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Virtual Authenticity: On Reinvention, Transformation and Functionality of Traditional Dancing during COVID-19

ABSTRACT: The following article is dedicated to the changes in folk dancing caused by the Covid pandemic and presents the author's theoretical ideas on dancing in the digital world. The examples concern the phenomenon of dancing the Bulgarian way by Bulgarians and non-Bulgarians in urban settings, which the author has been studying for years and now diagnoses the emergence of a new virtual model and defines virtual authenticity.

On the one hand it relates to the fluid notion of authenticity and organises self-reflection, free expression and rediscovering of one's own identity in cyberspace. Distance-dancing the Bulgarian way provides a psychosomatic environment with previously unknown online effects and paradoxical dichotomies. In this notion of subjective authenticity, the memory of the social intimacy of circle dancing helps with the social intimacy in the online communication and supports the belief in the whole world as an open community.

On the other hand, in addition to focusing on themselves through constrained loneliness, dancers also engage with themes of the political past, cultural essence and national determination.

The verbal discussions in social networks, at virtual folk dance camps and in university classes reveal the solid notion of authenticity. Transparency leads to more knowledge about Bulgaria and its interpretations; endless accessibility improves the correctness of the sources. Nevertheless, the new roles and hierarchies in digital Bulgaria provoke vulnerability and emotion. Recognising the phenomenon as persuasive and flattering communication, the increased verbal exchange connects both the individual and community aspects of authenticity.

Even if the dance enthusiasts from Bulgaria and from abroad are not yet fully united in the so-called imagined or digital Bulgaria, the phenomenon participates more than ever in the idea of a global village. Distance-dancing the Bulgarian way creates third spaces of protection and resistance and establishes a global community that has a future beyond the pandemic.

KEYWORDS: folk dance, digital Bulgaria, authentic reflexivity, solid and fluid authenticity, constrained loneliness, flattering communication, online disinhibition effect, third space, social distance-dancing

This paper was written in the worst period of the COVID-19 pandemic and presents my first observations and ideas about folk dancing at that time. My position as an internationally active teacher of Bulgarian and other traditional ethnic dances, as an insider in many dance circles, and ultimately as a university expert facilitated my access to the research material. Just as with the new ways of interpreting dance, virtual participation has emerged as a new form of qualitative research in my work that became increasingly familiar with digitality.

In a world that lives extremely fast anyway after the so-called “third industrial revolution” (Rifkin, 2011), it could be expected that the problems of dancing due to the Covid crisis will not last. However, they brought changes that have led me to deeper questions, further analysis, new concepts and even to the evaluation and continuation of my theory of intra- and intercultural communication. The execution of this development is beyond the scope of this article, but it describes its theoretical basis.

On the notion of authenticity

Every ethnochoreologist and ethnomusicologist has had to encounter the notion of authenticity at some time or another. In many countries, traditional folk dances and folk songs take us back to a past and vanished rural life that modernity longs for and mourns to a great extent. Therefore, according to Regine Bendix, the search for their authenticity is combined with the interest in preserving a beautiful or endangered world (Bendix, 1997). Even if we switch off the emotions, we try to analyse and deeply evaluate authenticity in order to define and bring awareness to cultural heritage and ethnic identity. But the concept of authenticity is also readily constructed to support a cultural nationalism. This cultural concept of solid authenticity (as I would call it, following Assmann’s theory of culture and memory (Assmann, 2006) is a political instrument. Thus, my colleague Andreas Meyer claimed that “there can be no authenticity per se, but only an authenticity for something” (Meyer, 2021). From another inside perspective of the performative, the current choreographer of the Bulgarian National Ensemble of Folk Songs and Dances “Philip Koutev” also told me in 1996 that “there is no such thing as authentic and inauthentic folk dance, but talented or untalented art” (PC Ivanov, 1996).

In my work, I have come across various perspectives and understandings of authenticity and believe that we should always clarify at least two terms with basic pragmatic differences. For historical research and archiving of rural folklore, I had to use the common term, which in my eyes only concerns form or politics. It is an objectified authenticity – observed, asserted and certified.

Among the dancing people, however, I needed more and more a fluid communicative and philosophical concept of subjective authenticity. For my anthropological studies, I then defined it in line with Ernst Cassirer (Cassirer, 1944) as an expression of identity and saw it linked to the inner perspective of the person *here and now*.

As spectators or jury members at folk festivals, I think we all consciously or unconsciously work with these two ideas of solid and fluid authenticity and their political roles. We judge the originality of the forms and at the same time the identification of the actors with them, which we perceive as genuine, powerful and convincing. According to the first use of the term, it is not authentic when white people regularly practice Afro Dance or Japanese people dance Flamenco. But here, a different kind of authenticity emerges. And that is not only subjective, but also global.

Similar to Alexandro Ferrara (1998), I am intrigued by the possibilities of a reflexive authenticity and believe that traditional dance today provides shining examples of it. In my analysis of traditional Bulgarian dancing by German speaking people, I discovered that reflexive authenticity is the key to successful nonverbal intercultural communication (see Panova-Tekath, 2011).

At the same time, in terms of cultural development, urban traditional dance creates a kind of heterotopias in the sense of Michel Foucault (1993), and the new digital lifestyle makes them even more effective.

My subject of research

Over the past few decades, I have delved into the concepts of authenticity that have arisen from traditional dancing in urban settings. Before and after 1989, the so-called “Bulgarian folk dances” became very popular as a profession or a hobby among Bulgarians and non-Bulgarians. I defined this phenomenon as *dancing the Bulgarian way* and distinguished its variations as Soviet, American, Democratic, Emigrant, Mediating and Virtual models (see Panova-Tekath 2020, 2021, 2022). In my opinion, all of them reveal reflective authenticity and fluid nationality (see Panova-Tekath, 2010).

For this paper, I was inspired by the transformation of the phenomenon into an online activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without being in the same place, people continue to dance Bulgarian folk dances together thanks to live streaming, become members of internet forums dedicated to Bulgarian folklore and build a larger community than ever before. I call it “digital Bulgaria” and would like to make a few comments here that I think concern dancing in cyberspace in general.

In 2020 a Dance M.F.A. student at the University of California Irvine published an article entitled “Forced to move virtually” in which he states, Not since the Greatest Depression of the 1930s has the dance community made such a unified and technological leap forward [...] Virtual dance is the way of the future and the author feels “as though it can assist in catapulting new ideas and businesses into the dance world” (Sanders, 2020).

I am reluctant to ascribe such a revolutionary significance to the pandemic in relation to Bulgarian folk dances, but I must confirm that I detect important changes in the phenomenon on a global and local, social and individual, physical and cognitive level. I analyse the latest variations of dancing the Bulgarian way as a gentle protest against the unknown difficult situation, and I decipher a kind of *virtual authenticity* and new *third spaces* created by the phenomenon.

I had the opportunity to actively perceive the alterations of my research object in three new contexts that had to prevail due to the coronavirus disease:

1. The Bulgarian dances as part of the creative online semester at the Folkwang University in Essen;
2. The virtual Bulgarian folk dance parties and webinars organised not only from Bulgaria but also regularly from the USA, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, various Asian countries, and Australia;
3. Recorded and shared Bulgarian folk dances and comments on them on YouTube and in Facebook groups such as “Съкровищницазабългарски хораумани” [*Sakrovishnitsazabulgarski hora itantsi*].

My participant observation and interviews, as well as my own interactions and reflections on these three manifestations of dancing the Bulgarian way in the digital lifestyle, led to my decision to define a new model of the phenomenon and to my ideas about virtual authenticity in general.

Balancing between social and individual: *Constrained aloneliness*

Many of my interviews on *distance-dancing* touch on the definition of the new term “aloneliness”, which Canadian psychologist Robert Coplan used to highlight the positive aspect of loneliness (Coplan, 2019). In tune with the basic concepts of philosophical anthropology is the insight of Michael Dragiev from the Bulgarian diaspora group in Düsseldorf:

Besides literacy in microbiology, the pandemic was an occasion to put ourselves back in the centre as the most important. To protect our health, to sort out our priorities and to manage our own time (PC Dragiev, 2021).

The coronavirus disease forced this *aloneliness* and that’s why the research of Coplan can only be linked to a limited extent. Distance dancing is a special balancing act between social and individual, being together and being alone. Here we can determine various influences, but at the same time also the relaxation of a conscious control.

The independent decisions of the mediated person are, of course, only relative, and often imaginary. Nevertheless, the rapid emergence and abundance of opportunities and support for dancing people during the COVID-19 pandemic were remarkable. Old communities and their members have shown great creativity and tirelessness in the noble intention to organise togetherness or simply to keep spirits high. The internet also gave new institutions and personalities a chance to become more visible, accessible, and ultimately influential.

It is fascinating to analyse how the virtual model of the phenomenon unites tradition and innovation in marketing as well. Several American and Bulgarian organisations offered their folk dance camps and festivals in virtual form and developed the established brands very enterprisingly. For 70 years, Bulgarian

folk dances have been among the most taught subjects in the oldest and most prominent International Folk Dance Camp at the Pacific University in Stockton, California. By changing the registration form to free donations and expanding the programme and availability to 24 hours a day, the virtual editions of Stockton Camp have been attracting between 1000 and 2500 participants from all over the world twice a year since 2020. The new enthusiasts explain to me that they didn't know about the camp before, hadn't ventured into such intensive lessons at a high level in face-to-face situation, or just couldn't afford to go to California. The internet made it easier, and I recognised in their feedback almost all of the factors of the *online disinhibition effect* that John Suler revealed for Cyberpsychology and Behavior as recently as 2004 (Suler, 2004). For instance, a new enthusiast explained in her letter of gratitude to the Stockton team in January 2021:

From the comfort of my bedroom I have enjoyed several days of being on an adventure. I liked having so much control of managing the "go for it" and "resting". I liked feeling free to add expression to the dancing without being observed, including doing very approximate versions of the dances. Oddly, I felt MORE CONNECTED TO THE DANCING compared to being present at the dance hall with others.

The person, who wishes to remain anonymous here, also describes a total devotion and even first traits of dependence. The relaxation of the controllability of participation and presentation obviously transitions into a kind of conscious short-term dependence, which seems to me to be typical of virtual authenticity:

Really, it felt odd and disorienting whenever I left my room and encountered daily life surroundings when I went to the kitchen to eat. It was fun to drift--make that crash--to sleep immediately after dancing and to know I merely had to rise and click to be back IN the adventure. I enjoyed being immersed in this truly worldly experience of dancing and music and sharing with so many folks from so far away. (PC xx, 2021)

In contrast to this Stockton enthusiast, my students at Folkwang University were not allowed to choose whether to attend my class or not. However, they were free to stay at home and, for example, to participate in the class held in Germany from Asia.

In my courses, I was able to offer my dance students not only the usual movement exercises, but also additional theory and new acquaintances. By introducing ethnochoreology as a new Moodle subject and by organising lectures and online classes with my colleagues from different continents as well as discussions with other folk dance students, I believe I have achieved a special sensitivity to the outside world in my students and also increased their cultural and self-reflection. The self-reliance in the pandemic led to more responsibility for most young people. The live streaming and the opportunity to move authentically in front of the camera, to understand and learn dances from the screen and to have conversations with people the world over, enabled them to feel their own personal development and improvement of their studies. However, when Covid restrictions began to lift, they were all extremely happy to be dancing together again in person, and then a year later to also hold hands or shoulders. They described that they now appreciate circle dancing and couple dancing much more. In addition to this statement,

a student of Turkish origin shared with me that he will now most certainly do folk dancing with his traditionally-minded relatives (PC, Soenmez, 2022).

Cognitive effects of practical virtual dancing

It is clear that the online dancers experience an unusual psychosomatic situation and therefore the processes of their corporal learning or teaching are accompanied by special cognitive effects. They include the development of an unconventional sense of space, the ability to “see” one’s own body without a mirror, the cognition of one’s personal sphere of energetic influence, the reflection of an atypical sound environment, the discovery of the smallest details in movement, the rediscovery of participants and teachers, the habituation of teachers to the absence of tangible reactions, the plurality of simultaneous oral correspondence via chats, the uneven proximity of the face in the screen, etc.

Since dancing online in the Bulgarian way is less physically demanding than doing so in real social space, reflexive authenticity is replaced by authentic reflexivity, and participants balance freely between different levels of place, time and meaning.

A global village

a. Remembering and reorganising the meaning and the social intimacy of the *Horo*

New institutional cooperation, new expert groups, new acquaintances and friendships were made during the Covid period. Thanks to active communicative memory, the social intimacy of circle dance became a social intimacy of online communication.

Because of the isolation, “electricity” could not flow through the grasping hands of the Bulgarian circle dance, but also in the context of constrained loneliness, the creative individual dancers found a variety of solutions in the virtual model to maintain and stage the relationship of the dance line. Thanks to the technological possibilities and the wealth of ideas, we saw several video compilations in cyberspace – for example a clip of the “*Иеремия*“ [*Jeremia*] club from Sofia, which threw a traditional dance shoe from member to member in April 2020 and thus showed one of the club’s choreographies. With the online initiative “I drop, I drop a handkerchief” and corresponding films the diaspora group of „*Нашенци*“ [*Nashentsi*] from Verona complemented the virtual offset of the festival „*Намегданана другата България 2020*“ [*Na Megdanana Drugata Bulgaria 2020*] and connected Bulgarian immigrants in different European countries. This symbolic voyage of discovery was less reminiscent of a child’s game than of ancient folklore rituals.

Not only did the virtual model bring many new people into the phenomenon, but it also allowed many to get to know each other in its “participatory culture”

(Burgess, Green, 2009; Turino, 2008). If it weren't for the internet, we wouldn't have learned about orphans in Uganda and Ghana dancing Bulgarian folk dances for Daniel Delibashev, or about many other translations of Bulgarian cultural essence in the diverse "third spaces" of the phenomenon.

b. The extended community: New positions, hierarchies and emotions

At first glance, the specific communities I recognized from the older models of the phenomenon (Panova-Tekath, 2020) dispersed during the pandemic into individuals who stayed at home. But at the same time, thanks to technological progress, creative members, active memory and the common object of interest, the old groups merged into a larger and unexpectedly strong, fluid community that I like to call *digital or imaginary Bulgaria*. At first glance, it includes – similar to McLuhan's (1964) idea of the global village – local Bulgarians, diaspora groups and non-Bulgarian dance enthusiasts from all over the world and has a free market-oriented structure.

Speaking with the language of Owe Ronström (2014), I must state that the marketers are the new leaders of the virtual model, and the doers are definitely becoming the knowers in the internet forums dealing with Bulgarian dances, culture and identity. But not all established choreographers and dance masters are willing, active and gifted for online communication – neither for permanent presence in the cyberspace, nor for convincing verbal inputs, nor for perfectly structured advertising. A positive role model is, for example, Prof. Anton Andonov from the Academy of Music and Dance in Plovdiv, who gained progressive experience in the Covid period: In addition to the many public posts from him and others about his activities with Bulgarian dance, his private Facebook page collected fascinating dances and made my colleague and his courses very popular.

Yves Moreau, for decades the most incisive foreign dance teacher for Bulgarian folk dances, regularly put one of his dances on his public Facebook page and made online the so-called Culture Corners, in which he commented on his old field research in Bulgaria and shared his impressive memories with the recreative dance community in the world.

On the other hand, many people who were not well known in the scene are now gaining a stage for expression, prestige and influence through skills that fit the new media (for example as bloggers who determine the topics themselves or admins who can block people or add them to the updated communities).

Very importantly, the virtual model supports the "habituation and demand for complete availability of everything" and the belief that "one's own opinion must be heard by the world" (Fosler-Lussier, 2020, pp. 152–155). If we continue to use here the terminology of marketing, "distance-dancing the Bulgarian way" designed in this way gradually acquired the character of a *fluid brand* and very quickly found its chances for a "temporary autonomous zone" (Svensson, 2016, p. 200) in cyberspace. Its hybridity and flexibility in relation to the old roles and hierarchies gave everyone a place and a "voice" and helped to impose a certain democracy. However, sometimes this can be viewed as pseudo-democracy or

anarchy. Because the non-simultaneity and invisibility in digital communication contributes to the courage and activism of different participants, a fact that online psychotherapist Kali Munro explained in 2003 as the advantage of “hit and run”. In doing so, the power of the dance’s authenticity automatically transferred to a powerful emotionality in the statements. High emotions are particularly evident among Bulgarians and prominent former dance teachers who identify with the old days.

Despite the accessibility of all events on the Internet, the traditionally dancing Bulgarians from home and abroad, also online, tend to cultivate a second large community parallel to the world community of non-Bulgarians who dance the Bulgarian way. This division becomes softer in the virtual model – its justification in the language barrier and the financial gap disappears – but apparently the distinct national feeling and pride remain even stronger. The phenomenon confirms one of the paradoxes of the pandemic described by Ivan Krastev: Along with the increasing tendency towards deglobalisation, the Covid crisis shows the shortcomings of renationalisation (Krastev, 2020, pp. 73–74). Transparency as a design principle of digital humanity allows ethnocentrism and nationalism on the web but subjects them to constant scrutiny and reaction. In my view, within the extended virtual community, the possibility of the subtle spread of their pathological forms is minimised.

Intensified verblivity: more knowledge, correctness, recognition, and vulnerability

The internet promotion gives dance teachers and artists an incomparably huge audience, but it also forces them to handle their dance material very competently and correctly – in the frame of the new transparency they now give their sources, name the authors of the music, show old films, discuss translations, etc.

As mentioned above, one of the most important differences of the virtual model from the other models of dancing the Bulgarian way is the powerful entry of verblivity and polar emotions into the phenomenon.

Originating from the phenomenon already existing in a real social environment and being its new reflection, the verbal communication of the model divides its meaning and emotional charge into two fields – regulation and recognition.

In examining the multiple chats about Bulgarian folk dances, we find that online verblivity revives the first notion of objectified authenticity and makes it essential not only for the ethnomusicologists and politicians but also for all people dancing the Bulgarian way. Polarising and affective are the public discussions about what can pass for Bulgarian traditional dance, by whom, where and how, and the uncompromising and bold *digital verbalisation* adds a whole new colour and tension to the phenomenon. Thus, in a post from 2021, we read that “our dance folklore is being replaced and we are turning it into indefinable mixed dish a la Zumba-Bulgarian”. This wit is followed by an empathy and appeal that I believe characterises the rhetoric of the virtual model:

If all of us who are ‘users’ of our folklore in whatever form, who monetize it without brakes or moral inhibitions, get together and say in one voice that we want to be honest, correct, and honourable, miracles will happen. (Kurdova, 2021).

Also evident is the new politicisation of the phenomenon through sporadic and irreconcilable verbal clashes linked to antagonistic assessments of the communist past. Dancing the Bulgarian way for the first time announces ambitions for ***persuasive communication*** and forms clear camps of opinion.

On the other hand, Facebook pages and groups are overflowing with enthusiasm for the richness of Bulgarian dance culture and with reactions of gratitude to specific personalities. In the spirit of this hedonism and affirmation, I find in the individual micro-level of the phenomenon many examples of the so-called *flattered self*. Thomas De Zengotita derives this term from his claim that contemporary Internet-mediated “flattery” is changing the individual and its world view (De Zengotita, 2005, pp. 7–9, 13–25, 227–229). In my investigation of this new global paradigm of the phenomenon, I use the term ***flattering communication***.

Paradoxical dichotomies

There are many interesting paradoxes in dealing with Bulgarian folk dances in cyberspace and I can only briefly mention a few of them here. The limitless freedom of speech and expression and the feeling that your mind has merged with the mind of the online companion (*solipsistic introjection*) correspond to participants’ forced microphone-off during a dance event. Anyone can be a YouTube soloist, post whatever you want and claim anything about Bulgarian and Bulgarian dance, but the online space allows for an outspoken response and facilitates visibility and awareness that is greater than ever before. Zoom participants choose whether to turn on their cameras but rely primarily on their visual perceptions to learn and join. The “mediated” dancers can choose whatever name they want or even remain anonymous but are forced in live streaming to accept and show strangers their homes, how and with whom they live, their privacy.

Dancing Bulgarian in its virtual classes is like a mirror that turns constantly and entertains with magical distortions of intimacy and distance. Temporality plays out between the pseudo-synchronicity of the collective streaming activity and the different times of day for participants from all corners of the Earth, between the asynchronous dancing with past sources from folk archives and the possibility of recording and countless future re-enactments of the experience in the current session. Territoriality here is also different from other models: video recordings of folk festivals and field research by the dance teacher transport the homebound dancers under the open sky to a Bulgarian village; the program tools (most often Zoom) allow them to pin and enter the teacher’s home or choose and observe the place of another participant in the session, as well to hide himself completely by turning off his own camera; the Internet connection authorises or forces dancers to repeatedly exit and return to the event.

Conclusion

Increasing information about the past intensifies the present. Allowing verblivity into the phenomena of the nonverbal gives them more transparency and power. Meeting new people, finding new media channels, or inventing third spaces is an enrichment and never a limitation.

By using the internet, dancers deepened and expanded their intra-, inter-, and transcultural discussions about the cornerstones of the Bulgarian tradition and discovered the potential of Bulgarian dance as a survival strategy. Very soon after the outbreak of COVID-19, the phenomenon of dancing the Bulgarian way was talentedly reorganised as an uplifting encouragement and resistance to social segregation.

I am not trying to sugarcoat virtual dancing, and I do not want to replace traditional dancing in a physical place in a social group with dancing in front of a screen alone. Unforgettable is the joy when we had face-to-face dance lessons for the first time after the strict restrictions at the Folkwang University of Arts. Bulgarian dance itself survived by helping people survive. Even more: it blossomed and the first statement I heard in my group interviews, which was also confirmed by hundreds of dancers on internet forums, indicated that it will now experience more devotion, appreciation, and protection.

Still, I think we should keep the insights and creativity that we achieved with online discussions and distance-dancing the Bulgarian way during the pandemic. Very important is the ability to experience authenticity virtually, with which we have learned to find, express, and develop our identity in cyberspace, to believe the whole world as an open community and at the same time to critically reflect on the cultural essence and take it with us into the future.

One last update

A lot of time has passed since the initial presentation of this paper and I would just like to mention again that I am continuing to work on the topic. In any case, it is essential for me to emphasise here that the many remarkable and not only negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have lasting effects on several levels of the dance phenomenon. The enforced online format attracted new people to dance who have stuck with it in person to this day. The release from the stress of social distancing in person through traditional dance at home was ecologically comprehensible and, in my opinion, can define and sustainably establish a new kind of virtual eco-choreology. For researchers, the new model provided an opportunity for significant conclusions and rethinking of everything that came before. Virtual dancing can be further explored in terms of augmented reality.

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