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Chance Isn't Always Random: How "Chaos" Led to Modern Structure

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Loyola Marymount University

Professor Jill Nunes Jensen

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At the forefront of modern dance for more than half a century, American dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham challenged the hierarchical and restrictive ideals of classical dance through the development of avant-garde movement and radical innovations.

Cunningham's unique artistry and uncanny ability to defy conventional elements of form established him as a modern dance revolutionary whose concept of chance continues to influence and expand in performing arts today. This paper discusses Cunningham's chance theory and his unconventional movement and music aesthetic, by comparing it with the structure and methodology of Anouk Van Dijk, director of Chunky Move Dance Company's countertechnique philosophy. By researching journals, documentaries, articles, interviews, performance footage and reviews, it can be understood that Cunningham's choreographies amplified the basic possibilities of space, time and energy. His movement practice relied on chance, and spontaneity – showcasing the rawness of human motion. On the other hand, and perhaps equally unorthodox, Anouk Van Dijk's countertechnique practice focuses on, "sequentially directing and countering" parts of the body to enable dancers to move with more mobility, fluidity and spatial awareness (About Countertechnique, n.d., para. 2). Contrary to initial beliefs, chance and countertechnique's movement practices lack a formulaic approach to choreography, a combination of these research frameworks will explore how both Cunningham and Van Dijk's movement philosophies of chance and countertechnique are rooted in organization, structure, and rely on sequencing and patterns as a fundamental idea, thus sharing a connection and resemblance in the creation of choreography.

To Merce Cunningham, dance is "quintessentially about people moving" and solely that (Roy, 2008, para. 4). Because of this impulse, author Susan Au posits that, "Cunningham liberated choreography from traditional principles of good composition" and by breaking the

restriction of rules, creates movement solely for the sake of moving (2012, p.155). Transforming a balletic-influenced style to one that exudes modernism and innovation, Cunningham refused to interpret or tell tales through a set-up storyline that involved the depiction of roles and characters. He also steered away from the conventional ABA composition structure. Instead, his choreography is, “not governed by the logical progression of movements building towards a climax” (Au, 2012, p. 156).

By the early 1950s, Cunningham became fascinated with the ideas of indeterminacy and chance, which was the basis of his technique called “chance operation”. According to dance scholar Mark Franko, experimenting with chance as a mechanism for choreographing involved “charting all possible movement options prior to their arrangement,” thus the sequencing of movement phrases was left to chance methods of determination (1992, p. 144). Commonly misunderstood as a “license for chaos,” Cunningham biographer David Vaughan explains that the chance process is not as arbitrary as it might appear – in fact, chance has a very methodical logic behind Cunningham’s system of developing movement (p. 9). As a result, Cunningham commonly utilized the *I Ching* to construct the sequences of his phrases. *I Ching*, an ancient Chinese “book of change”, compiles the methods of random sortation, cards, and dice in which Cunningham used to specify and determine elements in his composition, such as “which parts of the body would be used, what directions, how many dancers” (Vaughan, 2001, para. 4). Cunningham’s chance method in actuality resulted in a precisely constructed choreography and was carefully ordered while simultaneously eliminating the foreseeable nature of composition.

Cunningham shared a long-term partnership with avant-garde composer John Cage. Together, they developed and advocated many radical innovations including, the disassociation of dance and music. In a BBC documentary directed by Elliot Caplan, Cage desired a condition

where the choreographer and the composer create works independently, yet simultaneously, to bring together a masterpiece “without one being ahead of the other or interpreting the other” (*Merce Cunningham: Points in Space*, 1986). As a result, the dancers in Cunningham’s company would learn, memorize and rehearse the complex chain of motions in silence and only during the last rehearsal would the dance created by Cunningham and the scores written by Cage collide for the first time. The independence and indeterminacy of dance and music became a cardinal principle of the Cage-Cunningham aesthetic, where Cage and Cunningham believed that this approach would give both dance and music freedom and clarity.

While many might situate the Cage-Cunningham aesthetic in the era of improvisational structure, both artists had a meticulous process in sculpting their compositions. First premiered in 1951, *Sixteen Dances for Soloist and Company of Three* was Cunningham’s first dance to use indeterminacy and chance where “the variable was the order of the sections” (Au, 2012, p. 156). The choreography integrated the nine permanent emotions of Indian classical aesthetics, four light and four dark with tranquility, the ninth and permeating emotion. When choreographing this piece, Cunningham developed a structure where each emotion would alternate between light and dark. Nonetheless, it didn’t particularly matter whether ‘sorrow’ or ‘fear’ came first, thus Cunningham incorporated *I Ching* to determine the order (Vaughan & Pritchett). Through tossing a coin, Cunningham finalized the order of the dance to become: Anger, the Humorous, Sorrow, The Heroic, The Odious, The Wondrous, Fear, The Erotic and Tranquility. Additionally, coin tosses also helped discover the individual sequences, length of time and directions in space. Despite the seeming randomness of such methods, the compositional structure was constructed on a basic pattern so that the sequence would alternate between light and dark. As a result, Cunningham merely used chance as a mechanism to expand his creativity and explore new

artistic revenues to choreograph on the edge of norm. He believed that “it is possible for anything to follow anything else, and the actual order of events can be chanced rather than chosen” (Vaughan & Pritchett, p. 7). Cunningham’s arrangement of the sequences highlighted that even in chance, to an extent, his choreographic approach lies in organization and structure of alternating emotions.

After a successful composition using chance operations, Cunningham continued to explore how chance was able to guide his artistic undertakings. Performed in 1994 in Brussels, Belgium, *Ocean* was a dance created to be performed in a circular space with the audience surrounding the dancers, and the 112 musicians surrounding the audience (Morgenroth, 2010). According to an article published by the Merce Cunningham trust, *Ocean* was split into nineteen sections and performed with fourteen dancers, with Cunningham utilizing “the number of hexagrams in the *I Ching*” to develop 128 phrases in which he used chance operation to sequence together” (Ocean, n.d., para. 3). In an interview excerpt from the *Mondays with Merce Film Library*, Cunningham explained how since the stage was a circular platform, the first step in his choreographic process was to define where offstage and ‘front’ were. Cunningham went on to “divide the whole area into 12 sections and [used] chance operations to determine each dancer’s facings, and how many space changes each dancer makes” (*Merce Cunningham: On "OCEAN"*, 2015) By watching a rehearsal footage of *Ocean* on the Merce Cunningham Trust YouTube Channel, it may appear that the locomotive pathways and direction of phrases are randomly arranged, however, Cunningham explains that he used chance to determine if a dancer would stay in a given space, or move from side to side. Furthermore, using chance, Cunningham was able to calculate how many times a specific movement faced “front” (*Merce Cunningham: On "OCEAN"*, 2015).

Ocean features a very gradual buildup of dancers from a solo into couples, trios and small groups, until all fourteen dancers perform the last two minutes of the dance. This layout gives every viewer, no matter where they are seated to watch the dancers in the foreground; thus in a more complex performance setting such as a circular stage, Cunningham's chance operation helped meticulously craft the facing of each phrase to ensure that the movement remained virtuous at any angle. Moreover, arms reaching up and out were a key motif in this piece. *LA Times*, dance critic Lewis Segal notes that the "weightless balances in extension and all the high-velocity entrances and exists that enhance the sense of tiny bodies hurtling through a huge space" helped create ocean themed shapes such as "sharp-angled reefs" or "powerful currents" (1996, para. 8). As a result, Cunningham's well-calculated, predetermined staging structure and organization helped establish patterning and sequencing for the dancers to create such ocean-inspired shapes without collisions or facing discrepancies.

Through an overwhelming aptitude for innovation and artistry, Merce Cunningham has clearly made a profound impact on the dance world. With a highly unique and distinctive perspective on constructing a choreography, Cunningham planted a revolutionary legacy that prevails long after his passing. The structure and organization stylized in Cunningham's chance operations has indirectly influenced the movement philosophies of modern dance companies, specifically countertechnique of Chunky Move Dance Company.

Parallel to Merce Cunningham's concept on the freeness of dance and how the exploration of movement should be accessible and uninhibited, Van Dijk believes that the company's performance is to be charged with "an ever changing dynamic balance" (About Countertechnique, n.d., para. 2). In other words, countertechnique guides dancers to perform in a way that enables dancers to move with more speed, space, control and agility. This exhibits how

chance and countertechnique, as processes of creation, prioritise movement over other elements of design.

In an interview between Van Dijk and Dhiel, Van Dijk explains how “countertechnique discards the dominant opinion the dance world that all movement relates to one centre in the body. Instead in countertechnique, dancers always keep their alignment and balance by continually giving counterdirections to each movement” (Dhiel & Lampert, 2011, p. 61). Therefore, for each direction you give your body, a counter-direction is given. For example, if you move your arm forward, a countering motion would be moving your ribs backward, thus creating a dynamic balance in which dancers are able to conserve energy while simultaneously move more spatially and fluidly (Van Dijk, 2010).

Similarly, the Cage-Cunningham music aesthetic defied the communal opinion that movement was co-dependent on the music. The co-existing, rather than dependent relationship of music and movement established by Cage and Cunningham allowed both artists to fully explore their crafts without compromising or relying too much on one or the other. In the case of countertechnique, counterdirections of motions allow dancers to discover modes of moving more efficiently and less strenuously, thus minimizing unnecessary movement patterns. In a video clip of Van Dijk teaching class, she acknowledges how “every part of your body can work independently” to create a cohesive movement (Van Dijk, 2008). The goal of countertechnique is to work sequentially and building awareness that each part of your body is able to move independently whether it be in opposition or rotation. Furthermore, both movement practices focus on creating a dynamic balance. The unusual harmony of Cunningham’s music-movement aesthetic enables the shifting nature of dance to be balanced by music, whereas,

countertechnique brings awareness to dancers that the sequencing of movement can always be countered by more movement.

Much like how Cunningham employs chance to optimize creativity and structure in his choreography, countertechnique features two principle notions: ‘toolbox’ and scanning’ as its baseline method of organizing thoughts to help declutter the mind and body. Defined as a “virtual set of problem-solving tools” by *Dance Magazine* author, Garnet Henderson, toolbox is a systematically organised collection of tools for the body and mind in which dancers use as a virtual map (2017, para. 4). For example, if certain movements feel stiff or abnormal to the body, a dancer can think about incorporating the tool ‘popping’ to reduce tension in their joints. On the other hand, scanning is the process where dancers continuously and “actively observe their mindset and body in order to choose from the most appropriate tools from the toolbox” for their given situation (About Countertechnique, n.d., para 3). If a dancer observes their mind and body during rehearsal and realizes that they are lacking focus and intention whilst performing, a tool they might think of is “see what you see” therefore, encouraging dancers to engage and embrace their surroundings rather than staring aimlessly ahead (Henderson, 2017, para. 4).

The efficacy of countertechnique is evident in Anouk Van Dijk’s choreography for Chunky Move’s highly physical performance, *Rule of Thirds*. Described by arts critic and editor Maxim Boon, *Rule of Thirds* is the final section of a trilogy “conjur[ing] an expansive, abyssal universe, ripe with narrative subtext” (2016, para. 1). A piece challenging the physicality of the dancers, countertechnique added to the illusion of space and the distortion of the audience’s perspective. Featuring dancers constantly weaving in and out of level changes, break-dancing inspired floor movements, and high knees, contrasted with sustained high extensions and sensual, intimate gestures, countertechnique allowed a seamless progression through the piece’s

many textural layers. Countertechnique changes the way a dancer interacts with space, thus providing a new framework for dancers to sequence phrases that maximize motion without overexerting energy. As a result, using the methods of scanning, dancers' moved either weightlessly with gravity, or exuded overwhelming force and taut to combat gravity. It was evident that without the concept of counter-directions and utilizing countering body parts to initiate the most effective way of moving, it would almost be impossible for the dancing bodies to accelerate from "muscular, provocative physicality" to sinuous fluidity.

Van Dijk's creation process shares similarities with Cunningham's innovative styles, such as how chance and countertechnique are the backbone to an uninhibited kinetic approach to choreography. Joy Davis, certified Countertechnique instructor, describes how countertechnique provides dancers a method and system for organizing an abundant amount of possibilities and choices a dancer faces (2013). By awakening the relationship between the mind and the body, it utilizes tools of directing and counterdirecting to inform dancers an organic means of moving. Similarly, chance operations are also seen as a system in establishing structure which assists in pre-determining spacing, direction of pathways and number of pathways. The designed pathways and compositional devices established by chance induce clarity in the execution of movement. As a result, both movement philosophies are rooted in a specific structure which influences the way choreographers and dancers are able to achieve a level of independence and freedom in their movement exploration.

Both Cunningham and Van Dijk have a very distinct choreographic and performance aesthetic in which organization and structure has allowed them to achieve such unique attributes. The structure embedded within both chance and countertechnique allow dancers to explore the freedom and control within their bodies and not just through the means of a specific step,

position or pose. Cunningham argues that if something is missing, he relies on chance to help fill the phrase or space (Franko, 1992). Chance not only guides his compositional process, but also creates nuances of unpredictability and surprise in which many of his viewers argue to be random or purely “chance”. According to dance historian Mindy Aloff, his use of chance procedures in “choreography diminishes the incidences of repeated steps, gestures or phrases – another lost aide-memoire” (1986, p. 21). Therefore, the employment of chance constantly prompted innovation and risk, while still utilizing a structured methodology. In the same way, countertechnique helps dancers unravel how to achieve maximum efficiency in the body in order to “see movement” (Van Dijk, 2010). By practicing countertechnique in training, rehearsals and performances, it provides dancers a structure to accelerate weight in space and counter directions to achieve stability, mobility, speed and agility. Through their respective movement philosophies, Cunningham utilized chance to help maximize creativity, risk-taking and provided substantial structure in his choreographic process while countertechnique’s approach towards training, creating and performing allowed dancers to perform movement at great ease while still exhibiting virtuosity and volatility. Thus, the seemingly random structure of chance and countertechnique developed a similar reliance on organization and patterned framework.

Through the investigation of chance operations and countertechnique, it is evident that these innovative processes of creating choreography are grounded in organization, structure, sequencing, and pattern. Within his lifetime, Cunningham relentlessly challenged the perception of dance through the rejection of traditional dance elements, such as the bond between music and movement, and how chance, a seemingly random approach to choreography was in reality, maximally structured. In an art form that demands effort, Van Dijk designed a movement practice that focuses on sequencing, directing and countering parts of the body to enable

maximum efficiency and range of motion – ultimately making movement feel and look effortless. Even though chance and countertechnique were created in two separate eras, it is distinctly apparent that both forms have evolved and integrated organization and formula into mainstream creative processes. The framework developed in both movement practices successfully made creating and performing movement more accessible and freeing. Cunningham established a structure that was freed the creative soul, while Van Dijk established a sense of freedom in performance. Beneath a veneer of what may be considered aesthetic chaos or randomization, chance and countertechnique were driven by structure and hyper-organization – meticulous systems crafted by their creators Merce Cunningham and Anouk Van Dijk.

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