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THE ELUSIVE UTOPIAN VISION IN DANCE FILMS

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Synopsis:

This paper is an attempt to analyze dominant patterns embedded in the dance films as a genre different from musicals and music videos. I attempt to read the optimistic closure of the narrative in dance movies made in Hollywood between the 1970s to the 2010s as a utopian vision derived from Western art and body philosophy.

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Why bother to analyze and find meaning when everyone knows dance films are meant for sheer entertainment? As Robin Wood pointed out, “genre cinema today—deprived of the sustaining base of the star/studio system, replaced by a set of businessmen sitting around a conference table asking ‘Well, what made the most money last year?’ and constructing a ‘package’ resembling it as closely as possible but going a little further—obviously survives only in an extremely debased and impoverished form” (310)¹. From the audience’s perspective, the viewing pleasure of watching the dance movies is similar to watching music videos but with more developed dramatic stories that offer voyeuristic pleasure. So, why bother? Theories of the body and representation of the body have become important in the field of cultural studies in recent decades; however, the dancing body and representational patterns of dance films have not held a major interest for cultural studies and film scholars. Given cinema’s ontological status as the dream factory that reflects its producers’ and spectators’ communal desire, this article poses several questions to a certain genre film – dance films, in this case—to analyze what pleasures, fantasies, and illusions the films offer to the audience.

Dance films are movies with plots that revolve around dance. The form of dance can vary from ballet, ballroom, swing, tango, tap, flamenco, salsa, lambada, lap, line, hip hop, and other street or freestyle dance forms. As the relevant main object of discussion, this article examines the following five commercially successful mainstream dance films in American cinema since 1977 to the present: *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Flashdance* (1983), *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Save the Last Dance* (2001), and *Step Up* (2006). Based on the total grosses of the opening weekends,² these five films all ranked within the top ten, together with *Staying Alive* (1983; a sequel to *Saturday Night Fever*), *Footloose* (1984), *Stomp the Yard* (2007), *Black Swan* (2010), and *Magic Mike* (2012). I will also include the latter four films in my discussion, with the exception of *Black Swan*, which, as a psychological thriller, is different from the other dance films even though the plot revolves around ballet.

This article is an attempt to analyze dominant patterns and beliefs embedded in the dance films as a genre different from musicals and music videos. Most of the dance films tell stories of a teenager growing up to overcome obstacles and predicaments. Class mobility is a

¹ Robin Wood. *Hollywood: From Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003).

² Dance Movies at the Box Office. www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=dance.htm

significant theme in most of the dance films which typically feature two protagonists from different racial, ethnic, and class background. The style of dance signifies the difference in their educational, cultural, and social background. There is the familiar theme of the American dream in which a newcomer, usually an underdog with no proper background, proves that he or she is more talented than the current star; as a result, there is rivalry in terms of talent and romance. Thus, the narratives promotes the illusive image of the United States of America as a land of equal opportunity for anyone who tries hard enough. The dance films incorporate romance, comedy, nostalgia, and athlete success stories all together into the narrative mix. In terms of thematic focus, the dance films' plots are all about the emotional and spiritual journeys the young protagonists need to take to become a mature man or woman, and the body becomes a symbolic medium connecting dancing with romancing. All the potentially painful social issues and differences in terms of class, tastes, and purpose in life are presented as problems arising from undeveloped identity, an immature understanding about life, fixed ideas, and misunderstanding about the other. The dance films typically end by evoking moral and ethical understanding about the other and delineating idealistic harmonious coexistence through dissolving all the conflicts and overcoming the central predicament.

In this sense, the dance films share predictable elements and storylines based upon the utopian vision of the human body growing out of identity crisis, human relations, class differences, and economic predicament. One of the most positive and encouraging aspects of the dance films is its body politics. The dance films regard the human body as a cultural and social subject, focusing on how the dancing body becomes a means to cross the boundaries and obstacles in society. Cognitively, the body is the protagonists' primary means of knowing and experiencing the world. Dance mediates two or more different bodies through the intimate process of allowing touching, thereby erasing social tensions. Discussing how the dance images project the activities of sex, Judith Lynne Hanna writes that "sexuality and dance share the same instrument—the human body"; According to Hanna, Ashley Montagu points out that "using the signature key of sexuality, essential for human survival and desirable for pleasure, dance resonate universal behavioral needs" (xiii)³. These films' views of reality arise through the concept of the human being as a bodily being, and they can be conceptualized by analyzing how the dancing body works to solve all cultural and social problems in reality. Without offering complicated philosophy, dance films challenge the typical hierarchy in aesthetics and differences in highbrow and lowbrow culture by incorporating different styles of dance, including, for example, ballroom into disco and hip hop into ballet, which also serves as a metaphor for social class. From the audience's perspective, watching a well-choreographed dance sequence at the end of the movie as a metaphor for social harmony between different genders, races, and classes can have cathartic and therapeutic values.

However, the happy ending in dance films can be said to provide temporary escapist pleasure, a utopian vision which works only until the audience leaves the movie theater. Apart from the formulaic characters and simple predictable narrative, the highly conservative

³ Judith Lynne Hanna. *Dance, Sex and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance, and Desire* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1988).

representation of gender and sexuality can be problematic. In terms of the dance films' gender politics, the films' visual aesthetics and physical images cultivate masculinity and femininity from a traditional point of view, despite the films' liberal perspective about race and class issues. With their strong focus on heteronormativity exemplified by the heterosexual dancing couples, the dance films do not question or subvert social norms in this respect. In terms of the main characters' choice of career, they are almost obsessive about the prestige associated with schools, programs, and jobs, thus endorsing the traditional concept of social hierarchy. The dancing body is trained to be evaluated by the authority of institutions in society, i.e., usually prestigious ballet companies or dance schools and universities.

Considering the fact that most of the dance films tell the stories of teenagers, i.e., a young man or a woman's journey from adolescence to adulthood, it is understandable why these films' standards seem to be more conservative than other genres of Hollywood films. The implication is basically an educational one. However, this genre can and should usefully be expanded to a subculture or a counter-culture film that connects different generation of spectators. The early dance films in the late 1970s and 80s contained a surprising number of subculture elements, such as the sexual promiscuity of the young people, gang violence, illegal abortion, and the strong presence of ethnic minorities. The dance films in the 21st century has been predominantly following the aesthetics of music videos. Because of the new digital technologies such as the internet, smartphones and new platforms like youtube, most of the dance films managed to achieve commercial success in the global market as well as in the States, despite the predictable plots and conventional story with many of the clichés. In this regard, the dance films can be categorized as an independent genre different from musicals – a genre worth more scholarly approach and attention.