

Conclusions

Modern dance techniques of creating movement and psychological processes
can be perceived in similar manners, and understanding one may benefit the
understanding of the other. Merce Cunningham’s body of work and method of
creation can be perceived as one way for a modern dance choreographer to explore
the human experience. Psychoanalysis and behaviorism are two branches of
psychological thinking that search for human understanding in similar ways to
Cunningham. Looking at both of these perspectives in comparison to Cunningham’s
body of work, sheds light on his process of choreography and offers a greater understanding of his art. Psychology provides a lens with which to perceive modern dance. Merce Cunningham is just one example of a choreographer who was heavily influenced by psychological thought, and created dance as an exploration of the human perspective, just as psychologists do each day. Understanding his methods allows the field of modern dance to be accepted as just another perspective with which to explore the human experience.
Emotion. Without her intense intrigue and curiosity to explore emotional circumstances, Pina Bausch’s body of work would have taken on an entirely different identity. It is through her keen sense of self-reflection and emphasis on one’s connection to the human experience that her technique was established, and then remembered so well. Bausch’s expansive repertoire represents an incredibly diverse yet connected group of pieces, which speak to the everyday human condition. Her works resonated on an incredibly personal level with her audiences, as a dance critic once stated in regards to her depictions of violent emotion, “when we see this on the stage, it has a truth, it has an immediacy, and a power” (Daly 14). During her choreographic process, Bausch developed a deeply personal connection to her dancers, which was portrayed quite clearly through their choreography. For many audiences, watching a Pina Bausch piece is an internal rollercoaster, an experience of inner reflection and questioning, perhaps sparked by her distinctive process of choreographing from within.

Bausch’s creative process may be seen as representative of her search for meaning within the human experience. She used real-life happenings as inspiration for what she put on the stage. Her company dancers played themselves, performed true emotions, and put an incredible sense of personal identity into their own movements. Understanding Bausch’s inspiration and choreographic process can lead to a greater comprehension of how she perceived modern dance as another
psychological perspective, as another way to examine and study the human condition. Her method of creation and her final pieces have often been related to psychology. The two branches of psychoanalysis and humanistic thought may be seen as offering parallel therapeutic methods to the choreographic process that Bausch created, and although they may be within a different field of research, give an interesting perspective on her method of dance creation. Her work can be examined as a perspective on the human experience, just as all branches of psychology search for meaning in very similar ways. Although she offers a contrasting choreographic method from Cunningham, both set out to explore life through the means of modern dance. As modern dance choreographers, each incorporated psychology into their methods in order to further explore the meaning of the world. For Pina Bausch, choreography was a way to explore and express human experiences and emotions that could not be realized any other way.

Bausch’s Choreographic Inspirations

“I am not interested in the movement of my dancers, but in what moves them” (Pina)

Sounds, environment, spatial orientation, political movements, emotion.

Choreographic inspiration may originate from anywhere. For Pina, inspiration came from within her dancers. Instead of drawing ideas from previous experience or traditional dance techniques, Bausch and her dancers created works based upon months of inner research and thought. Her entire choreographic process was in fact quite similar to a psychological therapy, in which individuals explore their unconscious thoughts and emotions. Bausch’s process was a continuous exploration. Even her final product was not considered absolute, but instead an integral part of the choreographic process. In a consequential moment for modern dance, Pina Bausch
broke the boundaries that separated theater from dance and combined them into one cohesive, innovative form of dance choreography. Her fascination with a person’s internal world led her works to be incredibly emotional, and to capture her audience in an immense way.

_A German perspective; the origins of tanztheater_

As modern dance was becoming more about movement and less about meaning in America, modern dance in Germany took a separate route. Cunningham and Cage were popularizing moving through space for movement’s sake, while German modern dancers were becoming heavily influenced by new philosophies. For instance, Rudolf van Laban “the German theorist, ha[d] divided all people in to three general types, according to their style of movement…based on physiological and psychological research.” (Martin 15). While this method of grouping was not widespread, what stuck was the idea that a dancer’s skill level did not solely depend on their style of movement, but also on their “personal mental, psychological characteristics” (Martin 16). According to Laban, a personal perspective was just as integral to a dancer’s technique as their physical movement. After the popularization of such influential theories concerning the modern dancer, German modern dance became obsessed with emotional connections, and in creating reflections of real life through movement. Modern dance became a way to express the feelings that could not find words.

In many ways, Pina Bausch was part of both the American and German modern dance movements simultaneously, and therefore drew inspiration from both practices. Her eclectic background gave her an innovative, inclusive perception of the intent of modern dance, and her inspirations came from across multiple cultures.
Bausch was a student of the American-born Paul Sanasardo and the quintessentially British Antony Tudor, yet was born into the tradition of German dance spearheaded by figures such as Rudolf von Laban, Mary Wigman and Kurt Joos. Each one of these artists, as well as many more, played a role in developing her style of working and movement preferences. As a German choreographer, Bausch grew up in a place where emotions were undeniably important to dance, yet taught by American and British teachers, this fundamental aspect of German dance was constantly opposed and questioned along the way.

In Germany, theater and dance were originally considered separate entities. Then suddenly, in reaction to the artistic movements of the time, a new art form was created in which dance could be theatrical and yet also provide a place to explore the human condition. As dance critic Ann Daly puts it,

The break really came in 1973. In that year, Mary Wigman and John Cranko died. We all thought Cranko’s death was just an accident that wouldn’t disturb the flourishing of the ballet, but for German ballet it was something like an end. At the same time, Pina was appointed director of the Wuppertal Ballet, not tanztheater at that time. That was really the break. It was she who made tanztheater. Without her success, which was not an easy success, there would not have been tanztheater. (Daly 7)

Bausch synthesized dance, spoken word, song, costume, and props into a choreographic work. Personal expression was already integral to the German aesthetic, therefore it was almost a predictable blend of artistic forms. Dance and theater meshed into one form allowed the ideals of both to come together and perhaps
create an even stronger message than they had on their own. According to many German choreographers, dance was created in order to mean something, to give ideas and feelings to the audience just as a work of theater would have done. Blending the movement of the body with the words and feelings of the theater was a crucial step forward for both art forms. Tanztheater represented a realistic and essential synthesis of German dance and theater.

Tanztheater marked a strong contrast to the dance occurrences happening in America at the very same moment. American choreographers were experimenting with accepting movement as it was and not as something more, while tanztheater found movement as incredibly meaningful and as an expression of internal feelings and emotions. American modern dance was diving into postmodernism, and the expression of the human experience through movement for the sake of moving. As the author Jochen Schmidt puts it, as opposed to the Cunningham-Nikolais generation in America,

Their German dance colleagues want to learn something and transmit something about their surroundings, about people’s daily lives, their cares, fears, problems and joys. Dance serves them as a means for release and humanizing. They therefore have a more realistic, earthy and heavy—but also more concrete, social and political effect than their American counterparts (Daly 8)

In Germany, dance was perceived as a way to connect to others, and to portray their internal thoughts. Tanztheater sought to explore the minds and express the emotions of real human beings.
Bausch may be considered by many to be the true instigator of tanztheater, but this shift in German modern dance was no doubt thoroughly influenced by previous artists and choreographers. Her wish to combine theater and dance originated from her choreographic process, which she formed with a combination of ideas from her former instructors. Many people, including two of her teachers, Antony Tudor and Paul Sanasardo, inspired her process of creation. Quite a few of their ideals regarding movement can be seen reflected in her works. According to dance critic Ann Daly, Sanasardo legitimized the exploration of disquieting subject matter, and he demonstrated how to heighten human emotion and behavior using poetic imagery, irony, and theatricality. He and Tudor served as models of the choreographer as an acute observer of human behavior. From Tudor, Bausch had the opportunity to learn about the psychological implications of gesture, the engagement of dancers as individuals rather than instruments, the creation of character, the evocative value of nostalgia (especially in costuming), the metaphorical power of the male-female relationship, and the importance of formal specificity, especially in the delineation of emotion. (Daly 28)

Many of the elements that inspired Bausch to relate dance to theater may stem back to her work with Tudor, as Royd Climenhaga points out, “Tudor’s strongly psychological style, with it’s emphasis on character built upon emotive gesture, must have reawakened and reconfigured some of Bausch’s earlier experiences with emotive gesture in the German dance tradition” (Climenhaga 6). His way of working with people as highly emotional beings must have resonated with her preferences in movement creation, and his methods of creating an emotional, deep, realistic
character on the stage made her realize that reality could in fact be portrayed through movement. Also, his emphasis on understanding other people and creating social relationships clearly translated to her works, in which relationships between dancers became crucial. Sanasardo and Tudor’s emphasis on normal human interactions and behavior no doubt intrigued Bausch enough to explore the possibilities regarding the human experience in relation to modern dance choreography. Without their instruction, she may not have been so keen to choreograph from within her dancers’ experiences, nor allow their emotions to come through her works with such prominence.

American dancer and choreographer Anna Sokolow may have also contributed to the way in which Pina Bausch thought about choreography. Her works emphasize a strong understanding of everyday movements and emphasis on emotional states, both of which can be seen within Bausch’s style. Perhaps Anna “Sokolow’s most important work, Rooms (1955), incorporates everyday movements heightened and stylized to reveal psychological states” (Climenhaga 7). The piece explores the human experience of city life, and the idea of urban alienation, the concept that individuals can feel so alone in such a populated area. Sokolow worked with her dancers to recreate simple everyday gestures and to incorporate them into her technical choreography. Instead of forcing highly stylized movement upon her dancers, they moved throughout space with pedestrian qualities, and with movements that one might see on the street and not expect on the stage. Bausch often incorporated everyday movement within her pieces, nothing ever appeared forced out of her dancers. The incredible emotionality portrayed by her dancers may have been
inspired by Sokolow’s emphasis on emotion, and her search for intention within choreographic movement.

Kurt Jooss also played a role in Pina Bausch’s growth as a choreographer. His politically relevant pieces brought a new perspective to German modern dance, and introduced highly controversial information to the dance stage. His political ideals were made clear through his choreography, and his audiences frequently reported strong reactions to his works. His piece, *The Green Table* (1932), is often considered his most famous work, and represents his political stance. The piece was created as a sort of anti-war statement, and premiered shortly before the Nazi regime took over Germany. The character of Death takes over the lives of all the others within the piece, and in its entirety the work is a commentary regarding the horrors that war causes. Jooss had personal connections to war, as he was exiled from Germany when he refused to exclude Jews from his company. This piece demonstrated his political stance on the futility of wartime. Pina Bausch took classes with Jooss when he returned to Essen, Germany in 1949, and taught there for nineteen years. Many credit Jooss as being the founder of Austruckdanz, the German precursor to tanztheater. Austruckdanz encouraged politically or personally relevant themes and emotions to come through choreography. There is no doubt that Jooss’ career as a politically brave and forward thinking choreographer inspired Bausch to express her own political statements, and encouraged her translation of ideas into movement.

*Dancing Internally*

Although other dancers and choreographers from Germany and elsewhere in the world inspired her, Bausch’s inspiration to create movement came first and
foremost from her own company dancers. They provided her with plenteous ideas for questions and answers with which to work from. When asked, Bausch most often credits her dancers as her inspiration, and it is clear that her works changed as the dancers she worked with changed. Each time a dancer left or joined the company, the choreographic movements would follow the new arrangement. Every dancer was integral to her process, and inherently necessary for the works to go on. Her pieces resulted from months of internal and external research as a company, and represented her broad range of collaboration with sounds, costumes and movement into a cohesive piece. With different dancers, Bausch would have had an entirely distinct choreographic experience.

Inspiration for Psychoanalysis

Bausch’s mode of choreographing relates in many ways to the field of psychoanalysis. The amount that the two processes coincide is quite outstanding. Both methods explore the human condition through similar questions, and search for meaning in virtually identical ways.

As stated earlier, psychoanalysis was inspired by the social and political movements of the era. Perhaps entirely coincidentally, both the branch of psychoanalysis and Bausch’s Tanztheater originated in Germany. These two events may have even occurred simultaneously in the same place, given that the direction of social thought in Germany at that time was working in one direction, no matter the field of inquiry. All fields of research at that time were becoming more focused on people as in-depth, mysterious beings, who should be understood and therefore studied further. Both German modern dance and psychoanalysis were essentially formed from this idea that further exploration of the human condition was necessary.
Just as psychoanalysis was inspired by a desire to explore the unconscious, Bausch was as well. Her works originated from the internal explorations of her dancers, and their expression of themselves from mind to bodily movements. Psychoanalysis examined the ideas that might not be on the surface, just as Bausch went beyond the movement in search of greater meaning.

**Inspiration for Humanistic Psychology**

The psychological perspective of humanistic theory is frequently recognized as the most forgiving perspective to examine human nature. As expressed in chapter one, this branch of psychology holds the idea that people mean to do well, and are generally positive forces in the world. On the whole, this branch of psychology is recognized for its emphasis on self-exploration, and allowing self-reflection to improve the mental condition of an individual. The whole person is recognized as more integral than their parts, and creative approaches to self-exploration are encouraged. A particular form of humanistic psychology is the Gestalt approach, which explores the self through role-playing and non-verbal cues. In many ways, the humanistic perspective and Pina Bausch explore the human condition in parallel manners.

Humanistic psychology was a reaction to other methods of psychology. Psychoanalysis and behaviorism were fully developed perspectives by the time humanistic psychology was established. Just as Bausch created tanztheater as a reaction to the current social and artistic movements in Germany and America at the time, humanistic psychology was created as a contrasting view of the human condition from psychoanalysis and behaviorism. Both of those perspectives had their
own, almost entirely negative views of the self, while humanistic psychologists
progressed their research holding on to the idea that humans are inherently good.

Bausch Technique

Determining a method with which to create choreography can be a lifelong
process, and often reveals a great deal regarding a choreographer’s internal
philosophies. Pina Bausch developed her creation process early on, but let it evolve
throughout her entire career. Although she proceeded with nearly the same method of
choreographing each time she created, each piece was unique. Her choreographic
process was one full of research. She would set out on a project, immerse herself and
her dancers in the topic, and allow months of research to ensue. This process never
delivered the same results, due to her broad spectrum of interests, and the expansive
nature of her immense sets of questions, which she asked her dancers to answer
throughout the brainstorming period. The themes and answers to these questions
were what gave each work its own identity. Endless possibilities arose from the
process of asking questions of herself and of her dancers. As ideas and answers
shifted, so did the meaning behind her pieces.

In order to begin the choreographic process, questions abounded. Bausch’s
dancers would take a ballet class in the morning, then head to her studio, where she
would ask them questions all afternoon and evening. These questions sometimes had
a theme, and sometimes they did not. Each dancer would individually decide how to
answer. Sometimes they were asked to answer in a certain way, such as a movement
solo or duet, other times they were given complete freedom. In this case, some
dancers might create a movement segment in answer to her questions, while others
might just sit and speak with her about their ideas on the topic. Therefore, the
dancers could dance, speak, or simply think about their answers. As an example, “for *The Seven Deadly Sins* and *Don’t Be Afraid* (1976), the dancers were increasingly asked to put themselves in very demanding emotional situations. Bausch was beginning to uncover the very heart of the process of dance, the motivating impulse from which movement begins, and that impulse is always a person in a specific situation” (Climenhaga 13). By using movements and ideas directly from within the minds of her dancers, she created a world in which their innermost thoughts and everyday emotions were portrayed onstage.

Just as a psychoanalytic therapist would work through the process of free association with a patient, Pina Bausch sifted through the minds of her dancers in order to create a piece of choreography. Emotions and personal experiences were incredibly useful in this process, and were welcomed into the space. Some example questions from her research for her piece *Nur Du*, included, “Why is it called ‘LA’?” “Something kitschy.” “Do something leading with your elbow.” “Spell Los Angeles with your body.” (Daly 20). Given her process, there was no such idea as movement without meaning. Everything she included had a purpose to the piece as an entity. Bausch cherished the ideas of the people she was working with, and allowed their voices to be heard. As a choreographer, “She looks for material that belongs deeply, and uniquely, to each individual. “She wants us,” says Dominique Mercy, one of the dancers, “to be as sincere and simple as possible.” (Daly 20). Bausch cared about honesty in movement expression of her dancers, and this was able to come through her hours and hours of questioning her dancer’s innermost thoughts. In watching her
work, one is watching the movements that were inspired by her questions, but in the end were created by her dancers.

Pina Bausch’s choreographic inspiration originated from multiple sources and therefore created works that could be seen from various angles. Her pieces are often viewed as collages, as a mix of ideas all rolled into one place. In creating a piece, Bausch begins with the individual expression of her dancers who maintain their personal perspective in surrounding an idea with various approaches to its representation. Bausch took the same elements as those explored by American post-modern dancers of the time—collage techniques, pedestrian movement, repetition, and borrowing from other media—but maintained her interest in the subject to arrive not just at a new technique into which the dancer’s body as artistic material might be placed, but at a new form in which human experience is expressed in bodily terms. (Climenhaga 14)

Her dances compiled the months of questions and answers from her rehearsals, emotions from within her dancers, her own movement research, and inspirations sparked by other choreographers of the time. This mode of creation complemented her goals regarding choreography. Bausch’s …collage techniques surrounded the ideas to create a multi-faceted perspective of the story, re-creating the condition and mood of each story rather than telling it through a more conventional linear narrative. She drew on her own and her dancers’ personal experiences to create presentational movement patterns formed from emotive gestures and derived from a response to, rather than in service of, formal story structures. (Climenhaga 10)
Her works introduced the modern dance community to a novel way of storytelling, resulting in an extremely personal yet at the same time universal experience.

Psychoanalytic Technique

Asking questions was crucial to both Pina Bausch’s choreographic process and to the process of psychoanalytic therapy. The way in which Bausch researched and created dances was parallel to how psychoanalysis examined human nature. Psychoanalysis could not exist without asking the hard questions. A psychoanalyst is trained to explore the mind by poking and prodding an individual so that they go through a process of self-reflection, which is thought to eventually relieve the worries or preoccupations from the past that are troubling the individual. At first, this process was one of hypnotization, but eventually led to voluntary explorations of the unconscious. William Everdell describes one psychologist’s early work through one patient’s experience, who

relive[d] feelings evoked by early traumatic experiences she remembered under hypnosis. Breuer called it “analysis” followed by “abreaction” or “catharsis.” Pappenheim [his patient] had called it “chimney-sweeping” or Redecur (talking cure). We have as much reason to give her name to the therapy as we do Breuer’s, for this was the famous “Anna O.,” the first person in the world to undergo psychoanalysis. (Everdell 135)

These early explorations into the unconscious mind inspired Freud’s methods of therapy, in which his patients shared everything that came to mind, no matter how random.

Bausch’s systematic process of questioning forced her dancers to draw inspiration for their movement from within, and thereby go through a personal
reflection process. By answering her questions, her dancers explored their own ideas and perspectives on life and were able to outwardly express these ideas through movement. In the same way, a successful psychoanalytical patient should feel relief by exploring the unconscious and the past, and ending up with a thoroughly reflected sense of self.

Techniques of Humanistic Psychology

The humanistic approach accepts people for who they are. Carl Rogers’ self-centered therapy took his patients through a process of self-discovery and appreciation that in the end created a more positive self-image. In the same way, Pina Bausch led her dancers through a process of examining their past and present experiences and gathering information about themselves from these reflections. Bausch may not have seen people as inherently good, but she accepted her dancers for who they were as people. Their personal lives mattered to her, and she enjoyed the exploration of her dancer’s lives through movement. Instead of asking her dancers to hide their emotions while dancing, Bausch wanted them to express their feelings. Their movements expressed how they felt inside, and provided a medium with which to examine them.

Humanistic psychology also emphasizes the idea that people should be looked at as a whole, rather than as a sum of their parts. Pina held a similar point of view. Her pieces have multiple dimensions, and can be seen from many different perspectives, but her dancers were seen as real people, rather then just dancers who could move around in space. This was what was most important. Instead of looking at her pieces as fragments, she wished for them to be seen as displaying broader messages. In the documentary film Dancing Dreams, the viewer watches while they
recreate her rehearsal process with young teenagers who have never danced. At one point the artistic director discusses how the piece is really just a narrative about the search for love, the human need for belonging. (Dancing) Just as she didn’t want the male and female relations to be taken too literally, this was true for all her topics. She cared more about the big picture, not about the subtleties within her choreographic works. Modern dance of the 1930’s also embraced this concept of spanning broad topics rather than focused ones. According to Martin, one of the four main components of modern dance was form, which was “defined as the result of unifying diverse elements whereby they achieve collectively an aesthetic vitality which except by this association they would not possess. The whole thus becomes greater than the sum of all its parts. This unifying process by which form is attained is known as composition” (Martin 35). A dance composition was therefore able to be thought as greater than the sum of all of its constituent parts. A modern dance was not perceived by one person looking at one aspect, but by a whole audience perceiving all elements of the choreographic work.

Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs can also be looked at in relation to Bausch’s works. Maslow introduced his theory in the 1940’s, and continued to expand it up through the 1960’s. The hierarchy of needs became the center of his “theory of human motivation” (Piotrowski 914). Hierarchy of needs states that in order to achieve fulfillment in life, an individual must achieve happiness in a multitude of different categories. The categories were set up in the shape of a pyramid, which at the very top contained self-actualization. In layman’s terms, in order to understand oneself and feel complete happiness, one must go through many
levels of achievement before it can be fully realized. A psychologically healthy person has their needs met and can achieve self-actualization and therefore live a more fulfilled life. The categories within the pyramid were; physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness or love needs, esteem needs, and the need for self-actualization (Piotrowski 914). Maslow’s theory was that the greater amount of needs in one category were met, the more motivation they would have to fulfill the next level of needs. In a sense, Bausch’s pieces work in this same way. In order to understand her works fully, one must understand her process and oneself. Her pieces speak to her audience as individuals and therefore comprehension of her work involves comprehension of oneself.

Role of the Dancer

Unlike many other modern dance choreographers, the majority of Bausch’s choreography came from within her dancers. She perceived her dancers as people, as normal human beings with legitimate emotions that she wanted portrayed to an audience through the movement of their bodies. Every dancer contributed to the process and outcome of each piece. A performance by her company was a true collaboration between dancers and choreographer. Without the specific dancers Bausch had working for her company at any given time, her works would have been incredibly different from those that were created, in regards to the sheer amount of movement vocabulary contributed by her dancers.

Dancers are people. Some choreographers choose to ignore this fact, while others recognize it. Bausch so strongly believed in it that she made it the basis of her choreographic technique. Her dances were her dancers. During her choreographic process she never once forgot that her dancers were individuals who could
communicate with their bodies and think for themselves. Even though performances sometimes included imaginary characters in fictional scenarios, the movements that the dancers performed onstage were entirely inspired from within. Although she often incorporated her own movement ideas, the movement or verbal expressions of her dancers initially inspired these ideas. Due to this process of choreography, the people she chose to dance in her pieces were different from who other choreographer’s might have chosen.

A consistent process was established in order to choose her dancers. Instead of picking people simply by how they moved through space, or caught on to her choreography, Bausch cared about their personalities as well. In her pieces, personal input mattered, and “the dancer [was] allowed to show personal openness beyond the degree of her turnout” (Climenhaga 13). A Bausch dancer put their whole being into the choreography, and was recognized for more than just how he or she moved. Bausch once said, “I pick my dancers as people. I don’t pick them for nice bodies, for having the same height, or things like that. I look for the person … the personality (Bausch 1985:14)” (Climenhaga 43). This was a popular perspective for modern dance choreographers at the time, and even Cunningham had this point of view, that the personality of a dancer might even matter more than their physical technique. An audition for her company included movement sections, but dancers were also tested on their theatricality, singing and speaking abilities onstage. Bausch’s dancers were anything but one-dimensional. Each one had a story to tell, and her works fought to tell these stories. For Bausch and her company, dancing was about sharing ideas and expressing feelings to one another. Yet she didn’t want her dancers to be too easily
read. She would say, “I like people who are difficult to open. Otherwise there’s nothing special” (Climenhaga 43). A dancer had to have a complex personality, with an interesting mode of portraying their inner qualities through their dancing. Who they were and whom they saw themselves as a person was incredibly important to Bausch.

Gathering inspiration from her own dancers, Bausch’s pieces became universally touching. Anyone, anywhere might to connect with her work, because it originated from the regular human experience. In preparing for her work, Nur Du, “Ms. Bausch arrive[d] in Los Angeles without an agenda. “We’ll move around with open eyes, open ears, and our feelings’” (Daly 19). She and her dancers drew movement inspiration from real experience. In this way, Bausch’s choreography is quite easy to connect to on a personal level, and audience members can see themselves reflected in the moves on the stage. “It started as the lives of her dancers themselves, but now moves toward a kind of cultural anthropology” (Climenhaga 29).

In other words, drawing dance from personal experiences enables viewers to see themselves in the dance, and creates a responsive connection between dancer and audience.

An incredible amount of Pina Bausch’s work can be seen as a representation of the expression of individuality. She never forced movement upon anyone, and by reaching into the personal lives of her dancers, each gesture contained meaning that became essential to the work. Some believe that “In no other company is the work such a reflection of individual company members” (Climenhaga 31). Movement conceived directly by her dancers is put on the stage for the audience to see,
providing a window with which to understand their innermost thoughts. Unlike Graham but similar to Cunningham, Bausch saw the importance of representing her dancers as individuals. “She looks for material that belongs deeply, and uniquely, to each individual. “She wants us,” says Dominique Mercy, one of the dancers, “to be as sincere and simple as possible.” (Daly 20). They were not seen as a company, but as people with real life stories that should be shared. Their personal stories were an important contribution. The way in which they moved was important, but not as important as their ability to stand out as an individual, and express their own emotions through gesture.

Emotions were never forced, instead they were genuine expressions of how the particular dancer chose to communicate through with their body. While there were unison sections of set choreography that Bausch created, she never let her dancers’ personalities disappear. In contrast to Graham, Bausch asked her dancers questions about whatever theme she was working with, and allowed their experiences to influence where the piece went. Although Bausch’s tanztheater included an acting proponent, her dancers never played pretend, or tried to be someone other than themselves. When playing a particular role, her dancers put their own spin on the character and made it their own. Her dancers went above and beyond the dance world’s expectations,

The dancer’s body in Bausch’s work always exceeds the bounds of movement any performer enacts, and the presence that is developed enforces our seeing past the movement to the person underneath and cultural codes as they are incorporated. The reality of the dancer’s body on stage is given increasing
importance, rather than some abstract ideal of movement the dancer tries to emulate. Even more, the bodily attitudes the dancers enact are drawn from the social fabric in which our image, and indeed our sense of self, is enmeshed. Our bodily relation to society is explored, in terms of both our placement within the structure of society and the longing to find some sense of true definition beyond that realm. (Climenhaga 91)

Her dancers not only explored their minds but also their bodies throughout the dances. Dancers came across as real people, examining themselves as an ordinary person might do. For Bausch, a dancer’s individuality and autonomy as a human being was considered an essential part of the choreographic process.

Dancers/Patients--Psychoanalysis

For Bausch’s choreographic process, her dancers were essential to the outcome of the work, just as a psychoanalyst would view a patient as essential in their therapy. Without input from her dancers, Bausch would not have had such a rich vocabulary of genuinely emotional movement, and her pieces could not have made the same personal impact as they did. Without the particular patient in the chair, the therapist would not have the same outcome. For a psychoanalyst, individuality and recognizing the patient as a unique being is essential in the beneficial outcome of the treatment. Psychoanalysis recognizes that every person deals with life in a different manner, and this must be understood in order to further understand and examine the person. At the core of Freud’s influential perspective is the idea that people should be treated as individuals, with their unconscious behaviors and thoughts illuminated at the forefront. His goals were to explore the minds of his patients in order to help them overcome their troubles and be in a better state of mind. In the same way
Bausch asked questions of her dancers, and with their answers, although from the body and not vocalized, they created a movement piece from within. Their unconscious thoughts and personal histories were incredibly important to Pina as a choreographer and as a person, and she valued each one. Her company members did not consider dance as a set structural art form, but one that continues to explore even as the dance is set onstage. For Bausch and her dancers, modern dance explored the human unconscious experience through physical movement, just as psychoanalysis explores the unconscious through vocalization.

Dancers/Patients—Humanistic Psychology

While Bausch may not have held the same perspective as humanistic psychology, that people are inherently good, she drew inspiration from her dancers whom she valued immensely. In order to put so much trust into her performers involved an incredible amount of trust and risk-taking. The outcomes of her entire works were in the hands of her dancers. She put trust in their abilities to translate their emotions and perspectives into their movement, just as the Gestalt approach used role-playing in order to explore emotions. An enormous amount of self-reflection was done in both Bausch’s dance studio and Carl Roger’s self-centered therapy. Knowing the inner workings of oneself was extremely important in both instances.

The Gestalt approach also emphasizes the importance of recognizing nonverbal cues. Dance can be entirely nonverbal and yet still portray an immense amount of emotion. Founded by Fritz Perls, the Gestalt form of psychotherapy “focuses on nonverbal behaviors, dreams, and current thoughts and emotions, as clients become more aware of denied feelings, their innate haling powers are
activated” (Piotrowski 843). Gestalt therapists “believe that emotional problems as well as some of the dissatisfactions experienced by ordinary individuals are attributable to a lack of recognizing and understanding one’s feelings” (Piotrowski, 843). The focus of this therapy was to allow the patient to realize the true nature of their feelings, by bringing to the forefront aspects of their mental life that they were not aware of, such as nonverbal cues and dreams. It is possible that Gestalt theory was influenced by modern dance, and its ability to portray such an immense amount of information, entirely without words. Bausch’s pieces always express emotion or a story through bodily movements and gesture. Her dances are never empty of meaning or emotional responses. Even the most pedestrian of movements are full of internal thoughts and processes. Humanistic psychology recognizes the fact that an incredible amount of human communication occurs through nonverbal cues and movements. Without words, people can communicate a huge amount. Just from bodily gestures, two people can have an entire conversation. Gestalt psychologists pay attention to body language as well as what is vocalized during a therapy session.

Perceptions of Her Work: Involving the Audience

Bausch pushed the limits of her audience. She did not want her dancer’s psychological states to solely be examined, but for her audience members to have their own internal struggles. As the author Royd Climenhaga expresses, “Bausch is not trying to convince us of anything, so there is no felt morality. Because none is imposed on you, you have to find it within yourself. This, ultimately, is the goal of Bausch’s approach to representation, to demand of the audience an inner search for a way to approach the images she unearths” (Climenhaga 65). Included in her process of choreographing, perhaps Bausch sought to recreate her dancer’s choreographic
process of asking and answering personal questions within her audience members. Instead of simply empathizing with her dancers, she wanted her audience to go through the same process of self-examination.

Watching one of Bausch’s works can be a strongly psychological experience. Audiences frequently report strong reactions to her pieces, whether negative or positive. Pina Bausch is widely recognized by the modern dance community for her incredible ability to create an emotional experience for the perceivers. And this was not an uncommon goal for a modern dance choreographer, as many believed “Movement, then, in and of itself is a medium for the transference of an aesthetic and emotional concept from the consciousness of one individual to that of another” (Martin 13). The choreographic process is a continuous one, and therefore a performance of a particular piece is just a step in the process of creation. Bausch’s process of choreographing was never fully “done”. Therefore, the audience was part of her process. Bausch involves her onlookers by making them think and make inferences for themselves about the presented themes. Instead of being told what to feel, for many, her pieces create feeling. Although reactions to her works may differ, it is not the perceptions that mattered to her, but that something resonated within. Her pieces are a reflection of life, or a statement of purpose, meant to explore the human condition and to urge people to think about their own experience.

Recognizing her process of working with her dancers’ movements provides an interesting lens with which to examine her dances. Many audiences have found that they connect with her work on an emotional level that they had never before encountered. Perhaps this was because Bausch’s work was made for the here and
now. This is made quite clear throughout her career as a choreographer, as she made it a point to incorporate her dancer’s current emotions and political statements to enable relevance. As Bausch once said, “When I make a piece now, it is only out of what is present at the time. I try to feel what I feel” (Climenhaga 45). Instead of creating work from the past or for the future, she wanted her dances to be saluting the present. She wished her works to be relevant no matter who or where or when they were performed. Therefore, Bausch likely hoped for her audiences to connect with her pieces in their own personal ways, no matter their current environment.

Pina’s choreography can resonate at both an individual as well as a universal level. A person may feel connected to the movement because that particular movement resonates with their own human experience, or they may connect because the movement may represent what they recognize as a universal emotion, which each one of us experiences at some point in our lives. Bausch’s pieces created a …central motivating impulse, and that is always a feeling, an impression as it is experienced in individual terms. Early pieces drew on outside sources as a base for the underlying feeling that the work tries to contain, while those of the fervent period of Bausch’s reinvention of form were more open explorations of feeling states. The pieces attend to a rhythm of experience, a way of being in the world, and address more fundamental aspects of emotional experience. (Climenhaga 60)

Because she drew from such internal sites of inspiration, her dances touched people with their universality. Somehow, even if it was at an individual level of connection, audiences felt more connected to others after seeing her works, as they emphasized
the experiences that we all go through at one point or another. The individuality of her dancers made it clear that her pieces were meant to resonate with people as ordinary people and not make an overarching statement of any sort. Bausch’s dancers were individuals in a real setting, demonstrating genuine emotions onstage for all to perceive and connect with.

Emotional reactions were often fostered by her choreography, perhaps due to how Bausch perceived her role as choreographer. She would say,

I look at myself as a normal person who reacts to everyday life just as everyone else does. I have to start from myself first, because I am the closest to myself, in my body and my heart. I am scared, content, I hope, just like everyone. Maybe this is why people react very strongly to my pieces, because they feel directly spoken to. (Climenhaga 64)

It is possible that the degree to which audiences felt an emotional connection with her pieces stemmed from the fact that she delivered her choreography directly to each individual. In some dances, her dancers would even look directly at audience members, and “That direct gaze was exposing, and exposure always feels self-consciously personal” (Climenhaga 69). Her works had their own communicative purposes, and audiences often felt as though they could react directly to the message given to them, because it was their own to take. Instead of addressing the audience as a cohesive group, her pieces considered people at an individual level. This created strong emotional reactions, as “The images are not didactic, they don’t tell us how to feel, but open up an experience into which we need to project our own meaning in order to complete, if meaning is what we are after” (Climenhaga 64). Each member
of the audience was therefore open to their own personal interpretation of and reaction to the piece, and was able to connect in whatever way felt the most natural. Bausch’s works are full of relatable and thought-provoking circumstances that individuals can connect with on multiple levels.

Complementing her theme of exploring emotion through choreography, Bausch is often credited with representing and exploring social relationships within her work. She researches personal ties and relationships that her dancers have experienced, and translates them into movement for her audience to observe. Her focus was on connection, “Bausch doesn’t set out to stake a claim in formal revolution against existing forms of dance, she simply concentrates on how we are connected to the world and how we feel what we feel. Her interest in what moves people rather than how they move is built on this fundamental base, and turns her away from the transporting illusion contained in previous forms” (Climenhaga 63). Her focus is on the human experience of creating and maintaining relationships, and representing this inherently human phenomenon through choreographic means.

An overwhelming amount of her work relates to this exploration of human relationships. To quote a reviewer from the Texas Observer in 1996, “Despite the exhaustion and despite the high risk to heart and soul, each of us still searches for connection. That search is occasionally cruel, more often difficult, sometimes delightful, and always heartrending” (Daly 26). Bausch realized what connect human beings the most are our relationships with each other. Nearly every one of her pieces explores these connections, and urges audiences to do the same with their own experiences. Whether audiences make this connection due to the content matter that
she drew from, or the actual movement she found most touching, we may never know. But relationships among people are often seen as the most essential part of her choreographic exploration. In discussing her process of choreographing from a process of asking questions of her dancers, she stated,

> What we are doing is still abstraction. It is not a private thing; there are certain feelings that belong to all of us. If you are honest, it’s not private, because we all know these feelings. We all have the same desires; we all are scared. There are differences – the taste, the flavor is different. But we are all together and it is the richness – all our possibilities – that I celebrate in my pieces. (Bausch 1999:11A) (Climenhaga 58)

Her emphasis on relation between people is overwhelming throughout her works. Her process was one of self exploration, but in doing so, she and her dancers were realizing the universality of emotions, and the relations we all have with one another. Her pieces speak to this notion, in their exploration and continual references to social relationships. Maybe these social relationships we perceive are simply metaphors for the true relationship we all have, the human abilities to share the same emotional experiences. People watching her pieces see themselves on the stage. “By reawakening us to our bodies and our bodily connection to the world and society, Bausch also reconnects us to our human relationships, doggedly so” (Climenhaga 66). Without such meaningful relationships in our lives, we would not be who we are, and Bausch was very much aware of this fact.

Bausch was constantly aware of the impact that her audience had on her dance practice. The way in which her audiences connected with her dancers was an
integral part of her choreographic process. For Bausch, the individuality of her audience members was very exciting. It was not important what their personal experience of her works were, but that they had an experience all of their own making. “Everybody sees a different piece. Nobody can see the piece I see. I see all the details in the rehearsals, and people see only one performance. I can’t explain what I see, but if I could, you would understand me, not the piece” (quoted in Stendahl 1996:68–69). Every person who watches a Bausch work has a unique experience. Regarding meaning of the pieces, people may agree or disagree, “but that depends in large part on who you are and the world in which you are contained” (Climenhaga 98). Perhaps her pieces will never mean the same thing to more than one person. Due to the audience’s influence and her idea of an ongoing process, each time a piece is performed a new set of eyes are welcomed and recognized as essential.

Beyond the theme of relationships, an overwhelming amount of her audience frequently felt as though her pieces commented on the relationship between males and females in society. As one modern dance critic saw it, “I think what Bausch does is extremely simple. The emotions presented are not the whole range of the emotion you could look at. In all her dances I see the conflict or confrontation between men and women. Each time it’s the same thing. That kind of angst emotion goes on for too long for me to want to participate in it” (Daly 11). Her style of repetition of emotional movements resonated so much with her audience that it became an overarching theme of her choreographic work. The negative relationships that come about between men and women surface again and again within her pieces, from the way the dancers interact with one another, to the words that are spoken on the stage.
Each time she comes back to this theme, clearly one she believed to be incredibly important to get through to her audience. But when a dancer hears about the audiences perception of Bausch’s work as a commentary simply regarding men and women, they are taken aback, “I often hear that what you see in our pieces is only about man-woman relationships. It’s not meant to be so narrow. It stands for problems that human beings have, nations have, and the world has. It stands for more than just man-woman” (Daly 12). Her dances stand for relationships between genders, between societies, between countries, between continents. While her theme might seem blatantly obvious, there may be a deeper, yet broader message behind the obvious. Bausch may have been using male and female relations to represent the bigger, more universal struggles of the human experience.

Violence is yet another recurring theme throughout Bausch’s repertoire. Perhaps in making a political statement, or staking a personal belief on the stage, she included many scenes of blatant violence. “Bausch may be displaying violence, she may even be confronting it, but she certainly isn’t questioning it” (Daly 18). Violence is often shown on the television in America, but when it is shown on a stage, it strikes people in a different way. Apparently, “What really disturbs American audiences and dancers—especially about Bausch’s work—is the violence depicted. Some say Bausch may be condemning violence but that she revels in depicting it; they say she works up the audience so they are thrilled, and it’s the thrill of the lynch mob in watching people bang their heads against the wall or hit each other” (Kisselgoff/Daly 13). Audiences were not used to seeing violence through dance, and Bausch let it be seen. According to dance critic Ann Daly, “In
Kontakthof; a group of men surround a woman; their initial caresses turn into tweaks and pulls and tugs. She offers no protest. They literally pick at her for what seems a very long time” (Daly 16). This goes on for so long, that many people feel uncomfortable watching. But if this occurs every day in real life, why is it so hard to see on the stage? In this piece, “the real subject is not the rage of a woman; it is the unheard rage of a woman. In Bausch’s pieces, violence comes in bursts of dense repetition. These acts of violence are neither conventional nor naturalistic; rather, they exist on the plane of metaphor. They deal with the violation of women’s bodies but more so, of women’s autonomy” (Daly 16). Bausch’s works recognize that violence is an ordinary occurrence and simply display this regular phenomenon in an uncommon setting. In order to get her point across, she uses her iconic repetition.

Nearly all of Pina’s pieces include sets of repetitive movements. Café Müller is remembered for the scene in which a man and a woman are hugging and another man moves them to a carrying position. They repeat the sequence so many times that eventually they do not need the other man’s assistance, and continue at a rapid speed all on their own. It is a commonly remembered sequence because of the strong emotions it evokes. In each of Bausch’s pieces, her repetition may have new meaning, but it is clear that it held importance. Considering her theme of violence, repetition serves to intensify the experience. In fact, “The way Bausch uses repetition both intensifies and anesthetizes the response to the violence. At the same time that her repetitions accumulate emo-tional force, they also undercut emotional impact with the overtly theatrical (repeatable, therefore acted and “make believe”) behavior. That’s why some spectators sweat through these sequences while others laugh” (Daly
16). Whether the repeated violent acts created a humorous or uncomfortable notion, they created a sensation. The way in which a movement was repeated resonated with audiences and created an emotion. Some audience members would even undergo an unusual experience of time. “Bausch’s work brilliantly embeds powerful dramatic imagery in formal repetition. In sequences when I realized that something would happen again and again and again, I experienced a very unsettling but at the same time pleasurable suspension of time. Instead of going forward, time expanded in another dimension” (Daly 17). Her use of repetition emphasized the message she and her dancers were trying to portray, and added an emotional component for the onlookers to attach to.

For Pina Bausch, modern dance was a way to explore the human experience. Her inspiration came from her dancers, whom she recognized and respected as individuals. She was deeply moved by previous choreographers who had involved psychological components within their works. Her process of choreography was one of research into the human condition, asking questions and debating answers for months, even years. She valued her audiences as individuals too, just like her dancers, and the audience’s perceptions were often deeply personal. Overall, the movement of her dancers was not as important as what they were trying to communicate. Who they were as people was more integral to her process of choreography than how they moved through space. Using her dancer’s choreography and pedestrian movements on the stage, her pieces can resonate with anyone at anytime, due to the universality of her goal. She perceived modern dance as a form of exploration and expression of the human condition, just like psychology.
How does understanding her process/psychological ties influence our perceptions?

Seeing choreography through the lens of a choreographer offers a novel perspective. This chapter has examined different aspects of Pina’s working process and product that has stood out from others. Her work embodies the human experience, unlike any other. Her collaboration of theater and dance created a whole new realm with which to explore. Understanding her work with psychology in mind makes us all too aware of how connected she was with the human thought process. Her choreography is fascinating because people are fascinating creatures, and we love to observe one another. Her works connect us on a level that is undeniably real, a level only reachable by thinking through a psychological lens.

A person lacking knowledge of Bausch’s background may not have the same perspective. Her inspirations from Tudor, Wigman, Sokolow, Jooss, among others, shook her choreographic style and shaped the way in which she worked. Pina took aspects of each of these choreographers’ styles, and created her own. She combined German dance with theater and brought reality to the stage. Instead of working from outside influences, she worked from within her dancers. She saw modern dance as a way to find the meaning to life, a perspective to see the world, just as psychology offers the same. Dance was more to Bausch than movement, it was a way to express her innermost emotions and ideas, a way to embody everyday life.

Her technique was her dancers. Without them her pieces would have been entirely different. She spent months of research on a topic, and throughout this period gathered information from her dancers. She would throw questions at them, and their answers built the choreography. Each dancer then played only themselves on the stage. Emotions were genuine, and had meaning and a back-story. No movement
was done just because. Knowing the way she created work offers a great deal of knowledge that helps tie her work to psychology even further. A layperson may watch her pieces and be moved, or touched by the works. But a person who understands that the movements of her dancers are inspired from their own inner research and personal experiences, perceives an entirely different performance. A person with this kind of background in her working process is able to envision the dancer’s processes and how they so closely resemble a psychologist’s work.

Psychology, no matter which branch, seeks to understand and study the human mind and behavior. Bausch’s work does just that. It not only searches the minds of her dancers, but also that of her audiences. Her onlookers experience a self-reflection, and real emotional connection to her works. Both her choreography and the field of psychology allow this type of self-reflection and awareness to occur.

Searching for Meaning with Psychoanalysis

Freud’s theories and Bausch’s style were met with equally controversial audiences. In the case of psychoanalysis, people were awestruck that simply talking through issues could possibly be beneficial to a person. How could sitting on a couch, letting out whatever came to mind lead to a healthy outcome? Why is the unconscious so important? Bausch’s pieces were met with equally controversial perspectives. Audiences were confused as to why her works were so personal, why they were so emotional, why there was talking, singing, and props in a dance performance? Why did they touch upon such dark and controversial topics?

Bausch’s works emphasize repetition, while psychoanalysis emphasizes revisiting the past. In many ways, these are the same processes. The pieces of Bausch’s choreography that are most often remembered by audiences are the
repetition sequences. Similarly, psychoanalysis emphasizes the importance of looking at how the past influences the present. These respective ways of exploration both hint at the same underlying idea, the idea that self-exploration is crucial. Dance audiences and critics, as well as social scientists at the time of Freud were skeptical of their processes, but in the end, they come together cohesively in a way that displays the same ideas in the same way. In a society that is so future-oriented, looking to the past may seem like a waste, just as repeating the same movement may seem as though it is removing the novelty out of the dance. But in both cases, the choreographer and the psychologist are using the same technique to create new ideas. Bausch repeats in order to make a statement, while psychoanalysis explores the past to understand the individual.

Psychoanalysis is just one of the psychological perspectives that can be tied to Bausch’s process of choreography and her final performances. Her inspiration coming from within her dancers is very similar to how psychoanalysis was founded, through the investigation of unconscious thoughts and inferences. In order to generate movement, her dancers were asked questions relevant to her current research. Therefore the gestures and way they moved through space was entirely self-generated and genuine. Her dancers bodies were not forced to move in any certain way other than their own, and therefore represent true individuality within her pieces. Psychoanalysis emphasizes that every human being is different, and people’s pasts has had an impact on their present and future behavior. Bausch often references past experiences, and asked questions regarding individual remembrances about people’s lives. Her use of repetition may be interpreted as a reference to past
memories, revisiting past events. In conclusion, psychoanalysis and Bausch’s process of choreography as well as her expansive body of work can be seen as similar lenses with which to explore the human experience.

Searching for Meaning with Humanistic Psychology

As the third major branch of psychology to form, humanistic psychology was met with open arms. Psychoanalysis and behaviorism had originated and proven to be of use to people, therefore a third method was questioned but accepted. People viewed humanism as an agreeable option with which to further their self-reflection.

Humanistic psychologists and their theories and Bausch’s works received similar reviews. Individuals felt a connection to the processes, and went through an immense amount of thinking about the self in order to move on from their struggles. Bausch’s methods of choreographing spoke directly to her audience, and they went through their own internal journey during her performances. Humanistic psychology searches for meaning in life by examining what it means to reach happiness, and self-fulfillment. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, and the Gestalt theory are just a couple of examples of how humanistic psychology explores the human condition and searches for greater meaning in life. Just as Bausch’s dancers went through self-exploration during her choreographic process, patients in humanistic psychotherapies experience parallel circumstances in their quest for mental stability. Humanistic psychology emphasizes the importance of the whole person as a sum of their parts, as self-actualization as reachable through a process of meeting needs, and bodily cues as essential to understanding one’s actual feelings. Bausch’s dancers went through their own internal research processes, coming out of the choreographic process with a
renewed appreciation and understanding of themselves, and how their personal experiences could be portrayed through movement and therefore perceived by others.

Conclusions

In the case of Pina Bausch, psychology acts as a parallel. Her works embody what many psychological researchers express in their theories. For Bausch, dance was more than just movement, it held meaning deeper than the structure of the physical movements.

Her methods of creating dance hold many similarities to psychological methods of therapy. Both psychoanalysis and humanistic psychology perceive the human experience as crucial to the study of the human mind. For psychoanalysis, the unconscious is predominantly studied, while humanists focus more on the inherent good of people. Yet both these fields recognize the importance of individualism, and the fact that each and every one of us is unique. Bausch recognized this too, and each of her dancers expressed their individuality through their movements.

Comparing Bausch’s choreographic works to psychology may seem irrelevant to the study of dance, but I do not see it this way. Instead, looking at her works from a psychological perspective, comparing her methods to those of another field, enlighten the viewer. Through the examination of her inspirations and processes of creating dance, one receives a greater appreciation and understanding of her pieces. For Bausch, although her process may have been opposite of Cunningham’s, modern dance served the same purpose. Modern dance served as another lens, another perspective with which to understand the world. Through dance, she explored the possibilities and the experiences of human life.
Conclusion

“...the body itself, and not just the choreographic scenario, ought to reflect the creator's private response to the world” (Jowitt 102).

Modern dance may be seen as an exploration, as a way in which to develop a perspective of the human experience. Recognizing the multitude of connections between choreographic and psychological processes enables an in-depth understanding of and a unique insight into modern dance. It allows this idea of modern dance as a perspective to resonate. The preceding chapters have reviewed the careers and methods of two prominent modern dance choreographers, and have compared their choreographic approaches to the psychological methods within psychoanalysis, behaviorism and humanistic psychology. This analysis of the two contrasting choreographic processes may change the way in which one perceives these choreographers, in that with more information, they may begin to seem more alike. While at first it seemed as though Cunningham and Bausch were working with two entirely separate ideas of modern dance, they were indeed both creating movement in order to explore and examine human nature, using dance as their perspective. Relating psychological perspectives to choreographic practices allows a greater comprehension of where the choreographer came from, and how modern dance and psychology are truly able to explore the same idea; the human experience.

Upon explaining my research to others, I usually receive nods of acceptance even from non-dancers, as people seem to understand that there is a connection between psychology and dance, almost as though that is common knowledge. Yet most individuals are unaware at just how influential psychological theory was in the formation of modern dance. An enormous amount of the earliest modern dance
choreographers were influenced by psychoanalytical theory, as it was invading the American public at the time modern dance was setting up its roots. Psychological perspectives introduced by Sigmund Freud were blossoming during that era, and swayed enormously prominent choreographers such as Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham. Thus their choreographic processes contained strongly psychological undertones. Modern dance became an exploration of human behavior and expression, parallel to psychological thought.

Merce Cunningham represents a break from the strongly psychological movement style of the earliest modern dance choreographers. His process was one of chance, one that embraced risk and randomness. For Cunningham, dance was a way to explore oneself by moving through space rather than by searching the unconscious. His choreographic processes relate directly to psychoanalysis in that both embrace the human condition as random and unpredictable. Yet his process can also relate to behaviorism, in the sense that both Cunningham and behaviorists explored human behavior in a very scientific and disinterested manner. I chose to discuss Cunningham due to his revolutionary choreographic process, and the way in which he chose to reject previous ideals regarding modern dance. He is just one of many examples of a choreographer who can be analyzed parallel to psychological thought, and in doing so one may gain a greater understanding of him as an artist and of dance as another psychological perspective, and as just another way to explore the human condition.

Pina Bausch’s choreographic process exemplifies nearly the opposite of Cunningham’s. Instead of moving for the sake of moving, she was interested in why
her dancers moved. Movement came from within, inspired by personal experiences and everyday human dilemmas. Her pieces truly examined what it meant to be a human being. Psychoanalysis can be compared to Bausch’s process, due to the way in which both methods place such emphasis on the unconscious, and on the inner reflections of the individual. Her works make very direct emotional connections with her audiences, and create an incredible amount of introspection and reflection on the part of both her dancers and observers. Bausch’s pieces can also be looked at as parallel to humanistic psychology, in that both perspectives recognize the whole person as essential in understanding behavior, and that emotions are critical to understanding a person’s experience. Bausch is a quintessential example of a choreographer who used a psychologically-inspired process in order to create work, and thus her insights offer a unique perspective on the intersection between psychology and dance.

My Own Choreographic Process

Personal experience with modern dance led me to ask the questions that sparked this research, and they have further helped me to at least touch upon their answers. As a dancer, I always felt as though there must be a connection between how one creates a dance and how one perceives the world. After all, this is practically common sense. Choreography comes from human beings, and our past experiences, self-reflections, and emotional outpourings go, whether subconsciously or intentionally, into the melting pot of choreography. Whether our movement through space is meant to mean something other than the movement itself or not, it is always an exploration. Modern dance can be valued as a perspective with which to explore the human experience, just as psychology does so with different methods.
Both modern dancers and psychologists recognize the importance of exploring with both mind and body, and both fields are valid ways to examine the human condition.

The choreographic portion of this thesis changed with each semester. In the fall, my process was truly an exploration, while in the spring my methods became more focused as I incorporated more of my research to inform my rehearsal techniques. I found that more than ever before my movement research was an incredibly invigorating way to consider the topic, and without the experience of creating these two works, my perspective would not have been as insightful. Movement allowed me to reexamine my ideas in an entirely unique way, and provided an outlet with which to truly compare the choreographic techniques of two contrasting choreographers, Cunningham and Bausch, in a way that is only possible by physically moving oneself through space.

In creating choreography for the fall thesis performance, I worked to incorporate my own style of choreography with that of Merce Cunningham and Pina Bausch. I sought to include movement from both backgrounds and methods of choreographing, but to add my own twist. The final product was a combination of these styles of movement brought together on stage as one cohesive work. The entire process gave me a hands-on approach to examining the unique methods of such contrasting choreographers.

Both the process of creating the piece and the three final performances were integral to my understanding of the choreographer’s modes of working, as well as to my own growth. I feel as though it is important to share this experience with others in order to exemplify how my methods of creation furthered my research and my
understandings of the connections between psychology and dance. Reflecting on my process of choreography also enables an understanding of the choreographic process as perhaps more important than the final product.

After briefly introducing my four dancers to the vast differences between the two choreographic processes of Cunningham and Bausch, I began my own. Echoing Pina’s style of creation, I asked that my dancer’s personal experiences influence their way of moving. Each rehearsal, I came up with specific questions to explore, and asked for them to be answered with movement. For example, during one rehearsal I asked each dancer to write down exactly how it had felt to be trapped in a situation, either emotionally or physically. How did they remember feeling? What was going through their mind? How did they get to that place? Each dancer created a solo phrase based upon what they had written. They then created duets with the theme of one trapping the other, and how it might feel to be in an overwhelming relationship. Later, a trio was choreographed based upon how it felt to be alone or abandoned. They even created solos inspired by the others’ duets and how they felt after watching each other be so uncomfortable, trapped or overwhelmed. I was asking these questions as I was exploring how emotions change depending on time, place, and relationship, and chose to work with these inquiries throughout the process, which allowed my dancers to develop an in-depth connection with their choreography. In this way, each of my movers expressed their innermost emotions onstage with their own voices.

In contrast with Bausch’s style, we also worked with a more random method of creation, inspired by Cunningham. Whenever I created sections of choreography, I
taught it to my dancers right away no matter where I believed it should fit within the piece. At the very end we put sections together by chance and random decisions. I further exposed my dancers to Cunningham’s chance operations method with a coin toss representation. We experimented with choosing numbers and pairing them with the head or tail of the coin, which then dictated the order and movements of each dancer. I placed my dancers randomly in the space, had them start at chance-picked times, and then perform movements picked by chance, dictated by the toss of a penny. This experience was as close to Cunningham’s chance operations as we could replicate, and it was certainly a challenging activity for movers who normally expressed such emotion and intentionality with their dancing.

The third and final fall performance was emotional and unpredictable, as though it were the first time they had danced it through, because in fact it was an entirely different piece than the one we had made; it was missing a dancer. Shortly before the final show, a dancer called me declaring that she was too sick to perform. So one hour before the performance began, my three remaining dancers re-spaced the entire piece. We changed the spacing, added and subtracted a few entrances, and taught one dancer the missing dancer’s duet. All of this was so incredibly stressful that I did not realize how crazy it was until they began the performance. Incredibly, they were wonderful. Some audience members told me afterwards that they didn’t even notice our fourth dancer’s absence, which was happily surprising.

I am still in awe at my dancers’ strength that night. They truly became Cunningham dancers as they reworked everything just moments before setting foot onstage. They took a huge risk, learning new choreography so shortly before the
show and re-spacing what they had known for months. I believe that the rehearsal process may have helped them in this unforeseen endeavor, but not as much as their natural human abilities to deal with unexpected occurrences. Yes, they had heard about Cunningham’s chance operations, but I believe that their success during this last performance was due to their experiences in everyday life. Each day we come across situations that surprise us, and must learn how to cope. I noticed that this final night was slightly reminiscent of Cunningham’s pieces in which the movements, music, costumes and sets were all picked randomly shortly before the shows. Therefore every performance was different, and put the dancers in an incredibly vulnerable place. Yet it always worked out, just as it did here. My dancers rose to the occasion and embraced chance.

My experience with the spring thesis concert went in a slightly separate direction. Instead of focusing on the differences between the two choreographers, I chose to focus more on the ideas that they worked with and their similarities in thought. The final performance echoed the styles of both choreographers, but had more of an emphasis on representing a choreographic process, and not necessarily a specific one.

As I entered into my second semester of rehearsals, I had five dancers, more research, and a much more focused vision to work with. Early on I decided that my dance would be almost a direct outreach of my research question, instead of an exploration of the two contrasting choreographic methods. I worked with my dancers to create a piece that somewhat resembled the process with which a choreographer goes through to create a dance. Our goal was not to force meaning upon the
audience, but simply for our choreography to exist and allow the viewers to perceive it however they preferred. It was an exploration of the process of creating movement, and how it was intimately connected to exploring what it meant to be a human being.

Similar to the fall piece, I incorporated both Bausch’s and Cunningham’s styles of choreographing, but this time they became intertwined. The process began with me asking my dancers to create random movements, devoid of meaning. They picked pedestrian gestures and did them without any emotion and without any narrative in mind. They choreographed duets with movements that came to them at random, that were done without any previous thought, and created solos without any emotional associations. When we began putting the piece together, we did so completely randomly, without taking into account the placing of the dancers on the stage or the flow of the movement.

About halfway through the process, we began working in a much more Bausch-inspired style in which I asked them questions and they created choreography based on their personal answers. I asked my dancers about their own methods of creating choreography, how important meaning behind movement was to them, and why they danced. Even when I gave them my own choreography, they were asked to create an emotional narrative for each part. One section was incredibly internal yet simple, and it explored their abilities to examine themselves through movements that they were naturally drawn to. By the time we completed the process, I felt as though my dancers were performing our process. My dance was not trying to say anything to the audience, but instead allowed the audience to create their own meaning if they
wished. It explored the choreographic process as a psychological one, one that examines the human experience just as well as psychology allows.

This lengthy process of choreography and research has given me an enormous amount of information with which to move forward as both a dancer and as a person. Although I am just developing my skills, and often still wonder who I am as an artist, I have definitely noticed a change in how I perceive my chosen art form. I feel as though I may never fully understand myself as a dancer, as I will constantly be changing as a mover, but perceiving modern dance as a way in which to examine the human experience has made me even more aware of my own experiences with dance. Dance has always been my outlet, my way of expressing myself when no words could. Being in the moment, being one with the movement, I have often lost and sometimes even discovered myself. Perhaps this process was not just for me to examine other choreographer’s perspectives, but to develop my own. I am not entirely sure what my choreographic objectives are yet, but this year they were certainly to go on an explorative journey. I investigated my own perceptions of what choreography could be and in doing so, learned more about human experience and behavior than I could have ever expected. My own choreographic process became psychological, as I searched for answers within my dancer’s expressions of being human.

Final Thoughts, Future Directions…

My inquiries into the intersection between psychology and dance are far from over. This thesis is just the very tip of what I hope modern dance will explore in the future. I have discussed how the formation of modern dance was heavily influenced by psychological thought, and how the choreographic processes of two contrasting
choreographers can be compared to psychological processes and seem to become more alike than ever before. After researching the ways in which psychological thought interacted with both Cunningham and Bausch’s choreographic processes, I have a new appreciation for their works and for the fact that no matter how different two choreographers may seem, similarities do exist. Modern dance is truly just another way to explore our life on this planet. Human beings are curious, and this is true within every field of research. Whether we are curious about movement or how human behavior and interactions work, we are constantly asking questions and seeking answers. Understanding modern dance as a way in which to examine human nature makes it appear so incredibly similar to psychology. Choreographic methods and psychological processes are both ways in which to explore and perceive the human experience, with the mind and the body working together as one.
Bibliography


