

## Theatricalization of the Ritualistic

### Gesture and Dancing.

### A Semiotic Approach

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**Abstract:** The Saussurian adagio according to which linguistics is *le patron général de la sémiologie* is well known. To a certain extent, the verbal and non-verbal may be subjected to a common, semiolinguistic scheme of investigation. For instance, a fundamental phenomenon in the history of cult(ure)s – the transition of collective expression patterns from *sacer ludus* to *ludus aestheticus* – may be described, in our opinion, in a semiological metalanguage. Thus, we intend to illustrate, by resorting to a choreographic corpus, the relevance of certain semiological concepts, traditionally applied to verbal objects:

- desemantization"/ "resemantization": a relevant opposition, in our opinion, for the transformation of the choreographic language along with other structures of society;
- "mutability" and "immutability" of the sign: a paradoxical condition for the subsistence of not only verbal, but also choreographic language;
- the Saussurean principle of "alteration through continuity";
- the Saussurean concept of "shifting" the semiotic relation; in our opinion, shifting the original relation (ritualistic, magic-religious) between the choreographic significant and signifier is a symptom of the gradual "aestheticization" or "theatricalization" of choreographic "language".

**Key-words:** dance, desemantization, gesture, (im)mutability, language, resemantization, ritual, sign, Saussure, theatre.

A reversal of the process of *desemantization, resemantization* is defined by Greimas and Courtès as the operation through which "certain partial contents, previously lost, often to the benefit of a wider discursive unit, retrieve their initial semantic value" (Greimas & Courtès, 1979, p. 316). Often, the route of "theatricalizing" (Delavaud-Roux,

1995, p. 67) choreographic figures is that of desemantizing them by inscribing them into a new (purely aesthetic or ludic) context, different from the original, magic-religious one. For example, the representation of Maenads on antique ceramics reveals the shift, in time, from "spontaneous attacks of mass hysteria" (Dodds, 1986, p. XVI) and the first forms of "hysteria" domesticized through rite (*Ibidem*), to cult forms with an attenuated violence and, eventually, choreographic elements which are rather "formal than emotional", aesthetically encoded in a "mannerist style" (Delavaud-Roux, 1995, p. 47). The stylistic evolution is, in this respect, symptomatic. The bending and turning movements – a mark of maenadic choreography – executed by women dancers closer to us in time, are less abrupt than the original ones. Along with certain movement particularities, the props have also changed: the Maenads represented on ceramics from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC wear shoes, unlike their yet barefooted co-religious fellows, who had preceded them a few centuries before. The maenadic dance remains essentially a ritual, but the closer we get to the Hellenistic age the more theatrical it becomes, and its aesthetic encoding becomes more rigorous (Delavaud-Roux, *op. cit.*, p. 47). However, the "theatricalization" is not irreversible. As the dance loses from its original violence and becomes aestheticized, there still occur – as iconography shows – bursts of primary aggressiveness, symptoms of recurring religious hysteria (*Ibidem*). Retrieving the old significations may be regarded like a process of resemantization – late and sporadic – of maenadic kinesics. Today, most of the magic and/ or religious significations of chorèmes<sup>1</sup> belong to the area of a semantic archaeology of the non-verbal; nevertheless, their respective kinesic figures have survived integrated into another code, ludic-aesthetic, many chorèmes illustrate, through their evolution, not only a process of "stylization" and "mannerist" encoding of the expression (Delavaud-Roux 1995), but also one of gradual desemantization (namely, of the disappearance of the initial relation between signified and signifier). This "mannerist" encoding of the choreographic expression is mentioned, in different formulas and contexts, by J. Robinson (1981) – who draws attention to the risk of "sclerosis through encoding" –, and by M. H. Delavaud-Roux, who notices the "mannerist style of our dancers" (*op. cit.*, p. 110). As Saussure (2011) said, concerning the verbal expression, the sign is in the situation of being "altered" as a consequence of its "continuation"; so, the "fidelity towards the past

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<sup>1</sup> We may name the choreographic elements/figures by analogy with the levels of the verbal language (phonemes, morphemes).

is but relative". The principle of alteration relies on that of continuity: continuity cancels the user's freedom of innovation but supports, at the same time, the alteration of the original relations between the signified and the signifier. Therefore, we may speak about a "dialectics" of the *mutability* and *immutability* of the sign (Saussure, *op. cit.*). Both the verbal and the choreographic expression are conditioned by two factors: time and society; time enables the social forces which affect the system of signs to develop its effects (Saussure, *op. cit.*). At the origin of certain choreographic figures there may stand – as we have already mentioned – a magic-religious reason. In time, this first signified may be substituted, with or without a visible alteration of the signifier, by a secondary signified (aesthetic and/ or ludic). Today, such significations may still connotatively, but not denotatively, evoke the old magic-religious contents.

A good illustration of the Saussurean principle of alteration *through continuity* is the semantic evolution of Greek dances with arms, during funerary ceremonies. As early as an archaic age, very noisy manifestations used to accompany funerals and dancing with arms, performed on the same occasions, had a magical function. For instance, on the death of their king, the Spartans would strike their metal tools forcefully, in an attempt to generate noise, in order to drive away all evil influence, which might have disturbed the good order of the rites and the rest of the dead person. Such practices highlight the semantic value (Saussure, *op. cit.*) attributed to noise, like one of the significant elements of performing a rite. The iconography of classic Greek antiquity still contained sequences of dances with arms in a funerary context. In classical antiquity, dancing with arms in front of a deceased person, had the role of reminding the fellows about his brave deeds and/ or honouring his memory during a military ceremony. In terms of expression, the choreographic discourse has been preserved; but the initial, ritualistic-magic signification has been lost and replaced by a secularized, purely civic one. Moreover, the relation between the signified and the signifier from the *pyrrhic*, like in the Dionysiac dance, keeps "shifting". Therefore, during dance history, the continuity of the expression enables the alteration of its respective signification, as Saussure observed concerning the linguistic systems. Not only certain choreographic figures, but even the technical virtuosity itself shows the feature of the "shift" in the initial relation between signified and signifier. An offering to divinity and a sign of the contamination with its supernatural essence, virtuosity becomes, in time, a purpose in itself, a mark only of the dancer's skills,

technical and aesthetic performance. The semiotic relation between signified and signifier shifts from the initial ritualistic value towards a secularized, ludic and/ or aesthetic one. The signification of the choreographic discourse changes along with its receiver, who is no longer divinity, but a human audience. The orientation of "shifting" the relation between the signified and signifier moves towards the "erosion of the sacred" and the "search for beauty for beauty's sake" (Bourcier, 1994, p. 15) or of the gratuity of the game itself. Much later devoid of their cultic meaning, figures such as the back "bridge", the "somersault", air tumbling, the "cartwheel" – an offering represented by the effort put in performing them – were executed, as shown in the bas-relief and paintings from the Egyptian temples, by dancing priestesses who thus worshipped and welcomed god Amon during his annual journey on the Nile. At Luxor, for example, a sequence represented in a temple shows how the god was welcomed by a group of dancing priestesses, who were arching their bodies in a back bridge, grasping their ankles with their hands (Bourcier, *op. cit.*, p. 17) certaines figures

Often, the degree of technical evolution is inversely proportional with that of preserving the original magic- ritualistic signification. For instance, in Attica, during 600-550 BC, perfecting the art of dance is synchronized with a significant loss of the initial functions and values. The path of progressive desemantization is set out by a series of bodily configurations, which anticipate, with amazing precision, the ones characteristic either of classic ballet, or the various tendencies of contemporary dance, or other (cult or folk) styles and trends, closer to us in time and, obviously, secularized. So, Attic ceramics shows choreographic moments integrated into a Dionysiac context, sending to the *grand-jeté* from classic ballet or to leaps from modern dance. M. H. Delavaud-Roux (*op. cit.*, p. 64) believes that she can even identify, on ceramic ornaments from Attica, an important moment from a leap performed "with *demi-tour* at landing, which makes it comparable to a *coupé-jeté en tournant*" and, also, a leap "with *demi-tour* performed in the air, right before landing". In Boeotian ceramic representations of Dionysiac dances, the same researcher identifies, among others, frequent rotation movements of the shank, similar to those "*rond-de-jambe* performed by French-cancan dancers" (*op. cit.*, p. 68). On the ceramics showing sequences from Attic *kômos*, there are represented dancers on *demi-pointes* (*Ibidem*, p. 98), a way of dancing practiced, much later, by Isadora Duncan. In an attempt to avoid the cannons of academic ballet, she will look for a source of authenticity

in the old Greek representations of movements. The Maenads represented on Hellenic ceramics also dance on *demi-pointes* (Delavaud-Roux, *op. cit.*, p. 13). With their hands on their chest or with arms stretched out, the girls from the noble families of Sparta would also perform turning movements on *demi-pointes*, during the celebration of Artemis Karyatis and the Nymphs (Bourcier, *op. cit.*, p. 39). Old Egyptian images show turning movements and the decomposition of a circumvolution movement, which announces the spectacular *fouetté* from classic ballet (*Ibidem*, p. 17). The ritualistic scenario of the Dionysiac pair dance, especially that of Satyrs and Maenads, may constitute the origin of a *pas de deux* (Delavaud-Roux, *op. cit.*). Like in the classic *pas de deux*, which closes, in academic ballet, with a *porté*, the climax of Dionysiac mixed dance is the kidnapping of the Maenads. In the sequence of Dionysiac *porté*, the Maenad is lifted on the arms or shoulders. The ancient ritualistic significations of the choreographic gestures and figures have been completely or partially lost; certain *chorèmes* survive, nevertheless, desemantized and actualized in a profane context. Virtuosity, demonstrated by the complexity of the steps and the use of accessories, was for the Greeks, a mark of the exceptional nature of the worshippers of Dionysus, at least during celebration rites. Dancing with plates or other pots, performed today by the Greeks, is a distant continuation of ritualistic dances, practiced by *kômastes* in Antiquity (Delavaud-Roux, *op. cit.*, p. 98). These consisted, among others, in balancing a pot on one arm or leg, a posture made even more difficult by turning movements (*Ibidem*). Nathaniel Pearce, a resident of Abyssinia between 1810-1819, describes a similar scheme of indigenous ecstatic dance: "I have seen them in these fits dance with a bruly, or bottle of maize, upon their heads without spilling the liquor, or letting the bottle fall, although they have put themselves into the most extravagant postures" (Pearce, as cited in E.R. Dodds, 1986, p. 169). Therefore, once sacred, choreographic virtuosity loses, in time, its original ritualistic value; but it is invested with other significations, in the new frame of secular entertainment.

The dance also has, through tradition, a socially normative function; individualized masculine/ feminine, due to some kinesic schemes, the choreographic roles are able to transmit an encoded pattern of behaviour. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A. D., this socio-aesthetic specialization is noticed by Lucian of Samosata, when describing the mixed dance called *hormos* ("the chain"). It is "performed by men and girls together, dancing alternately, so as to suggest the alternating beads of a necklace. A youth leads off the dance: his active

steps are such as will hereafter be of use to him on the field of battle: a maiden follows, with the modest movements that befit her sex; manly vigour, maidenly reserve, these are the beads of the necklace" (Lucian, 1905, p. 243). Therefore, dancing is also a *propaedeutics*; it transmits certain attributions inside the group, along with the psycho-social roles marked through choreographic (i.e. kinesic schemes functioning as the masculine/feminine, we have previously mentioned.) An exception is the Dionysiac mixed dance : through gestures and postures, the protagonists – Maenads and Satyrs – place themselves outside the norm of conduct. The trance state triggers the exit of the Maenads from the typical female role, that which, outside the Dionysiac ritualistic frame, belongs to them by tradition. R. Girard (1972) argued that the function of ritualistic violence is to exorcise the potential of violence which every community has by regularly providing an outlet, encoding its way of manifestation; thus, spontaneous outbursts are prevented. Similarly, however with no reference to the French essayist, Delavaud-Roux sees, in the frenzy of the old Dionysiac dance, "a form of defusing violence" (*op. cit.*, p. 201) by miming it through dance. Leaps, fast turns, fallings, kidnapping would, therefore, be iconic representations of aggressiveness in Dionysiac mixed dances. An alternating blending of forte times of the violent movement and respite times, reserved to appeased movement may also be found in dances from other areas, for example, in a dance from Andalusia, called *taranto*. The *derdeba* dance, practiced in Morocco and Algeria, regarded as having a therapeutic value, is somehow similar to ancient Dionysiac dances, and represents a succession of frenetic movements (spinning, squatting, kneeling), followed by suspension of movement and, eventually, trance (Lièvre & Loude, 1987). By their frenetic and ecstatic aspect (the falling of one/ some of the dancers "like dead" during the choreo-musical treatment session applied to one of the patients outside the group), the *Căluș* rites (Eliade, 1989, § 305; Kligman, 1981; Giurchescu & Bloaland, 1995), as they were once practiced in Romanian villages, are related to other therapeutic rites, such as the choreo-musical healing rites practiced in Antiquity by the Greek Corybants – priests of the cult of goddess Cybele (Lucian, 1905) – or the Moroccan and Algerian dance *derdeba*. Turning violence into an agreement between partners is, at the same time, the theme of a Greek mixed dance called *geranos* (the crane). It is inspired by the nuptial parades of cranes; in turn, the partners simulate aggressiveness and submission, ending the dance in harmony (Bourcier, *op. cit.*, p. 38; Delavaud-Roux, *op. cit.*, p. 201). This occurs, theorized as such, in the classic dramatic poetics of India, under the generic form

*Tandava/ Lasya* (Vatsyayan, 1974, p. 8). This distinction is stipulated in *Abhinaya Darpana*, in *Sangitaratnakara*, as well as in other medieval treatises. Nevertheless, the opposition *Tandava/ Lasya* does not represent, at the level of the ensemble of Indian choreo-dramatic poetics, a consistent and univocal feature. For example, in *Natyasastra*, *Tandava* does neither necessarily designate a violent dance, nor a strictly masculine one, but a dance generally performed to worship gods or, in its appeased version (*sukumara-prayoga*), to express erotic feelings (Vatsyayan, *op. cit.*, p. 8). Whatever its particular expression, the opposition violent/ peaceful – and its versions – is a universal scheme which subsumes the variety of choreographic usages; here, we use the terms *scheme* and *usage* with the meaning given by Hjelmlev (1968-1971), who defines them one in relation to the other. This opposition polarizes two thymic categories, and thus articulates the semantism according to the perception of one's body. At the same time, it contributes, like in the Greek mixed (and propaedeutic) dance, to the "transformation of the micro-universes into axiologies" (Greimas & Courtès, 1976, p. 396). Along with the transition from the ritualistic manifestation to the purely aesthetic one, we are witnessing, again, a desementization of the choreographic figures.

For illustrate the process of *resemantization*, we shall resort to the mural representation of an African prehistoric rite (see Fig.1) and, respectively, some sequences from the romantic ballet *La Bayadère*, choreographed by Rudolf Nureyev in 1992, after Marius Petipa in 1877 (see Fig. 2-10), which will serve us as a corpus. In agreement with the definition of resemantization, the initial semantic content (ceremonial-religious) of a choreographic figure, lost in time through aesthetic stylization, may be recovered in certain choreographic co(n)texts. The figure we have in mind is represented in a mural painting dated ten thousand years ago and discovered in a cave from the western part of Niger. The foreground of the mural painting shows a group of seven women, in a position which suggests a forward swing of the body, on one leg, with the arms stretched apart. The scene resembles well a ballet posture or the position of permanent "balance" from gymnastics. Paleanthropologists believe that the mural sequence shows a moment from the performance of a rite practiced by a matriarchal community (see Ioan, 2002).

The posture adopted by the the prehistoric "dancers" signifies a "humble attitude towards a leader or god" who is, nevertheless, not represented on the wall of the cave. (The many lines suggesting vegetation confirm the fact that at that time, the Sahara region

was still blossoming and provide an argument for an alternative interpretation of the ceremonial dance as a fecundity rite, dedicated to the protective divinities of vegetation and fertility) (*Ibidem*). Included in today's dancing shows (as such or in other versions), this posture no longer carries the old ritualistic signification; nevertheless, it has been aesthetically recovered. In different co(n)texts, the posture of the characters from *La Bayadère* evoke – through expression and function – the kinesic discourse of the ritualistic "dancers" from the rite. The figure is performed – possibly as a sign of thanking or offering to the royal house – by the sacred woman dancer, when she receives a basketful of flowers, in Act II (see Fig. 4-5). In the same posture, the courtiers honour the rajah in Act I (Fig. 6-7). The rajah's daughter dances similarly, on the occasion of the engagement ceremonies. Versions of the Nigerian ritualistic posture adopt the bayadères dancing, in Act I, around the sacred fire and the High Brahmin (Fig. 2-3). All the versions mentioned share the swing on one foot and the stretching apart of the arms, but differ in the angle which the lifted leg forms with the vertical line, the angle between the line of the spine and the supporting leg and the angle between the spine and the horizontal line. In the mural painting, the position of the women dancers makes the spine parallel with the ground and the line of the back forms an angle of approximately 135-180 degrees with the lifted leg. The postures of the classic ballerinas from *La Bayadère* reflect a more pronounced tendency of lifting the torso, so that the line of the back tends to form a 180 degrees angle not with the lifted leg, like in the African drawing, but with the supporting leg. Unlike the position of Nigerian dancers, the angle formed by the ballerinas between the line of the back and the lifted leg may reach values even smaller than 90 degrees (for example, in Nikiya's swing on one leg, with the basket of flowers raised in her hands, above the head). But the test of *commutability* (classic in structural linguistics and considering the relation between the signified and the signifier) does not support, at least in this case, the distinctive function of expression variations. Therefore, in the co(n)texts chosen from *La Bayadère*, the ritualistic posture is resemantized, to the extent in which it retrieves certain significations it once had but then lost, to the advantage of the global (aesthetic) signification of the discourse. The respective posture retrieves – a symptom of resemantization – either the signification "authority", or "sacred", or both. Obviously, our interpretation is only one of the possible ones and tributary to a phylogenetic criterion. More exactly, it is tributary to the hypothesis that this posture could once have had, as some paleoanthropologists argue, a



ritual signification. We may draw the conclusion that at least certain contexts, such as those already selected from *La Bayadère*, enact ancient semantic features and thus enable the resemantization of certain chorèmes.

The gesture performed by raising one arm, with the palm of the hand facing upwards and the simultaneous lowering of the other arm, with the palm of the hand facing downwards carries – in ancient codes of ritualistic dance – the signification of blessing. Resemantized, it is performed, for example, in the second act from *La Bayadère*, by the sacred woman dancer, called to perform rites preceding the engagement (Fig. 8-9). The same process of resemantization is illustrated by the symmetrical opposition of the members (Fig.10). Its ritualistic signification is that of sign "addressed to the gods to catch their attention" (Bourcier, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13). The oldest documentation of this choreographic posture is constituted by its representation in a mural painting, dated approximately at the half of the fifth century BC and discovered by archaeologist J. Mellaart in Anatolia, at Çatal Höyük, in south-eastern Konya (Turkey). Two millennia later, this ritualistic posture will be adopted by Indo-European populations who worshipped a solar god (*Ibidem*). So, the dance of the bayadères at the temple, around the sacred fire and the High Brahmin (Fig.10), retrieves, in an aesthetic context, this old ritualistic signification. The choreographic posture is, in this case as to well, resemantized.

We may also illustrate the relevance of the concept of *desemantization* in the field of the non-verbal; for instance, by resorting to a sequence from the show *Ballet for life*, choreographed by Maurice Béjart, in 1997. It is about a posture (Fig. 11) very similar to the one of the Nigerian dancers we have mentioned above. But the ancient significations are no longer retrieved here, like in the sequences from *La Bayadère*; we can say this posture is, most probably, desemantized, without becoming meaningless.

## Conclusions

Even in the cannon form of *Cours de linguistique générale*, the editors retained some key observations formulated by Saussure concerning the unstable nature of the relation between "arbitrary" and "motivated", in natural language. First of all, as Saussure notes, "there is no language where everything is accounted for", just like conceiving a language

in which everything can be explained is "impossible by definition". Between the two extremes, "a minimum of organization and a minimum of arbitrariness", there unfolds the psycho-social reality of language (Saussure, 2011). But the two extremes delimitate not only the variety of verbal phenomena, but also the area of the non-verbal. A similar relation exists between the vocabulary of cult choreographies (*ludus sacer*) and the vocabulary of aesthetic dance (*ludus aestheticus*). (About relations between linguistic system and choreographic "language", see Hanna, 2001). Certain signs are "motivated" in sacred choreography as a result of some symbolic representations familiar to their native culture: the circular dance, the "limping dance" (*oklasma*, at the ancient Greeks), the Chinese one-foot dance, leaps, the arrangements of Chinese or Greek dancers into two groups, similar to enemies in armed confrontations and many others. With the blurring of the initial function (magic, cult or simply ceremonial) and the gradual acquiring of the aesthetic function, these have lost the first relation of motivation between signified and signifier.

In a large measure, the history of performance is a history of representation codes, namely of certain aesthetic and referential conventions which make possible that the choreographic or theatrical event on stage be understood by its audience. For instance, in Indian dance, *hastas-mudras* (gestures with one or both hands) have a narrative function. In Greek satirical drama, certain gestual marks serve to identify characters. In Indian sacred drama, which represents the story of the divinities, a gestual code enables the choreographic transposition of the myth. The Greek commentators left no "inventory" (Bourcier, *op. cit.*, p. 42.) of the canonical dance steps; that is why, P. Bourcier believes that "dancing movements were quite free for the Greeks, within the limits of the imposed mimics and genres (*Ibidem*). Nevertheless, they left a mimic code (*schemata*) and a code of conventional, "symbolical" movements: the hands stretching towards the sky are a sign of prayer; the hands stretching towards the audience, a direct way of addressing; the hands on the ground are an expression of sadness. The Greek *schemata* is a way of "abstracting", from the body's movement potential, certain elements invested semantically. For example, the Greek *skopos* is the gesture of the observer, of the one who lies at the lurch, while *xiphismos* evokes aiming the target with a weapon (*Ibidem*). Depending on the circumstances, dance has different functions and significations. A leap, a pirouette, dancing on toes, a certain position of the head and neck, the arrangement of

the arms and such other things carry a certain signification in a magic-religious code: to invoke divinity and obtain its kindness, to worship it, Dionysiac ecstasy, magic protection etc. But the same kinesic expression attracts another semantic content if the semiosis is established in (according to) the aesthetic code. This time, the choreographic signification will be "grace", "elegance", "technical virtuosity", "dramatic force" etc. Certainly, we should not ignore the phenomenon of resemantization, namely, the possible retrieving of the initial kinesic signification in some modern choreographies. Once more, the semiotic relation proves to be restrictive within a given cultural context (Greimas, 1970).

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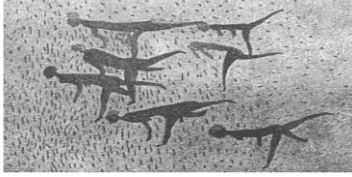
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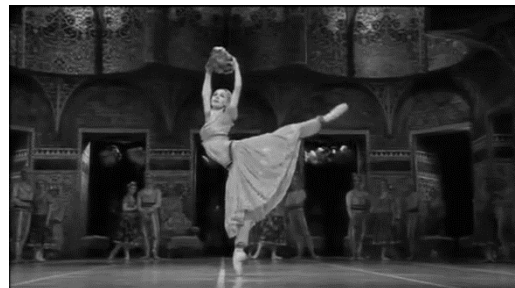
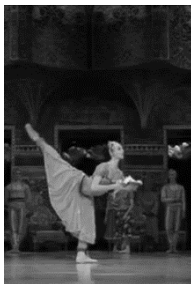
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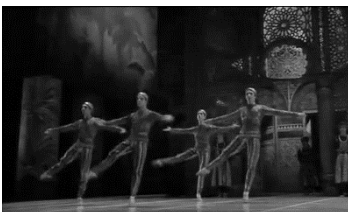
**Fig. 1.** Prehistoric dancers<sup>1</sup>



**Fig. 2-3.** Dancers at the temple (the ballet *La Bayadère* by Marius Petipa/ Rudolf Nureev )



**Fig. 4-5.** The bayadère dancing with a basket of white flowers



**Fig. 6-7.** Courtiers saluting the Rajah



**Fig. 8-9.** Blessing



**Fig. 10.** Dancing with the arms in symmetrical opposition



**Fig. 11-12.** Desemantization (*Ballet for life* by Maurice Béjart)

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<sup>i</sup> As reproduced in P. Ioan, "O trupă de balet... acum zece mii de ani" ["A Corps de ballet... ten thousand years ago"], in *Magazin*, no. 47 (2350), November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2002, p. 8.