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The Impact of Intuitive and Ideal Thinking on Modern Dance Improvisation

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how intuitive and ideal thinking influence the practice and pedagogy of modern dance improvisation. Through theoretical analysis and practical case studies, the study highlights the interplay between spontaneous creativity (intuition) and aspirational frameworks (ideal thinking). It also examines the potential of balancing these cognitive modes in cultivating versatile dancers and choreographers. This research contributes to both theoretical understandings and practical methodologies in the field of modern dance.

1. Introduction to Cognitive Modes in Dance

1.1. The Evolution of Modern Dance Improvisation

Modern dance, emerging as a reaction to the rigid structures of classical ballet, embraces individuality, freedom, and exploration. Improvisation, as one of its central elements, challenges dancers to create spontaneously while responding to internal impulses and external stimuli. As a practice, it fosters creativity and self-expression, often relying on the dancer's ability to access both intuitive and ideal thinking.

The integration of cognitive modes into dance improvisation has become increasingly significant in recent decades. With the influence of pioneers such as Isadora Duncan, whose work emphasized natural movement, and later figures like Merce Cunningham, who explored chance-based choreography, the boundaries of improvisation have expanded dramatically. However, a systematic understanding of the

cognitive mechanisms behind improvisation remains underdeveloped. This chapter sets the stage for exploring intuitive and ideal thinking as complementary yet distinct modes of cognition that influence improvisation in modern dance.

1.2. Defining Intuitive and Ideal Thinking

Intuitive thinking refers to a spontaneous, non-linear form of cognition that arises from immediate perception or bodily awareness. Rooted in theories of embodied cognition, intuition bypasses rational deliberation, allowing dancers to make instantaneous decisions based on internalized knowledge and instincts. Psychologists such as Daniel Kahneman have categorized intuitive thinking as "System 1," characterized by its speed and effortlessness. In dance, this manifests as the capacity to respond reflexively to stimuli, whether auditory, visual, or kinesthetic.

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Ideal thinking, on the other hand, represents a deliberate, aspirational approach. It involves envisioning creative goals and structuring movements to achieve a desired aesthetic or conceptual outcome. This form of cognition aligns with “System 2” thinking, which is more analytical and intentional. Ideal thinking in dance can be seen in the meticulous crafting of a performance, where each movement serves a pre-conceived narrative or theme.

1.3. Theoretical Foundations of Cognitive Modes in Art

The interplay between intuitive and ideal thinking can be understood through frameworks from philosophy, psychology, and education. John Dewey’s concept of “experience” underscores the dynamic interaction between spontaneity and reflection in creative practices. Similarly, Donald Schön’s “reflective practice” emphasizes the iterative process of action and thought, which resonates with the dual modes of cognition in dance.

From a psychological perspective, Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of “flow” provides insights into the optimal state of improvisation, where intuition and ideals converge. In a state of flow, dancers are fully immersed in the present moment, drawing on intuitive responses while simultaneously navigating a structured framework. This balance is crucial in improvisational practice, as it enables dancers to maintain both freedom and coherence in their movements.

1.4. Significance for Modern Dance Pedagogy

Understanding the cognitive underpinnings of improvisation has profound implications for modern dance pedagogy. Training programs that emphasize intuitive thinking often involve exercises in sensory awareness, such as guided imagery or movement improvisation with open-ended prompts. Conversely, ideal thinking is cultivated through choreographic tasks that require planning, editing, and refinement.

By integrating both modes, educators can develop dancers who are not only technically proficient but also creatively versatile. This dual approach aligns with contemporary demands in the performing arts, where dancers are expected to excel in both structured and spontaneous settings. Furthermore, fostering an awareness of these cognitive processes empowers dancers to navigate the complexities of modern dance, from studio rehearsals to live performances.

1.5. Objectives of the Study

This paper aims to bridge theoretical concepts with practical applications in modern dance improvisation. Specifically, it seeks to:

- 1) Analyze the distinct roles of intuitive and ideal thinking in improvisational contexts.
- 2) Investigate how these cognitive modes influence the creative process and performance outcomes.
- 3) Propose strategies for integrating intuitive and ideal approaches in dance training and choreography.

By addressing these objectives, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the cognitive dimensions of modern dance, offering valuable insights for dancers, choreographers, and educators alike.

2. The Role of Intuition in Modern Dance Improvisation

2.1. Understanding Intuition in the Context of Dance

Intuition, often described as an instinctive and immediate understanding, plays a foundational role in modern dance improvisation. Unlike structured choreography, improvisation requires dancers to rely on their innate responses to stimuli, whether they arise from internal sensations or external cues like music, space, or other dancers. In this context, intuition becomes a cognitive and somatic process, shaped by the dancer’s accumulated experiences, training, and embodied knowledge.

In dance, intuition operates through what Maxine Sheets-Johnstone terms “the primacy of movement,” emphasizing how bodily motion itself becomes a form of thought. This aligns with theories of embodied cognition, which argue that physical actions and sensory experiences are central to human understanding. For dancers, this means that intuitive decisions emerge from a deep integration of mind and body, bypassing conscious deliberation to create spontaneous and authentic movement.

2.2. Developing Intuitive Thinking in Dance Training

Cultivating intuition in modern dance requires deliberate pedagogical strategies. Training methods often focus on enhancing bodily awareness and responsiveness to external stimuli. For instance, exercises in contact improvisation encourage dancers to

tune into physical connections with partners, fostering a heightened sensitivity to weight, momentum, and touch. Similarly, sensory-based practices, such as responding to visual or auditory cues, help dancers develop an instinctive approach to movement generation.

Guided improvisation sessions, where dancers are prompted to explore specific themes or emotional states, further refine intuitive skills. These exercises often emphasize exploration over evaluation, allowing dancers to move freely without the constraints of premeditated outcomes. As Merce Cunningham famously noted, “The only way to do it is to do it,” underscoring the importance of experiential learning in building intuitive capacities.

2.3. The Influence of Intuition on Improvisational Performance

During improvisational performances, intuition allows dancers to navigate unpredictability with confidence and creativity. Whether responding to unexpected shifts in music, lighting, or interactions with fellow performers, intuitive thinking enables dancers to remain fully present in the moment. This presence is critical in maintaining the fluidity and authenticity that characterize compelling improvisation.

Moreover, intuition supports the ability to “read” and adapt to the dynamics of the performance environment. For example, in group improvisations, dancers often rely on intuitive cues to synchronize movements or create contrasts, achieving a sense of cohesion without explicit communication. This dynamic interplay exemplifies the collaborative potential of intuition in dance.

2.4. Challenges and Limitations of Intuition in Dance

While intuition is a powerful tool, it is not without its challenges. Over-reliance on intuitive thinking can lead to repetitive or superficial movement choices, limiting the depth and variety of improvisation. This issue often arises when dancers default to familiar patterns rather than exploring new possibilities. Additionally, intuition can be influenced by external factors such as stress, fatigue, or performance anxiety, which may hinder a dancer’s ability to access their instinctive responses.

Furthermore, the subjective nature of intuition can make it difficult to evaluate or articulate. For educators and choreographers, this poses a challenge in providing constructive feedback or guiding dancers in

their improvisational practice. Balancing intuition with analytical reflection is therefore essential in addressing these limitations.

2.5. Case Studies of Intuition in Modern Dance

To illustrate the role of intuition in modern dance, this section examines two case studies of renowned choreographers who have emphasized intuitive approaches in their work:

- 1) Merce Cunningham: Cunningham’s use of chance operations in choreography highlights the role of intuition in responding to unpredictability. By introducing random elements into his creative process, Cunningham challenged dancers to rely on their instincts to navigate the resulting structures.
- 2) Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker: Known for her exploration of music and movement, De Keersmaeker often incorporates improvisation into her rehearsals, encouraging dancers to engage intuitively with complex musical scores. This approach not only enhances their interpretive skills but also fosters a deep connection between sound and motion.

2.6. Implications for Improvisational Practice

Understanding and cultivating intuition in dance improvisation has significant implications for both performers and educators. For dancers, it enhances their ability to respond creatively and authentically in diverse contexts. For educators, it highlights the importance of designing training methods that prioritize experiential learning and sensory awareness.

By recognizing intuition as a core component of improvisation, this chapter establishes a foundation for exploring its counterpart—ideal thinking—in the next section. Together, these cognitive modes offer complementary perspectives on the creative process, enriching our understanding of modern dance improvisation.

3. Ideal Thinking: Aspirations in Dance Creation

3.1. Defining Ideal Thinking in Dance

Ideal thinking refers to the cognitive process of envisioning goals, crafting long-term plans, and striving toward specific aspirations. In modern dance improvisation, ideal thinking manifests as the deliberate shaping of movement to align with artistic concepts or narratives. While intuition relies on spontaneity, ideal thinking introduces a structured framework, balancing

immediate impulses with overarching creative objectives.

This cognitive approach often involves mental rehearsal, visualization, and the refinement of choreographic ideas. Ideal thinking is deeply rooted in the human capacity to imagine future possibilities and work toward them, aligning with theories of creativity and goal-setting in psychology. In the context of dance, it enables choreographers and dancers to articulate their artistic visions, transforming abstract ideas into tangible expressions.

3.2. Historical Context: Ideal Thinking in Modern Dance

Modern dance has long been a medium for expressing ideals, whether personal, social, or philosophical. Pioneers like Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey exemplified the use of ideal thinking in their work, crafting dances that reflected their aspirations for emotional depth and cultural commentary.

- 1) Martha Graham: Graham's choreographic process often began with a conceptual or emotional ideal, such as exploring themes of human struggle or mythology. Her iconic work *Appalachian Spring* demonstrates how a clear artistic vision guides the selection of movement, music, and staging to convey a narrative of optimism and resilience.
- 2) Alvin Ailey: Ailey's *Revelations*, a celebration of African American heritage, embodies the power of ideal thinking in choreographic creation. His ability to translate cultural ideals into movement inspired generations of dancers to view choreography as a platform for storytelling and advocacy.

These examples highlight how ideal thinking allows choreographers to imbue their work with purpose and meaning, creating dances that resonate on both personal and societal levels.

3.3. Practical Applications of Ideal Thinking in Improvisation

While often associated with choreography, ideal thinking also plays a crucial role in improvisation. Dancers may use ideal thinking to structure their movements around specific themes, emotions, or spatial designs, creating coherence within the spontaneous act of improvising. For example:

- 1) Theme-Based Improvisation: Dancers may begin with a conceptual prompt, such as "exploring the

idea of freedom." This provides a guiding framework that shapes their movement choices, blending intuition with deliberate intent.

- 2) Score-Based Improvisation: In this approach, dancers follow pre-defined rules or structures, such as repeating a movement motif or interacting with specific spatial boundaries. These scores encourage dancers to use ideal thinking to navigate within constraints while maintaining spontaneity.
- 3) Emotional Mapping: Dancers may align their movements with a desired emotional trajectory, using ideal thinking to sustain or transition between emotional states. This technique enhances the expressive depth of improvisation, allowing performers to communicate complex narratives.

3.4. Benefits of Ideal Thinking in Dance

Ideal thinking offers several benefits for dancers and choreographers, particularly in its capacity to:

- 1) Foster Creativity: By envisioning possibilities, dancers can push beyond habitual patterns and explore new movement vocabularies.
- 2) Enhance Focus: Ideal thinking provides a sense of direction, helping dancers maintain coherence in their improvisational practice.
- 3) Develop Artistic Identity: Through goal-setting and reflection, dancers can cultivate a unique artistic voice that reflects their ideals and aspirations.

These benefits underscore the importance of integrating ideal thinking into dance training and creative processes, particularly as a complement to intuitive approaches.

3.5. Challenges and Limitations of Ideal Thinking

Despite its advantages, ideal thinking presents certain challenges, particularly in the context of improvisation. Overemphasis on planning or perfectionism can stifle spontaneity, leading to rigid or overly calculated movements. This is particularly problematic in improvisation, where the essence lies in adaptability and fluidity.

Additionally, ideal thinking may create performance anxiety, as dancers strive to meet self-imposed or external expectations. Balancing ideal aspirations with the freedom to explore is therefore essential in maintaining a dynamic and engaging improvisational practice.

3.6. Case Studies of Ideal Thinking in Dance Practice

To further illustrate the role of ideal thinking, this section examines two contemporary choreographers who successfully incorporate this cognitive approach:

- 1) Pina Bausch: Bausch's Tanztheater exemplifies ideal thinking in its fusion of narrative, emotion, and movement. Her rehearsals often involved conceptual prompts that encouraged dancers to reflect on personal experiences, translating them into choreographic material aligned with her overarching vision.
- 2) William Forsythe: Forsythe's use of improvisation technologies reflects the integration of ideal thinking into dance. By developing structured improvisational tools, such as spatial grids or movement sequences, Forsythe created a framework for dancers to explore possibilities while adhering to his artistic ideals.

3.7. Ideal Thinking in Modern Dance Pedagogy

In dance education, ideal thinking can be cultivated through exercises that emphasize goal-setting, critical analysis, and creative problem-solving. For instance, students may be tasked with developing short improvisational pieces based on specific themes or constraints, encouraging them to balance spontaneity with deliberate intent.

By fostering an awareness of both intuitive and ideal thinking, educators can equip dancers with the cognitive tools needed to excel in diverse creative contexts. This dual approach not only enhances improvisational skills but also prepares dancers to navigate the complexities of contemporary choreography.

3.8. Conclusion

Ideal thinking enriches modern dance improvisation by providing structure, purpose, and depth to the creative process. While it contrasts with the spontaneity of intuitive thinking, the two modes are inherently complementary, offering dancers a holistic approach to artistic exploration. In the next chapter, we will explore how these cognitive modes can be integrated, creating a dynamic interplay that enhances the practice of improvisation.

4. Integration of Intuitive and Ideal Thinking

4.1. The Complementary Nature of Intuition and Ideals

Modern dance improvisation thrives on a delicate balance between intuition and ideal thinking. While intuition provides the immediacy and responsiveness necessary for spontaneous creativity, ideal thinking offers a sense of direction and purpose. Together, these cognitive modes create a dynamic interplay, enabling dancers to navigate the unpredictable nature of improvisation while maintaining coherence and artistic integrity.

This integration mirrors the dual processes described in cognitive psychology, where "System 1" (intuition) operates in parallel with "System 2" (deliberation). In the context of dance, this means that dancers are constantly shifting between instinctive movement and deliberate choices, responding to the moment while aligning with overarching artistic goals. The ability to harmonize these modes is a hallmark of skilled improvisers, allowing them to create performances that are both spontaneous and meaningful.

4.2. Theoretical Perspectives on Integration

The integration of intuitive and ideal thinking can be understood through several theoretical frameworks:

- 1) Donald Schön's Reflective Practice: Schön's concept of "reflection-in-action" describes how practitioners engage in a constant dialogue between doing and thinking. In dance, this translates to the ability to adapt movements in real time, informed by both intuitive responses and ideal aspirations.
- 2) Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory: Flow, a state of optimal engagement, occurs when challenges and skills are in balance. In dance improvisation, this balance is achieved by integrating the spontaneity of intuition with the guidance of ideals, enabling dancers to remain fully immersed in the creative process.
- 3) Gestalt Theory in Art: Gestalt principles emphasize the perception of wholes over individual parts. Similarly, the integration of intuition and ideals allows dancers to create cohesive performances, where individual movements contribute to a larger artistic vision.

4.3. Strategies for Integrating Intuition and Ideals in Practice

Achieving a seamless integration of intuitive and ideal thinking requires deliberate practice and peda-

gical approaches. Below are key strategies for fostering this integration in dance training and improvisational practice:

- 1) **Structured Improvisation:** Structured improvisation involves setting constraints or frameworks that guide dancers' movements while leaving room for spontaneity. For example, dancers might improvise within a spatial grid or follow a specific rhythm, combining intuitive exploration with adherence to a predefined structure.
- 2) **Feedback Loops:** Encouraging dancers to reflect on their improvisations fosters a deeper awareness of their cognitive processes. Through video analysis or peer feedback, dancers can identify how their intuitive movements align with their ideal goals, refining their ability to integrate the two.
- 3) **Thematic Exploration:** Assigning thematic prompts—such as “balance and imbalance” or “chaos and order”—provides dancers with an ideal framework to guide their improvisation. These themes encourage dancers to experiment intuitively while staying connected to a central concept.
- 4) **Collaborative Improvisation:** Working in groups enhances the interplay between intuition and ideals, as dancers must respond instinctively to each other while contributing to a collective vision. This collaborative dynamic fosters adaptability and coherence, key elements of integrated thinking.

4.4. Case Studies of Integrated Thinking in Modern Dance

To illustrate the practical application of integrating intuitive and ideal thinking, this section examines two examples from contemporary dance:

- 1) **Ohad Naharin's Gaga Movement Language:** Naharin's Gaga technique exemplifies the integration of intuition and ideals. Dancers are encouraged to explore their physical sensations intuitively, while simultaneously engaging with specific instructions or imagery provided by the teacher. This dual focus allows for both spontaneous discovery and intentional refinement.
- 2) **Trisha Brown's Improvisational Choreography:** Trisha Brown's works often blur the lines between improvisation and choreography. Her use of “accumulation” techniques, where movements are added sequentially, combines the fluidity of intuition with the structure of ideal thinking. This ap-

proach results in dances that are both organic and meticulously crafted.

4.5. The Role of Educators in Facilitating Integration

Dance educators play a crucial role in helping students navigate the intersection of intuitive and ideal thinking. Effective teaching methods include:

- 1) **Balancing Freedom and Guidance:** Allowing students to experiment freely while providing constructive feedback encourages them to develop their intuitive skills within an ideal framework.
- 2) **Encouraging Risk-Taking:** Creating a supportive environment where dancers feel safe to take risks fosters the confidence needed to explore new movement possibilities.
- 3) **Promoting Reflective Practice:** Incorporating moments of reflection into training sessions helps dancers articulate their creative processes, deepening their understanding of how intuition and ideals interact.

4.6. Benefits of Integration in Dance Improvisation

The integration of intuitive and ideal thinking offers several benefits for dancers and choreographers:

- 1) **Enhanced Creativity:** Combining spontaneity with structure allows dancers to generate innovative movement ideas while maintaining coherence.
- 2) **Greater Adaptability:** Integrated thinking equips dancers to respond effectively to the dynamic demands of live performances.
- 3) **Improved Communication:** In collaborative settings, the ability to balance intuition and ideals fosters clearer and more effective communication among dancers.

4.7. Challenges and Potential Solutions

Despite its advantages, the integration of intuitive and ideal thinking is not without challenges. For some dancers, the tension between spontaneity and structure can feel overwhelming, leading to creative blocks or performance anxiety. To address these challenges, educators and choreographers can:

- 1) **Gradually increase the complexity of improvisational tasks,** allowing dancers to build confidence over time.

- 2) Encourage open dialogue about the creative process, normalizing the struggles associated with integration.
- 3) Use mindfulness techniques to help dancers remain present and focused during improvisation.

4.8. Conclusion

The integration of intuitive and ideal thinking represents a powerful approach to modern dance improvisation, fostering creativity, adaptability, and artistic depth. By harmonizing these cognitive modes, dancers can navigate the complexities of improvisation with both spontaneity and purpose. This chapter sets the stage for the concluding discussion, which will explore the broader implications of this integration for modern dance pedagogy and practice.

5. Implications and Future Directions

5.1. Theoretical Contributions To Dance Studies

The exploration of intuitive and ideal thinking in modern dance improvisation contributes to a deeper understanding of the cognitive processes underlying creativity in dance. This dual-mode framework highlights the dynamic interplay between spontaneity and deliberation, offering a new lens for analyzing improvisational practices. It bridges gaps in existing research by integrating concepts from cognitive psychology, philosophy, and dance pedagogy.

The integration of intuitive and ideal thinking also expands the theoretical discourse on embodiment. By emphasizing the role of bodily awareness and intentionality, this study reinforces the idea that the body is not merely a vessel for movement but an active participant in cognition. This perspective aligns with the growing interest in embodied cognition across disciplines, positioning dance as a valuable site for interdisciplinary inquiry.

5.2. Practical Implications for Dance Pedagogy

The findings of this study have significant implications for dance education and training. By fostering both intuitive and ideal thinking, educators can equip dancers with the cognitive flexibility needed to excel in contemporary dance practices. Key pedagogical strategies include:

- 1) **Balanced Curriculum Design:** Dance programs should integrate exercises that develop intuitive responsiveness (e.g., sensory-based improvisation) alongside tasks that encourage deliberate planning (e.g., thematic choreography).

- 2) **Encouraging Reflection:** Providing opportunities for dancers to reflect on their creative processes helps them understand how intuition and ideals influence their practice. Reflection can take the form of journaling, group discussions, or video analysis.
- 3) **Promoting Collaboration:** Collaborative improvisation exercises enhance the ability to integrate intuition and ideals in real-time, fostering teamwork and mutual understanding among dancers.

Incorporating these strategies into dance pedagogy prepares students to navigate the complexities of both improvisation and choreography, empowering them to become more versatile and self-aware artists.

5.3. Implications for Choreography and Performance

For choreographers, understanding the balance between intuitive and ideal thinking can inform the creative process, from concept development to final performance. Choreographers who embrace this integration can create works that are both innovative and coherent, blending spontaneity with intentionality. Examples include:

- 1) **Rehearsal Techniques:** Choreographers can use structured improvisation as a tool for generating material, allowing dancers to explore intuitive movement within a defined framework.
- 2) **Performance Adaptability:** Encouraging performers to draw on both intuition and ideals during live performances enhances their ability to respond to unforeseen circumstances, such as changes in music or audience dynamics.

These practices not only enrich the creative process but also elevate the quality and depth of performances, making them more engaging and impactful for audiences.

5.4. Challenges in Bridging Intuition and Ideals

Despite its benefits, integrating intuitive and ideal thinking in dance improvisation presents challenges. For instance:

- 1) **Cognitive Overload:** Balancing spontaneity with deliberate planning can be mentally taxing, particularly for novice dancers.
- 2) **Tension Between Modes:** Dancers may struggle to reconcile the immediacy of intuition with the deliberation of ideal thinking.

eration required for ideal thinking, leading to creative conflicts.

To address these challenges, educators and choreographers can adopt strategies such as breaking down complex tasks into manageable steps or using mindfulness techniques to help dancers stay present during improvisation. These approaches ensure that the integration of cognitive modes enhances rather than hinders the creative process.

5.5. Future Research Directions

This study opens several avenues for future research in dance and cognition. Potential directions include:

- 1) Empirical Studies: Conducting experimental research to measure the impact of intuitive and ideal thinking on improvisational performance. For example, using motion capture technology to analyze how these modes influence movement quality and dynamics.
- 2) Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Partnering with psychologists and neuroscientists to explore the neural correlates of intuitive and ideal thinking in dancers. This research could shed light on how the brain processes movement decisions in real time.
- 3) Cultural Perspectives: Investigating how cultural contexts shape the interplay between intuition and ideals in dance. Different dance traditions may prioritize one mode over the other, offering valuable insights into the diversity of improvisational practices.

These directions not only deepen our understanding of cognitive processes in dance but also contribute to the broader field of creativity research.

5.6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that intuitive and ideal thinking are integral to modern dance improvisation, offering complementary approaches to creativity. While intuition enables dancers to respond spontaneously to stimuli, ideal thinking provides a framework for shaping their movements into meaningful expressions. Together, these modes of cognition enrich the practice of improvisation, enhancing its depth, versatility, and impact.

By exploring the theoretical and practical implications of this integration, this research highlights the

value of cognitive diversity in dance. For educators, choreographers, and performers, embracing both intuition and ideals offers a pathway to greater artistic growth and innovation. As modern dance continues to evolve, the interplay between these cognitive modes will remain a vital source of inspiration and exploration.

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