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# Ode to Choreography

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## Ode to Choreography

Katrin Kolo

*"Choreography is not owned by dance alone"* (William Forsythe, Choreographer)

Choreography and dance allow insights into strict hierarchies and collaborative forms of working, creation and destruction of spaces, flexibility, change, creativity, innovation, sustainability, resilience and last but not least: time. Name any buzzword and you'll see dance choreography has a quite long history with it already. Dance and choreography know a lot and have even a routine with "not-knowing".

As we see in this special issue, dance bears many relationships to organizations. And the good thing is:

*"Everyone is a dancer"* (Rudolf von Laban (1879-1958), Hungarian dancer, choreographer and dance theorist, author of labanotation).

In this invited commentary, I want to invite you to reflect upon several definitions of "choreography" that open up various avenues for future organizational theorizing, relating to the three dimensions: choreography as notation (writing); choreography as a social model (moving together), and choreography as a language (communicating). All three dimensions point implicitly to choreography as a form of knowledge creation, archiving and distribution. I shall also include final thoughts on the role of choreographers as leaders in non-hierarchical environments.

Choreography has no single definition. "Choreography" first appeared in French as "chorégraphie", referring to the *notation* of existing dances in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. "Choreography" has also been used to refer to the *creation* of dance from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The English term "choreography" appeared only in the 1950ies. Nowadays, choreography is most often defined as the design of movement in time and space (Klein, 2011). But there are many other interpretations, which highlight other aspects of the choreographic process, product or profession (for example, there is a survey with more than 50 answers from artists, theoreticians, curators and critics in the field of dance – Corpus, 2015). Personally, I came to use ever more consciously the following two definitions – the first emphasises the aspect of choreography as a product, whereas the second describes choreography as a process:

1) *Choreography as design of the perception of movement and time and space.*

This is inspired by Brandstetter's (2007) version: Choreography is the design of space, time and perception of movement. I would go beyond this and refer to choreography as the design of the perception of all three choreographic elements.

Let me give you simple examples for space and for time: By giving positions and movements to performers in the back, that makes them appear very small and enlarging ones to performers in the front, the space will be perceived with more depth. To play with time perception of the audience you may play with sequences of extremely speedy movements and on the other hand slow motion.

## 2) *Choreography as decision making.*

Thereby I refer to Burrows (2010: 40), who wrote in *A Choreographer's Handbook*: "Choreography is about making a choice, including the choice to make no choice". When choreographing you will be constantly faced with decisions. The choice whether you want to precisely repeat something or leave some degree of improvisation and to what extent, is probably the most constant one.

With these two definitions Choreography seems to me perfectly applicable beyond the world of dance.

In the following I would like to focus on three aspects I came across during my own practical work as a dancer, choreographer, manager, consultant and especially through my project "UnternehmENSCHoreographie – Corporate Choreography"<sup>1</sup>: Notation, Societal Model, Language. These three that could also be titled as "writing", "moving together" and "communicating" seem especially intriguing. All three are important from an artistic and dance perspective as well as from the organisational or sociological perspective. They influence me in both my practice as an artist in the field of dance and as a manager and consultant of organisations. Throughout the text you might find this transdisciplinary approach – truly interweaving separate fields and not "only" transferring knowledge from one to another – which is very important to me. Don't expect final answers though. As a choreographer I raise a lot of questions, I aim to open up new perspectives and intend to encourage you to use your own imaginative space.

## **Choreography as notation or writing**

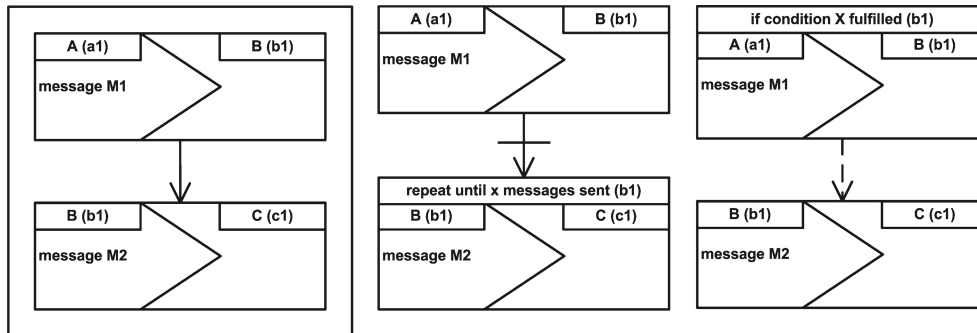
Choreography originally meant the notation of dance. Choreography in this sense is a challenging endeavour and can be of interest to studies of organization, in the social realm or in the world of management. Organizational life and business processes are multi-dimensional just like dance choreographies, they are performed with and through moving bodies, they are transitory (for example, services). Given the parallels between organizations and dance it makes sense to look at the tools of each sphere.

Indeed a certain type of web-processes are called choreographies and the Object Management Group administrates a notational standard (Business Process Modelling Notation BPMN 2.0), which is used to design, document and implement these choreographic processes.

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<sup>1</sup> The German compound UNTERNEHMENSCHOREOGRAPHIE - translated in English as "Corporate Choreography" – carries the word "MENSCH" meaning "human" in its centre. The German word „Unternehmen“, which is used to build the compound in UNTERNEHMENSCHOREOGRAPHIE, is rather a translation of the English word „enterprise“ or literally "undertaking" than of "corporation". Nevertheless the latter was chosen as an English translation as it gives a notion of the body (lat. "corpus" meaning "body") and thus hints towards the centrality of "humans" which is in the German word UNTERNEHMENSCHOREOGRAPHIE expressed through the term "MENSCH" in the middle of the word. The word enterprise/undertaking like the term Unternehmen is not confined to the business world. Both have associations of an adventure, a process with a goal, but with uncertainty and risk. The expressions enterprise/Unternehmen and choreography both appeared in the middle of 18th century during the time of the Enlightenment.

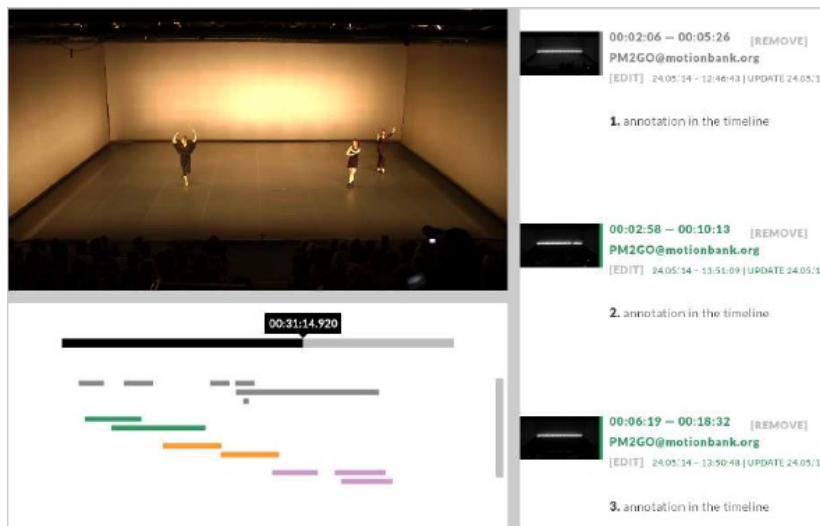
One of the first choreographic process modelling software programmes is even called “Let’s dance”. In these so called “Web Service Choreographies” (also see Weske, 2012), Choreography refers to the interaction of different processes, which are controlled by different process owners and not one authority (these are called “Web Service Orchestrations”). In these digital contexts choreography often is related to bottom-up, self-organising practices of collaboration (Preuss, s.a.).



**Figure 1. Relationships between interactions notated with “Let’s dance”**

The notation of multi-dimensional, highly dynamic and ephemeral processes – that are choreographies by nature – is a complex area. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century dance notation used to be notations of existing dances, which could be read by others and thus be re-performed, archived and studied. But questions emerged of what to notate, in which ways and in which media? Is it the steps, the movement in space, the quality of movement, in words, drafts or videos? Who is notating, from which perspective: is it what the choreographer designs, the performance of dancers or what the spectator remembers? Who is reading the final notation? Is the purpose of notation a prescript before a dance is performed or a description after it has been performed? The answers to these questions vary. Standards therefore are difficult to develop and establish.

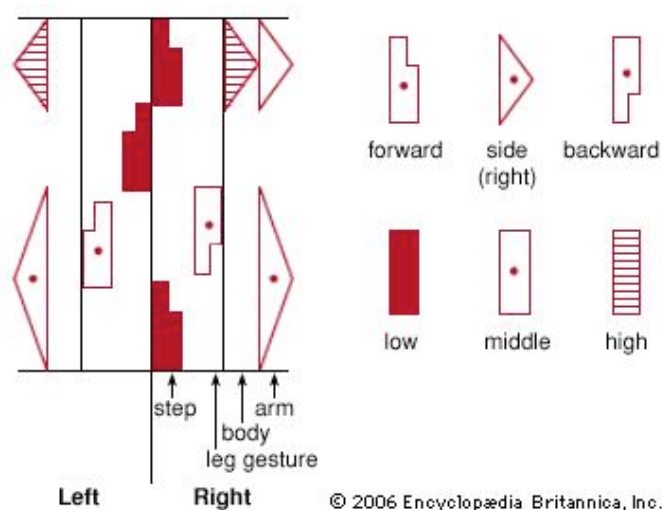
William Forsythe has created a research project for the documentation and notation of choreography that is called “Motion Bank” ([www.motionbank.org](http://www.motionbank.org)) and encouraged the development of a video annotation software called “piecemaker”.



**Figure 2. Example from the video-notation software Piecemaker (PM2GO)**

Videotaping has only to some extent solved the notational problem for dance, but can be misleading. How much can a video documentation of an organisation tell you about its actual functioning, decision processes, strategies, intentions? Would that exceed the value of an organization chart? Even video documentation might be helpful for some purposes – e.g. promoting a choreography to art presenters or the audience or as rehearsal tool during the creation process – it cannot solve the notational problem. Writing – be it on analogue or digital media – will stay “a lesser form of dance”, as Paul Auster (2013: 204) notices in his autobiographic “Winter Journal”.

The dance notation researcher Hutchinson Guest (1998) states: “the fact, that the developer of a dance notation was no dance expert was obviously quite helpful for the accuracy of the notation. Experts like Stepanov or Nijinsky tended to undermine details or even described them wrong, whereas Benesh and before him also Laban worked more precise.” I read this as a suggestion that dance experts might be able to contribute to the organisational side in the field of notation and vice versa. As far as I know, there has not yet been any exchange with dance and organizational experts on notational issues.



**Figure 3. Example of Labanotation**

Writing does not only mean forming words or signs, but leaving traces. Choreographies leave traces in bodies and thus are memorized or inscribed into the body – which is also immanent in the etymology of “choreography”: The compound refers to the antique Greek words *chorós* (round dance space in antique theatre or in its alternative meaning as ritualised round dance) respectively *choreia* (a unification of dance, music and words) and *graphein* (writing, inscribing).

Not only dance scientists, but also phenomenologists and cognitive scientists research and discuss questions concerning the bodily memory in interdisciplinary ways. They acknowledge that cognitive and bodily memory are not independent, but whereas the cognitive memory deletes constantly, the body doesn’t forget (van Imschoot, 2010; Koch et al., 2012).

When we discuss notation and writing, we implicitly touch also the reading of what has been written or the interpretation of what has been noted. Choreography thus also is a tool for reading and thinking: Bodily thinking as a way of revealing and interpreting what has been memorized by the body and that comes from your whole body and might therefore not be

rational or logical. In this sense, bodily movement, even a walk, can help the “flow” of ideas. This points to the use of dance as a research method that through movement makes accessible embodied knowing (Biehl-Missal, 2015; Hujala et al., this issue).

The relation of movement and embodied knowing (Springborg and Sutherland, this issue) is of importance and has a particular potential that has attracted researcher interest in sociology and other fields as well. Choreographic knowledge as embodied knowledge and not cognitive knowledge is an issue of relevance. This knowledge is moving constantly and therefore is hard to get hold of or to describe and document. However, in a time where artificial intelligence, digital information and virtual spaces and thus the deletion or at least abstraction from body were key, it seems that a new time has come to re-discover this body of ours: Embodiment has become a buzzword. Even the development of 3D-printers can be seen as a return to the body. After scanners have digitalized, virtualized and de-bodied material, we now send digital virtual data to a machine to materialize and re-body these data. Corporal liability seems to me another key word in this context: In Renaissance times, you secured money loans with your body. You went to jail or lost a finger or more, when you could not repay your debt. By developing fingertip-sensors or iris scanners for payment services, we return to the ancient body linked system, securing our debts with parts of our body, after a time, where we believed 0 and 1 will do the job alone. It might seem more harmless to give a finger print than a whole hand, but we should keep in mind, that even though you’ll stay bodily intact nowadays, you’ll hand over important data and thus the potential to control at least parts of your life to your counterpart. In this sense the “return to the body” and the access to body knowledge bears also dangers.

The importance and uniqueness of choreographic experiences, which can hardly be captured by other media than the body itself, brings me to my next aspect of choreography:

### **Choreography as a social model (moving together)**

Choreography is the art of moving and thus the art of living together, with other people, objects, environments, spaces, society. Currently my ideas and work revolve around choreography as the framework of social, cultural and also organizational rules that is shaping, influencing and determining this “moving together”. In this regard, dance theorist Gabriele Klein (2011: 20) , translated) explains:

Choreography reflects ... at a time the historical understanding of the organisation of movement as well as the political concepts of the social organisation ... Choreography is omnipresent in social spaces as an aesthetic paradigm, e.g. in the design of gardens and parks, urban planning, traffic infrastructure, architecture, ... or in the organisation of mass events like military parades, party congresses, pop concerts or soccer games.

For example, royal parades display motion sequences in new ways to suggest that they centre around the social order and the existing governance. Kolesch (2006: 107) also has explored the interplay of notation and performance, when walks in the park of King Louis XIV and his crowd were based on detailed notated instructions on steps, body rotations, gestures and the direction of gaze of other strollers. The king exerts affective and aesthetic influence on the bodies through a choreography of bodies and the social order. A related issue is the role of Louis XIV in classical ballet, where he danced main roles. From my perspective, this is not leisure, but rather a political way of showing and suggesting movement and styles with himself in the centre.

This idea of choreography that models and influences social structures, can even be traced back to Plato, who in his *Laws* that were concerned with an ideal way of administering a state described the artistic form of choreia (the etymological basis from choreography as a compound of "graphein" and "choreia" – Mullen, 1982). The citizens would learn the structures, rules and behaviour in this society through choreia as a unity of words, music, and dance. Plato's model of ideal society in form of a choreia would be inscribed in the bodies of the citizens and transferred into their everyday life.

I'll try to give you an example for modelling societal aspects, with reference to migration: Working with a group of - lets say - five persons, I would give them the task to walk from one side of the room to the other in a line and walk back and so on. They will find a particular rhythm in their steps to keep in line and will soon be able to change tempo or style all at once. In a way they will quickly become one body consisting of five bodies. This can be observed from outside, when they should start different styles of walking or rhythms and still appear as "one" group and a "body of five", not a bunch of individuals as before. Then let's say two more shall join. This will surely either spoil the original line, slow the walk down or the original five people continue with what they were doing, waiting for the newcomers to find their own way to join until a "body of seven" has found its shape and its moving possibilities in the given space. Now imagine thirteen more people joining the line-walk. They might have limited space now and even have to adjust their concept of "line" they were originally using (the simplest solution to this is to walk sideways and not frontal any more. This way each body needs less space in a line and therefore the line will easier fit into the space. Another solution close at hand might be to form a zig-zag line or a line consisting of two lines of people. Not to mention more creative solutions to allow a perception of the available space as big enough and comfortable for this body of 20) The bigger group will also have to find new ways to communicate within this new "body of twenty" as they are not so directly and literally "in touch" with each other anymore as in the very beginning (I shall comment on this issue in the next section). You can easily imagine, that the process of adaption within a group and its effects of growing or diversification within the members of the group (for example in which way is it sensible to age, sex or cultural differences of the people) can be modelled by this simple choreographic task of walking in a line. This might sound a bit like children playing Chinese whispers, but the fact that the group becomes a collective body – after performing the task for a while – is a big difference to these sorts of games. If you allow group members to leave the group at any moment, you might expect a chaos but quite soon – definitely much faster than you could teach a group of people to work along certain rules – the group tends to form a body which appears to be guided by its implicit rules. You will be able to observe how the group and the individuals who left the group throughout the adaption process find their own ways to re-join the group again.

Eventually this collective body is organized through complex and dynamic choreographic processes. This process consists of collective improvisations that can be called a choreography once they are repeated, altered and changed. As was found before, choreography often is seen as a form of knowledge (Butterworth & Wildshut, 2009). Also in this example, choreography can be a tool to generate and to access bodily knowledge, not only the knowledge of individual bodies, but also the knowledge of a collective body of a group of people.

Different from digital processes that follow a choreography we cannot perceive or perform, moving and especially dancing increases trust amongst people. Bachner et al. (2005) have found evidence for a relation between creative dance and the hormone vasopressin – a hormone which is known to have influence on social behaviour and maternal bonding. If you think of greeting rituals – like a handshake, kissing on cheeks or bows – these over time ritualized choreographies indeed increase trust. Dancing with people increases at the same

time the intimacy and let the dancers share a common experience, which creates a trustful atmosphere (also see Zeitner et al., this issue). Or is it the other way around: to dance together or to perform a greeting ritual you need to trust each other and the more you trust each other the more you enjoy? Anyhow, performing a choreography needs trust and choreography helps to find this trust.

### **Choreography as a language (communicating)**

[The choreographer] stepped forward to explain to the audience what they had just witnessed, and the more she talked, [...] the less you understood what she was saying. It wasn't because she was using technical terms that were unfamiliar to you, it was the more fundamental fact that her words were utterly useless, inadequate to the task of describing the wordless performance you had just seen, for no words could convey the fullness and brute physicality of what the dancer had done. (Auster, 2013: 202)

Dance as an embodied phenomenon can be experienced but cannot easily be described verbally or notated in a choreography. Dance theorists Gabriele Klein and Sandra Noeth (2011: 17) in this regard highlight that "dance is a construct made of metaphors for everything that we cannot describe with words". The field of dance and choreography itself often is used as a metaphor for many other things and also in the area of management, for example as an image for "movement" in the context of organizational change processes or as an analogy of a self-directed ensemble dancing onstage in a service choreography process.

The metaphorical potential of dance allows us to harness dance for bodily exploration rather than verbal discussions. In this sense, dance can be used as a research method (Hujala et al., this issue) and also as a method for self-exploration (Springborg and Sutherland, this issue). This ideal to access participants embodied and tacit knowing and to create new meanings, resonates in the notion of choreography as a language. In my corporate choreography project we usually started talking about one aspect of organizations until we realized that talking does not bring any further insights, just as Paul Auster describes in the quote above. Then we literally moved the words and questions with our bodies by creating little improvisations and choreographic episodes, without talking, until we felt we could not do more about the topics originally raised in our talks. After the moving sequence (not necessarily comprised of dance moves, people often just walked through the space, sat down, stood up, turned around, stopped, etc.) we started to talk again about our experiences and insights. In most cases we came back to our original questions that were now "thought through" with the moving method whereby the meanings of words had changed.

Let me give you one example, which was originally in German, but seems to work also in English and many other European languages: The word "respect" (in German "Rücksicht") relates to the Latin components "re" for "back/behind" and "spect" for "sight". In one of the movement sequences we discovered that developing a sense for what is happening behind our backs and to integrate this space behind us into our radius of attention and action, we were caring much more for the whole group and people started to trust each other even more (also see Ludevig, this issue). In the discussion following our movement sequence we found that this sight of the space behind one's back is a very special sort of "seeing the space behind you" - what we before called "respect". After this, every time, when we used the word "respect" again, we had this common experience and therefore also in mind this new meaning. Having "respect" meant more than before and at the same time it felt much clearer to all of us, what we meant by it. (Dancers usually train with a mirror, not solely to watch themselves but to see what is next and behind them. As a dancer you are trained to "see"



this space in order to be able to perform on stage without a mirror. One of my teachers called this ability the “compound eye” of the dancer.)

This process of “moving” words (through the body) and “translating” these moves back into words can improve communication within groups. Participants often had difficulties to express themselves verbally, but felt at ease with their movements and those of the others. During the movement sequences people could not only express themselves, they could also save a lot of time in moving all at the same time. This might also be taken forward as a movement-based addition to business meetings. Poetry has been used in meetings to broaden perception and find new meanings (Morgan et al., 2010) and dance – as a universal language – through its non-verbal and bodily detour can unfold a different potential.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Choreography itself and its definitions are as fluid, flexible and ephemeral as its elements: time, space and movement. Following the discussion of “choreography”, I would like to consider the task and responsibility of a choreographer and her or his role as a leader. There have been explorations of a choreographic process to learn lessons for leadership (Bozic and Olsson, 2013), and there are many examples in dance history that can be explored. Over time (for an analysis of contemporary choreographic practice see Husemann, 2009), this form of leadership has developed and in newest performances revolves around the issue of “trust” – a note on which I shall conclude my contribution.

In classical ballet, a choreographer leads the process of performing very specific steps and positions in a certain timeframe – usually a piece of music – and space. Similar to a Fordist organization, the aim is precision and variation on purpose or by mistake is to be avoided, leaving no space for individuality and creativity to the performers or workers.

Later in time, Les Ballets Russes (1909-1929) under the management of Sergei Diaghilev came up with great teams of artistic leaders, which created an opus together. For example the Ballet “Parade”: Music by Erik Satie after a Libretto by Jean Cocteau, Costumes by Picasso and Choreography of Léonide Massine. Picasso’s cubist costumes were in solid cardboard, allowing the dancers only a minimum of movement, even if the purpose was to create a ballet. This is a form of collaboration that we often find in organizations.

A different approach comes from one of the most famous choreographers of Modern Dance, Merce Cunningham, who used to work with visual artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage for music. They decided that all their arts are equally important and shall happen at the same time and space. They worked separately and only confronted each other with their result in the end when all elements were combined. The result marks a new and successful dimension for dance and its perception.

Some of the most important contemporary choreographers, for example William Forsythe, share leadership with performers. Rather than giving steps, rules, structures, guidelines or themes, he chooses members of the ensemble as partners on eye-level, allowing them to develop their own ideas. This way the ensemble of individuals leads itself to a creative body.

A choreographer, who works with organizational members, I see my role very much in the spirit of a curator who considers every person a masterpiece of art and helps each one to get the right space to unfold its full potential and offers opportunities to relate to each other thus unfolding their collective potential. This also relates to my initial definition: “Choreography is about making a choice, including the choice to make no choice” (Burrows, 2010: 40). I

propose a very limited set of rules or give tasks. Often it is only one, e.g. like in my example about "the line". I try to find "enabling restrictions", an expression I found in Brian Massumi (2015) work. The performers' task is then to explore those by making decisions about following, breaking and interpreting. This is a way of allowing them to do what they feel like doing, but always in relation to the original task or rule. This way every rule is also applicable to me and thus, hierarchy is eliminated to a great deal. I also invite into the process a certain degree of discomfort and irritation to open up opportunities to create experiences, knowledge and creativity. Throughout this working process, decisions by the choreographer or any other participant that were made as well as those not made become transparent in a non-verbal form. This high level of transparency and information is again a means to build trust. Considering choreography as a medium to increase trust, it has the potential to reduce the importance of words and material things and helps a non-hierarchical social structure to emerge.

Curiosity, trust and the readiness to accept failure are surely the right components to start any endeavour. Choreographic processes seem to me a good method to gain, train and rehearse those three.

"Oh man, learn to dance otherwise the angels in heaven won't know what to do with you." Augustinus (quoted in Brandstetter and Wulf, 2007: 41, translated)

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Katrin Kolo – Dancer and choreographer trained in Munich and Stockholm, Master in Economics at Ludwig-Maximilian-University Munich and Master in Transdisciplinarity in the Arts at Zurich University of the Arts; worked for many years artistically for the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, further employments as consultant with management consulting companies, and as cultural manager a. o. as co-director of Tanzhaus Zürich and program and production manager of Zurich Festival; founder and director of the move-think-tank corporate choreography for research and training in contemporary forms of collaboration.