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## Incomplete mimesis, or when Indian dance started to narrate stories

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**Abstract:** It has become customary to refer to traditional Indian performance genres as “dance-theatre” in cases where they patently display techniques of narration or storytelling, carried out through the codified and controlled use of the body in time with the music of instruments and sung lyrics. The Indic vocabulary dedicates a specific term, *nṛtya*, to those forms in which the narrative element clearly prevails over the abstract dance movements—where gestures and facial expressions are used to communicate emotions but the dialogues or poetic lines are assigned to a singer and not recited by the actor/dancer. However, if we look at the way in which Sanskrit theoreticians have divided the spectacular object into specific genres, things get fuzzy. The ancient theory of Indian theatre (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, 2nd century BC–4th century AD?), in fact, acknowledges only a binary distinction between “theatre” (*nāṭya*)—the conjunction of a dramatic text and its representation on stage—and “dance” (*nṛtta*)—movements set to a rhythm with the sole aim of producing beauty and devoid of a narrative-cum-representational function. From this perspective, the recognition of a narrative capacity in dance looks more like the fruit of great theoretical effort rather than a natural development, which has posed a number of significant challenges to literary critics, who must painstakingly negotiate between the constantly evolving genres of performance, the binding categories reiterated in the *śāstras* (authoritative treatises), and the newly developed aesthetic theories of drama, requiring an ever more specialized concept of dramatic mimesis. Apart from giving an overview of how the performance genres are divided and classified in the Sanskrit treatises, with an explanation of the relevant vocabulary, this article will focus on some of the theoretical problems that emerge when dance starts to narrate stories, in particular in the work of Abhinavagupta, a prominent Kashmirian philosopher writing at the turn of the first millennium.

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## 1 Introduction: A question of categories

For more than two millennia, theorists of Indian dramaturgy and dance have strived to classify the spectacular object, devising multiple categories and sub-categories that aim at drawing neat boundaries on the multifarious landscape of the performing arts. Not so long ago, I was presenting a paper at a conference on the historical development of the use of hand gestures in storytelling in Indian theatre, as we can reconstruct it from technical treatises on the performing arts. In this paper, I traced the development of *hasta-abhinaya* (“acting with the hands”) from a stylized gesticulation accompanying the dialogues of an actor to its almost utter takeover of the spoken word, with specialized gestures to render even the most abstract features of verbal language, such as verbal moods and nominal cases, as can be witnessed in today’s Kutiyattam theatre.<sup>1</sup> At the end of my talk, a scholar in the audience acquainted with Keralan forms of performance raised his hand and commented on the improper use of the category “theatre” for Kutiyattam, since, as my interlocutor continued, this should be rather conceived as a form of dance. Had I been misleading my audience by using Western categories such as “theatre,” or “dance,” to describe a phenomenon culturally and socially embedded in a different value system? Or was it the way I was thinking about the categories of performance, which I had been reading about in the Sanskrit treatises, that was inappropriate when applied to the reality of a living object?

First of all, I would like to use this anecdote to reflect on the nature of the spectacular object in India, to describe the complexity of which a terminology including only the two categories of theatre and dance is inevitably doomed to failure. Moreover, I would like to focus on the fluidity of the categories themselves, and on how different interlocutors may subsume different things under a single label or mobilize different categories to talk about one and the same object. Lastly, this story should make us aware that, however thoroughly a system of thought tries to grasp a living object such as performance, discrepancies between theory and practices will always be the rule, especially when one looks at the dynamics of the spectacular object as embedded in a cultural, social, ritual, and aesthetic context. The case of India is particularly emblematic with respect to this last point.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On the proliferation and specialization of hand gestures in Kutiyattam, see Szily 1998.

<sup>2</sup> I elaborate on the problematic issue of the relationship between theories and practices in Indian dance and dramatic literature in greater detail in Ganser 2011 and Ganser forthcoming b.

On the one hand, in India, theatre became the object of a body of expert knowledge quite early on, worthy of a scientific treatise in Sanskrit expounding its rules and codifying its techniques. The first treatise of such kind is the celebrated *Nāṭyaśāstra* (“Treatise on Theatre”) of Bharata, dated approximately between the second century BC and the fourth century AD, but possibly preceded by other types of textual codifications, such as the lost *Naṭasūtras* (“Aphorisms for Actors”), mentioned by the grammarian Pāṇini as early as the fifth century BC. This type of technical literature was prolific in the first millennium—although most of the texts of this period are no longer extant—and continued into the second millennium with treatises on theatre, dance, and music, subjects that are treated both independently and in combination with each other, as complex intermedial arts.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, a wide range of performance arts populate the landscape of the Indian subcontinent today, some of which, the so-called “classical” forms, still entertain some kind of relationship with the written tradition. This is achieved in various ways: by creatively adapting one’s practice to the blueprints of the treatises, by reconstructing old practices based on the indications of the texts, or merely symbolically, by forging imaginary links with the high tradition of Sanskrit scientific writing on performance.<sup>4</sup> This state of affairs, combined with modern heritage policies, might give the impression of a stunningly stale continuity in the performance traditions of South Asia, unthinkable in other cultural configurations. However, such continuity exists mainly on the surface, hiding as it does the moments of rupture, revival, renaissance, and oblivion of performance forms, as well as the constant debates and negotiations taking place between the custodians of the textual tradition and the exponents of the living arts.

The practice of narrating stories through dance is at home in India: the art of Kathakali narrates the great epics of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, combining the stories—rendered by the singers in the local language, Malayalam, and accompanied by live instrumentation—with pantomime acting, executed by one or more characters through a complex code of hand gestures, bodily movements, and facial expressions, enhanced by painted masks and grand costumes.<sup>5</sup> Bharatanatyam, a dance form from Tamil Nadu, specializes in the staging of the Padams (poems to be sung and danced) composed in the main literary languages of South India, where a solo dancer narrates

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<sup>3</sup> The best overview of the literature on performance in India, containing a chronologically ordered description of the available treatises and the major developments of the genre, is Bose 2007 [1991]. For a critical approach to the historical value of such literature for the study of performance in India, see Ganser 2011.

<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon, by which new practices derive their status of “classical,” as opposed to “folk,” has been variously designated as the textualization and Sanskritization of Indian dance, on which see, e.g., Meduri 2005; Peterson/Soneji 2008: 13; Ganser 2011, 2018, and forthcoming b.

<sup>5</sup> On the art of Kathakali and its repertoire, see, e.g., Zarrilli 2000.

through gestures and facial mimicry the heavenly exploits and worldly affairs of gods and kings, following the narrative line of the poems rendered by a vocalist and the complex rhythms and melodic patterns played by the live orchestra.<sup>6</sup> Using a similar format, Odissi specializes in a corpus of devotional and love poems, mainly in the Oriya language or Sanskrit, Jayadeva's *Gītagovinda* foremost among them all. This twelfth-century poem, whose oldest manuscripts already contain musical notation, narrates in ornate Sanskrit verses the amorous pastimes of the god Krishna and his favorite consort Radha and, beside Odissi, is performed in an array of regional variations.<sup>7</sup> Even Kutiyattam is regarded by many as dance or dance-drama: whereas in the final nights, an act of a Sanskrit play is recited by multiple characters present simultaneously on stage, most of its performance cycle—lasting up to 41 nights in some exceptional cases—consists of a silent pantomime in which a single actor interprets a long retrospective in the guise of a storyteller. In this phase, he alone narrates the background of the story, up to the point where it reaches the beginning of the chosen act of a Sanskrit play.<sup>8</sup> Besides the traditional repertoire, drawing largely on the Indian epics, some experimentation has also been attempted—among which figure a Kathakali rendition of King Lear<sup>9</sup> and a Kutiyattam rendition of Macbeth, as well as the various adaptations of Christian themes in Bharatanatyam<sup>10</sup>—which testifies to the great versatility and narrative potential of the gestural code and norms that shape and regulate such artistic forms.

These sparse examples—not to mention the many so-called “folk” forms, such as Yakṣagāna, Rāmlilā, etc., that draw their themes from the epics and other popular repertoires—may suffice to show that in India, dance is by and large used as a medium for narrating stories. Pure or abstract dance, on the other hand, is also part of the repertoire of some of these forms—Bharatanatyam, Odissi, and Kathak, for instance—but it is never the main or sole component in a dance recital.<sup>11</sup> Apart from the capacity to follow the most intricate rhythm, deliver symmetrical lines, and execute the gestures with precision, the skill of an Indian performer will be

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**6** On Bharatanatyam, see, e.g., the collection of articles in the volume edited by Soneji (2010).

**7** For a bibliography on the performance of the *Gītagovinda* in India, see Ganser forthcoming b.

**8** The various phases of a Kutiyattam performance and the differences in their acting and narrative strategies have been carefully analyzed in Johan 2014. Apart from using the mimetic potential of gestures and bodily movement to convey narrative content, Kutiyattam sometimes employs the Vidūṣaka, the Malayalam-speaking jester, although his art of storytelling is purely a verbal one and will therefore be disregarded in the present paper. On Kutiyattam and its female counterpart Nangyar-kuttu, see also Moser 2008.

**9** See Zarrilli 2000: 177–195.

**10** See, e.g., Mortillaro 2017.

**11** For an example of the different articulation of pure and narrative dance in a recital of Bharatanatyam and Kathak, see Bansat-Boudon 1994: 213.

judged according to his capacity to convey the narrative content in a highly expressive way, so as to charm the audience and sympathetically enthrall them by the emotions depicted. To designate this kind of storytelling through dance, for which the modern English vocabulary would mostly use newly coined terms such as “dance-theatre,” “dance-drama,” or “dramatic dance,” the Indian vocabulary possesses the very useful term *nṛtya* (“mimetic dance”; here “narrative dance”), which often occurs as the middle term in a triad containing *nāṭya* (“drama”) and *nṛtta* (“pure dance”) at its two extremes.<sup>12</sup> These three terms are nowadays a marker of the performance arts considered as classical—so much so that almost every performer or dance critic currently employs them to talk about aspects of performances that combine different media. In the technical texts, however, these terms do not bear such clear-cut meanings, as we shall see, as they sometimes indicate different media used in a single performance art, and other times refer to distinct and circumscribed genres of performance. Moreover, this nicely shaped triad, so useful in tackling Indian performative arts with its middle term designating narrative, mimetic, or dramatic dance, comes to overlap with and substitute an older dyad, in which only the opposite terms *nāṭya* (“theatre”)—the conjunction of a dramatic text and its stage representation—and *nṛtta* (“dance”)—pure movement set to a rhythm and tempo with the sole aim of producing beauty and devoid of a narrative function—are known, as is the case in the seminal text on dramatic art, the abovementioned *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata.<sup>13</sup>

From a textual perspective, the recognition of a narrative capacity in dance looks more like the fruit of theoretical effort rather than a natural development

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**12** The translation of these three terms is borrowed from Vatsyayan 1968, and has become quite standard among contemporary exponents of the various forms of classical dance. Here the term “narrative” dance is preferred to “mimetic,” “dramatic,” or “representational” dance, in line with the working definition of narrative adopted by Gianvittorio-Ungar/Schlapbach (forthcoming): “we speak of narrative when contents such as experiences, actions, and interactions of characters are represented, and when the representation invites us to feel mentally and emotionally driven into the storyworld.” According to Gianvittorio-Ungar/Schlapbach, such a terminological variety “results from different scholarly traditions as well as from the complex level of representation of which dance is capable.” On modern approaches to “narrative” and “narrativity” applied to classical studies, with a new focus on experience and the cognitive dimension of ancient narrative, which has opened the door to studies on narrative media other than literature, see Grethlein et. al. 2019.

**13** As Bansat-Boudon (1994: 204–205) puts it: “c’est sans doute assez tôt que l’opposition binaire *nāṭya* / *nṛtta* a été transformée en une opposition ternaire *nāṭya* / *nṛtya* / *nṛtta*, destinée à devenir très rapidement pour les Indiens la seule façon d’appréhender l’objet spectaculaire dans sa totalité. Mais, au fil des siècles et des ouvrages traitant de théâtre, se produiront des glissements d’une catégorie à l’autre et des recouvrements partiels de champs sémantiques qui contribueront à créer, puis à installer, une certaine confusion des termes et des notions.”

dictated by the reality of the spectacular object. As we shall see, the introduction of the new category of *nṛtya* has posed a number of significant challenges to Indian literary critics, who must painstakingly negotiate between the constantly evolving genres of performance, the binding categories reiterated by the *śāstras* (authoritative treatises, technical texts), and the newly developed aesthetic theories of drama, requiring an ever more specialized concept of dramatic mimesis.<sup>14</sup> Starting with an overview of the categories in which the spectacular object—or the “spectacular nebulous,” as L. Bansat-Boudon (1994: 197) calls it—has been divided and classified in the Sanskrit texts, with an explanation of the relevant vocabulary, this paper will focus on some of the theoretical problems that emerged in the Sanskrit texts when dance began to narrate stories. Particular attention will be given to the work of Abhinavagupta, a prominent Kashmirian philosopher writing at the turn of the first millennium. To his name is credited the only extant and possibly last commentary on the totality of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. This grand commentary, called the *Abhinavabhāratī*, was written at a time when new forms of performance, clearly different from Sanskrit drama, became a constant feature in the landscape of performance and began to claim their place in the technical treatises. As I will argue, Abhinavagupta’s reluctance to use the already available category of *nṛtya* for these new forms on the verge of theatre and dance has much to do with his redefinition of the concept of dramatic mimesis and acting (*abhinaya*) in line with his own aesthetic theory—and is not merely a reflex of his declared allegiance to the letter of the text he was commenting on, i.e., the celebrated *Nāṭyaśāstra*, as repeatedly pointed out in previous studies.<sup>15</sup> This, to my mind, allows us to explain his tendency to classify the new performance genres as forms of dance rather than theatre. This paper will thus offer a comparative perspective on how Indian authors have thought about the singularity of the act of narrating stories through dance—an act that, while so obvious in retrospect, engendered a complex rethinking of dance and its frontiers.

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**14** I understand dramatic mimesis as the capacity of acting (*abhinaya*) to represent the inner and outer lives of characters in a particularly vivid, lifelike manner, which, as I argue below, is different from dance mimesis, or the function of *abhinaya* within it. This accords with the sense of representation-cum-expression ascribed to mimesis in antiquity, differently from its negative eighteenth-century connotation of “copy,” “replica,” or even “counterfeit.” See Halliwell 2002: 13–14.

**15** For studies on the genres of Indian performance and discussion of their categorization in the Sanskrit treatises, the reader can refer to Mankad 1936; Varma 1957; Warder 1972: 137–168; Raghavan 1978: 517–555 and 1993: 176–200; Bansat-Boudon 1994; and Bose 2007 [1991]: 154–193. For a critical overview, see Ganser forthcoming a.

## 2 Dance as theatre's ancillary in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*

The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, as its name indicates (“Treatise on Theatre”), is a treatise that deals with *nāṭya* (theatre, or drama) in 36 chapters; it was requested by the gods as an antidote to the moral degradation of society, “an object of diversion to be seen and to be heard,”<sup>16</sup> appealing to all and instructive to all. This theatre appears as a summa of different knowledges and savoir faire, an intermedial art combining a text and its recitation and appropriating for its own ends other art forms such as vocal music, instrumental music, and dance, which become its ancillaries. In the first chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the definition of theatre is laid out in the following terms: “That nature proper to ordinary experience, associated with pleasure and pain, is called theatre (*nāṭya*) when it is conveyed through the registers of acting (*abhinaya*) such as the bodily and the others.”<sup>17</sup> Now, besides stressing its primary emotional focus, this definition also points out the specificity of theatre as a mode of narration, namely its conveying its own content through dramatic representation, identified here with the four registers of acting, *abhinaya* in Sanskrit.

The word *abhinaya* sometimes refers to acting in general, i.e., to the way of communicating the meanings of the poetic text that is specific to stage performance. This is what I designate as “dramatic representation” (sometimes also expressed by the action noun *abhinayana*), stressing its communicative function as a dynamic process connecting performers and audiences. Sometimes it refers to the registers of acting in their singularity, i.e., the fourfold *abhinaya* whose instruments are the voice, the body, the mind, and costume. There are thus four types of acting, which are the vocal (*vācīkābhīnaya*), the bodily (*āṅgīkābhīnaya*), the psychophysical (*sāttvikābhīnaya*), and the ornamental acting (*āhāryābhīnaya*). The word *abhinaya* is also used to refer to the thing that is enacted or represented on stage, the object of representation. Here I will focus especially on the sense of *abhinaya* as the communicative function proper to theatre, which to me seems to be central to Bharata's etymological explanation of *abhinaya*, given at the beginning of the section on bodily acting:

The root *nī-*, preceded by [the prefix] *abhi-*, has the sense of determining the meanings (*artha*) [of the dramatic text] as directly manifested in front (*ābhīmukhya*) [of the spectators]. It is called *abhinaya* because it carries (*nayati*) the objects [of theatre to the audience]. And it has

16 NŚ 1.10cd: *kṛḍanīyakam icchāmo dṛśyaṃ śravyaṃ ca yad bhavet* ||

17 NŚ 1.119: *yo 'yaṃ svabhāvo lokasya sukhaduḥkhasamanvitaḥ | so 'ṅādyabhinayopeto nāṭyam ity abhidhīyate* ||



been called *abhinaya* since it determines the different meanings, according to practice, in association with twig limbs (*śākhā*), bodily limbs, and facial expressions.<sup>18</sup>

As to the category of dance, *ṛtta*, it is also known to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and forms the subject of a full chapter, the fourth, although it is never given a unique and unequivocal definition. Dance is explained in somewhat negative terms with respect to dramatic representation when, in the chapter dedicated to it, a group of sages asks Bharata the reason for using dance in theatre, since the communication of the meanings of the dramatic text is already assigned to the acting. The question and its answer are given in the following verses, whose purport, developed in the dense commentary by Abhinavagupta, we shall linger on in some detail below:

The seers said: “Given that dramatic representation (*abhinaya*) has been devised by those experts in [theatre] for the sake of attaining the meanings (*artha*) [of the dramatic text], why indeed has this dance (*ṛtta*) been devised [and] what is the nature to which it conforms? It is not connected with the meanings (*artha*) of the songs, nor does it bring any meaning (*artha*) into being. Why has this dance been devised in [connection with the musical compositions of the preliminary rite,] the *gītakas* and *āsāritas*?”

On this point it is answered: “Dance does not indeed conform to any meaning (*artha*) at all, but it is meant to generate beauty; that is why dance has come into use.”<sup>19</sup>

Clearly enough, these questions about the nature and function of dance refer to the meaning of *abhinaya* as the specific way of communicating meaning on stage. This same function is excluded from dance, which is neither associated with the meaning of the songs, nor brings any meaning into being autonomously. In the complex system that is a dramatic performance, dance is in fact seen in combination with vocal singing and instrument playing in the preliminary rite (in Sanskrit: *pūrvaraṅga*), a ritualistic phase that precedes, announces, and inaugurates the performance of a Sanskrit play.<sup>20</sup> In these long preludes, musical compositions are performed in order to please the gods and obtain their protection for the good outcome of the theatrical play to come. Some of the musical

**18** NŚ 8.6–7: *abhipūrvas tu ṇīndhātur ābhimukhyārthanirṇaye | yasmāt padārthān nayati tasmād abhinayaḥ smṛtaḥ || vibhāvayati yasmāc ca nānārthān hi prayogataḥ | śākhāṅgopāṅgasamyuktas tasmād abhinayaḥ smṛtaḥ ||*

**19** NŚ 4.261cd–264ab: *yadā prāptyartham arthānām tajjñair abhinayaḥ kṛtaḥ || kasmān ṛttaṃ kṛtaṃ hy etat kaṃ svabhāvam apekṣate | na gītakārthasaṃbaddhaṃ na cāpy arthasya bhāvakam || kasmān ṛttaṃ kṛtaṃ hy etad gīteṣv āsāriteṣu ca | atrocyate na khalv arthaṃ kañcin ṛttam apekṣate || kin tu śobhāṃ prajānayed iti ṛttaṃ pravartitam |*

**20** On the *pūrvaraṅga*, its origins, and its functions, see, e.g., Kuiper 1979; Bansat-Boudon 1992: 67–80; Lidova 1994; and Tieken 2001. For an overview of previous opinions with a development of Abhinavagupta’s analysis, see Ganser 2016.

compositions of the preliminary rite are accompanied by dance; the dancer both displays abstract sequences of codified dance movements, alternating with the enactment (the word used is, again, *abhinaya*) of the meanings of the songs, typically through mimetic gestures and facial expressions. The whole of the chapter on dance deals with the description of the basic dance movements and larger choreutic sequences, the so-called *karaṇas* and *aṅgahāras*,<sup>21</sup> as well as their combination with vocal and instrumental music, in what can be regarded as an intermedial protocol of performance.

Besides its use in this preliminary rite, dance appears to have played a role in the main enactment of the play as well, although the pieces of evidence in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* are scant and not unambiguous. Moreover, one should not succumb to the temptation to assign the main role of storytelling in theatre to dance, intending it as a sort of pantomimic performance, as it happens with many of the modern forms of classical dance-theatre.<sup>22</sup> The actors described in Bharata's theatre, in fact, mobilized all four registers of acting, combining them into a harmonious blend: they used their voice to recite the dialogues, with all the intonations and linguistic conventions proper to the role (vocal acting or *vācika-abhinaya*); they accompanied their speech with codified hand gestures and facial expressions, assuming the stances and the gaits appropriate to the type of character personified (bodily acting or *āṅgika-abhinaya*); they tuned their minds following the requirements of the emotive situation (psychophysical acting or *sāttvika-abhinaya*); and they disguised themselves with elaborate costumes, ornaments, and facial paint (ornamental acting or *āhārya-abhinaya*).<sup>23</sup> Watching an actor's acting, a spectator accustomed to the stories and conventions of Sanskrit drama was able to recognize the different characters played on stage and to identify sympathetically with the emotions depicted. There were, however, places in the performance of a play where the use of dance was particularly prescribed, for instance to enact battle scenes, or when the actor had to move around the stage to mark the entrance

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**21** The *karaṇas* are basic dance movements involving the upper and lower body, and are codified by Bharata as 108 in number. *Aṅgahāras* are larger choreographic sequences, made of a number of *karaṇas* combined into a continuous string, and codified as thirty-two in number. On *karaṇas* and *aṅgahāras* in their choreutic, visual, and sculptural dimensions, see e.g., Subrahmanyam 2003 and Vatsyayan 1968.

**22** There has been a certain tendency, in modern studies, to overstate the role of dance in theatre, a flagrant example being the translation of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, in Naidu et. al. 1936: 1, as "The Science of Dancing." On the link of such attitudes with the "revival" of Indian dance in the 1930's, see the introduction in Ganser forthcoming a.

**23** On the combination of the four registers of acting and its techniques, which falls under the concept of "harmonious acting" (*sāmānyābhinaya*), see Bansat-Boudon 1989–1990; 1992: 341–387.

of a character or to signify a change in space and ambience.<sup>24</sup> This *nṛtta* we must interpret as a choreutic movement, largely codified along the same lines as the dance of the preliminary rite, governed by abstract bodily symmetries and intricate rhythmical patterns.<sup>25</sup>

In all these cases, the object designated by the word *nṛtta* looks different from bodily acting, *āṅgikābhinaya*, although both use the body in a nonconventional and stylized way, giving ample space to hand gestures, rhythmical foot movements, and bodily postures. One might venture to say, using the categories elaborated by E. Fisher-Lichte for the study of contemporary performance, that *āṅgikābhinaya* uses the “semiotic body,” the body that becomes a vehicle for embodying a dramatic character and communicating the text’s meaning, while *nṛtta* uses the “phenomenal body,” or the sheer presence of the performer’s body perceived in its own materiality.<sup>26</sup> The function of *abhinaya* would thus be communicative and representational, while that of *nṛtta* purely aesthetic, or better, psychagogic (to echo Bharata’s words: “Dance does not indeed conform to any meaning, but it is meant to create beauty”).<sup>27</sup> So far, so good. This apparently clear-cut demarcation separating dance from bodily acting, however, gets blurred in another passage, where dance is considered part and parcel of the process of acting with the body (*āṅgikābhinaya*):

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24 NS 4.55cd–56: *aṣṭottaraśataṃ hy etat karaṇānāṃ mayoditam || nṛtte yuddhe niyuddhe ca tathā gatiparikrame | gatipracāre vakṣyāmi yuddhacārīvikalpanam ||* “This group of 108 *karaṇas* has been stated by me for dancing, fighting, and hand-to-hand fighting, as well as for moving around the stage with gaits.”

25 It should be noted that in Sanskrit theatre, the orchestra was present on stage throughout the performance, accompanying and punctuating the ongoing scenic action in an expressive way. For a visual reconstruction of its disposition on stage, see Bansat-Boudon 1992: 201.

26 On the concepts of “semiotic body” and “phenomenal body,” see Fischer-Lichte 2008, *passim*. My attention was drawn to these two useful concepts by K. Schlapbach (2018: 10), who uses them in her masterful study of dance in later Greco-Roman antiquity.

27 In order to distinguish the function of dance, as an art of entertainment leading to pleasure, from theatre, whose aesthetic aim is always regarded as twofold—consisting as it is of pleasure and instruction (*prīti* and *vyutpatti* in Sanskrit)—I borrow the term “psychagogic,” well established in studies on Greek theatre to designate the function of music and other arts that lead or coax the soul into aesthetic pleasure, as opposed to instruction (Zanker 2015: 63). On pleasure and instruction as the twofold aim of Sanskrit theatre, and on its identification with *rasa*, the aesthetic appraisal of an emotion or aesthetic experience tout court, see e.g., Cuneo 2015. The role of dance in theatre is no doubt to contribute to the overall aesthetic experience; however, dance has no autonomous power to evoke *rasa*, and is therefore mainly seen as an auxiliary to drama. On the role of dance in the aesthetic experience, see Bansat-Boudon 1992: 193–198 and Ganser 2013 and forthcoming a.

The *śākhā* (“twig limbs”), dance, and the *aṅkura* (“sprout”) are to be known as the elements of this [bodily] acting. The one called *śākhā* is bodily [acting], the *aṅkura* indicative acting, while dance, which is produced by bodily movements (*aṅgahāra*), is based on the [basic dance units called] *karaṇas*.<sup>28</sup>

The *śākhā* and *aṅkura* are explained elsewhere in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as two phases in the protocol of acting that mainly involves the bodily medium.<sup>29</sup> The *aṅkura*, or sprout acting, is the enactment of one’s own inner feelings with the body and without words, thus on the order of suggestive acting, which the actor can decide to use at his pleasure as a way of expressing what in the dramatic text remains implicit. The *śākhā*, or twig-limb acting, is less clear, since the *Nāṭyaśāstra* just says that it is a display of the twig limbs that gradually engages the head, the face, the shanks, the thighs, the hands, and the feet.<sup>30</sup> Here, both the *śākhā* and the *aṅkura* are listed as elements of bodily acting, along with dance, although their respective representational potential must have been clearly different, a fact that has caused much perplexity for later commentators. The *śākhā* appears in fact to have been a form of acting on the verge of dance; it is often contrasted with *nṛtta* as two liminal cases of using the body for expressive ends, in which the representational function is not particularly developed. As to dance, it is difficult to see how it could participate in bodily acting, whose aim in theatre is by definition to communicate meaning, while at the same time being excluded from the domain of meaning communication, as maintained in other passages. Can dance be narrative and nonnarrative, or semiotic and phenomenal at the same time? Or is it an altogether different narrative medium? I will come back to this crucial conundrum and Abhinavagupta’s solution to it in section 4 below.

Although its role within the performance of a play is somewhat ambiguous in Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra*, dance is treated on the whole as an ancillary of theatre: it may be used to please and praise the gods within the rite of the preliminaries, or to enact a battle scene or circumambulate the stage during the performance of the

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28 NŚ 8.14–15: *asya śākhā ca nṛttaṃ ca tathavāṅkura eva ca | vastūny abhinayasyeha vijñeyāni prayokṭṛbhīḥ || āṅgikas tu bhavet chākhā hy aṅkuraḥ sūcanā bhavet | aṅgahāraviniṣpannaṃ nṛttaṃ tu karaṇāśrayam |*

29 Namely in the harmonious acting that privileges the body to communicate the textual meanings, the so-called *śārīra-sāmānya-abhinaya*, (“corporal harmonious acting”), on which see Bansat-Boudon 1989–1990.

30 For the definition of the *aṅkura* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, together with a translation of Abhinavagupta’s commentary on it, see Bansat-Boudon 1992: 374–375, and 375–376 for the *śākhā*.

play, or as a beautifying element, or somehow as an element of bodily acting.<sup>31</sup> In none of these cases is there question of a free, spontaneous dance movement, but rather a series of codified dance sequences, the *karaṇas*, which combine to form longer sequences, the *aṅgahāras*. Although dance (*nṛtta*) appears in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as an already developed art, endowed with its proper technique and specialized performers—at least in the preliminary rite, dance is performed by female dancers called *nartakī* and especially convened for this aim, while actors, male and female, are usually called *naṭa/naṭī*—*nṛtta* is always described as part of the larger complex that is theatre, *nāṭya*. This state of affairs will undergo radical changes in the technical texts toward the end of the millennium, as I will detail next.

### 3 Narrative dance in the *Daśarūpaka*: A new genre or an acting method?

The first occurrence of a tripartite notion in which narrative dance appears as a distinct category—with the name *nṛtya*, together with the previously encountered *nāṭya* and *nṛtta*—is in the *Daśarūpaka* (“The Ten Dramatic Genres”). This treatise was written by Dhanañjaya in Central India around the end of the tenth century, and it is joined with a commentary called the *Avaloka*, composed by his putative younger brother Dhanika.<sup>32</sup> The *Daśarūpaka* is an important treatise, not only for its peculiar treatment of aesthetic ideas and the number of important commentaries it received, but also because it is the only treatise on dramaturgy that has survived from the time span that stretches from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata to its grand commentary by Abhinavagupta. The *Daśarūpaka*, as its name betrays, is a detailed treatment of the ten dramatic genres (already canonized in this number by

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**31** There are also other occasions in a play where the use of dance is prescribed, in particular within the scope of the *kaiśikī vṛtti* (“gorgeous style of presentation”), the *nāṭyadharmī* (“theatrical convention”), and the *lāsyāṅgas* (“amorous vignettes”), embedded dramatic fragments that variously combine music, songs, and dance to convey the theme of love. On these terms and their interpretation, especially in the light of Abhinavagupta’s commentary, see Bansat-Boudon 1992. I have also dealt with some of Abhinavagupta’s interpretations of the use of dance within a dramatic performance in Ganser 2013, in particular with regard to the psychagogic effect of dance, arguing that dance assures, on the one hand, the spectator’s adherence to the fiction, and on the other, the cohesion of the spectacle, which I regard as two facets of the same coin.

**32** On Dhanañjaya and Dhanika’s period, geographical provenance, patronage, and work, see Pollock 2016: 154–157.

Bharata).<sup>33</sup> It contains, at its very outset, a division of the spectacular object that became very influential and was accepted almost unanimously, though with some modifications, by later authors, with the exception of Abhinavagupta, and which has become standard even in today's parlance about Indian performance arts.<sup>34</sup> In the neat tripartition laid down by Dhanañjaya and expanded in the commentary by Dhanika, the spectacular object is divided and defined as follows:

- Theatre (*nāṭya*) is an imitation of the situations [of the characters] [DR 1.7a: *avasthānukṛtir nāṭyam*]. [It is] tenfold [and] based on aesthetic emotions (*rasa*) [DR 1.7d: *daśadhaiva rasāśrayam*].
- *Nṛtya*, which is different [from it], is based on emotive states (*bhāva*) [DR 1.9a: *anyad bhāvāśrayam nṛtyam*], and is an enactment (*abhinaya*) of word meanings (*padārthābhinayo*) [DR 1.9c].
- Dance (*nṛtta*) is based on rhythm and tempo [DR 1.9b: *nṛttaṃ tālalayāśrayam*].

Dhanika's commentary sheds some light on these definitions, which is especially helpful for grasping the new category of *nṛtya* as distinct from both *nāṭya* and *nṛtta*. The term *nṛtya*, says Dhanika, is used to refer to some other staged forms than the ten canonical forms subsumed under the label *daśarūpaka* (ten dramatic forms), and is restricted to the seven varieties of *nṛtya*. In support of this view, he quotes a verse that lists seven *nṛtya* types by name:

Ḍombī, Śṛīgadita, Bhāṇa, Bhāṇī, Prasthāna, Rāsaka, and Kāvya are the seven types of *nṛtya*, and they are similar to the Bhāṇa [of theatre] (monologue play, one of the ten dramatic forms).<sup>35</sup>

The anonymous verse is quoted within an objection that introduces Dhanañjaya's definition of *nṛtya*, where the validity of the restriction in the number of dramatic genres to ten is questioned by reason of the existence of other forms of performance.<sup>36</sup> The traditional verse quoted by Dhanika adds the important detail that these forms are "similar to the Bhāṇa," which is indeed listed among the ten canonical dramatic genres. The Bhāṇa, as the definitions go, is a monologue play in one act, performed by a single actor. In these humoristic short plays—translated by some as "causeries"—a character typically converses with several other people he crosses on his way. These

<sup>33</sup> The ten dramatic genres are given in NŚ 18.2–3ab as Nāṭaka, Prakaraṇa, Aṅka, Vyāyoga, Bhāṇa, Samavakāra, Vithī, Prahasana, Ḍima and Īhāmṛga. On their characteristics, productivity, and historical distribution, see Leclère 2013: 38–53.

<sup>34</sup> On the legacy of the *Daśarūpaka* tripartition of the spectacular object and its variations, see Mankad 1936: 12–22 and Bose 2007 [1991]: 167–177.

<sup>35</sup> AL ad DR 1.9, p. 8: *ḍombī śṛīgaditaṃ bhāṇo bhāṇīprasthānarāsakāḥ | kāvyam ca sapta nṛtyasya bhedaḥ syus te 'pi bhāṇavat ||*

<sup>36</sup> For a translation of the passage with this objection, see Bansat-Boudon 1994: 208.

characters are not present on stage, but the solo actor reports their dialogues by projecting their voice through a theatrical convention called “speaking to the sky” (*ākāśabhāṣita*).<sup>37</sup> Let us now have a look at the characteristics of these *nṛtya* types and their differences from the other two categories of theatre and dance.

The first opposition, one between *nāṭya* and *nṛtya*, is said to concern their being based on either *rasa* or *bhāva*, which I have tentatively translated as “aesthetic emotions” and “mental moods,” although the difference is not crystal clear. *Rasa* and *bhāva* are two terms employed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* to designate the emotional sphere as it is given stage presentation. There are eight flavors, the *rasas* (or nine, with the inclusion of the pacified in later texts), listed as the amorous, the comic, the pathetic, the furious, the heroic, the fearsome, the odious, and the wondrous (NŚ 6.15, 6.45 ff.). The *rasas* are famously said to arise from the display of the complete array of elements that characterize an emotional situation: the causes, or so-called determinants (*vibhāva*), i.e., the characters and the external circumstances; the consequents (*anubhāva*), i.e., the reactions to the emotions, shown as visible bodily signs by the actors; and the transitory states (*vyabhicāribhāva*), a group of thirty-three states that variously combine and nuance the main emotional state. The conjunction of these elements or aesthetic factors gives rise to one of the eight *rasas*,<sup>38</sup> to which correspond eight basic emotions or stable states (*sthāyibhāvas*): delight, humor, sorrow, anger, valor, fear, disgust, and astonishment (NŚ 6.17, 7.8 ff.). The tendency among scholars is to translate *rasa* as “aesthetic sentiment” and *bhāva* as “emotion”; however, such a distinction is not unequivocal in Indian sources. For early authors, in fact, and for a considerable period of time, the difference between *bhāvas* and *rasas* was conceived as one of intensity rather than quality, while later authors started to postulate a difference in their ontology, whereby the *rasas* consisted of generalized emotions, tasted in a beatific ultramundane experience by the spectators, and as such utterly different

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37 For the translation of *Bhāṣa* as “causery,” a definition of the genre, and an English translation of its most famous specimens, see Dezső/Vasudeva 2009.

38 As the celebrated *rasasūtra* (“Aphorism on Rasa”) in *Nāṭyaśāstra* chapter 6 goes: “*Rasa* is produced by the union of determinants, consequents, and transitory states” (*vibhāvānubhāvavyabhicārisaṃyogād rasanīṣpattiḥ*). In a scene dominated by the amorous *rasa*, for example, determinants will be all those factors causing the character’s emotion: a beloved, pleasure gardens, unguents and fragrant creams, garlands, etc.; consequents will be all the visible reactions to the arousal of the emotion, such as sidelong glances, gentle speeches, playful movements, and so on; transitory states will be those states accompanying the main emotion, for instance joy, jealousy, shame, etc. For the translation of these three elements as “aesthetic factors,” see Pollock 2016.

from worldly emotions or *bhāvas*.<sup>39</sup> The aesthetic position of Dhanañjaya has not been settled beyond doubt, as he stands somewhere in between the old and the new paradigm.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, what Dhanañjaya precisely meant by the term *nṛtya*, a form of performance based on *bhāva*, is not made any clearer by his laconic definitions.<sup>41</sup>

The second opposition, the one between *nṛtya* and *nṛtta*, is sketched in the commentary by Dhanika first of all by recalling their commonalities, i.e., their etymological derivation from the Sanskrit root *nṛt-*, “to dance,” cited by ancient grammarians as having the sense of “throwing the limbs about.”<sup>42</sup> Despite this common derivation, says the *Avaloka*, *nṛtya* shares with theatre its imitative or representational nature—a characteristic already encountered in Dhanañjaya’s definition of *nāṭya*—while dance lacks dramatic representation or enactment.<sup>43</sup>

Although they are similar, since both are the objects of the throwing of limbs, *nṛtya* is different from *nṛtta*, as it consists in imitation (*anukāra*). [...] Dance (*nṛtta*) is a throwing of limbs, devoid of enactment (*abhinayaśūnya*), merely depending on the [rhythm and tempo].<sup>44</sup>

The hybrid object called *nṛtya* thus consists in the throwing of limbs, i.e., bodily movement, typical of dance, to which imitation and acting, the hallmarks of theatre, are added. However, it cannot aspire to the full status of theatre, since its basis is not the *rasas*, but the *bhāvas*, whatever this distinction may imply. Apart from such stray remarks, we do not get any concrete impression of what a performance of *nṛtya*, in the seven varieties mentioned, was supposed to look like. It is

39 As D. Cuneo (2013: 66) puts it in a nutshell: “Abhinavagupta’s very innovative interpretation of the Rasa Theory implies that *rasas* (aesthetic emotions) are, somehow, less than *bhāvas* (common-life emotions), insofar as the former lack some of the elements that pertain to the latter, i.e., all the elements that determine the inevitably pleasurable-cum-painful nature of real-life human emotional existence. Consequently, *rasas* become a sort of distillation or sublimation of *bhāvas*. The term *rasa* is therefore understood as meaning ‘sap,’ ‘juice’ or better ‘essence,’ ‘extract’ or ‘elixir’ of *bhāva*.” On the dramatic changes in Sanskrit aesthetics—which scholars have characterized as a series of paradigm shifts, especially for what concerns the ontology and locus of *rasa*—see McCrea 2008; Pollock 2010, 2016; and Cuneo 2013.

40 The aesthetic theory propounded by Dhanañjaya-Dhanika has been sketched by Pollock (2016: 154–180); however, what these two authors meant by *bhāva* and *rasa* is far from consensual.

41 Later authors, starting from the fourteenth century, classify these other performance genres as “minor genres” (*uparūpaka*), intending their link with the *bhāvas* rather than the *rasas* as justifying their inferiority, underlined by the preverb *upa-* (“minor,” “inferior,” “secondary”) preceding *rūpaka*, the usual term designating a dramatic genre.

42 See *Dhātupāṭha* 4.9: *nṛto gātravikṣepe* (Böhtlingk 1964 [1887]: 72\*).

43 For a very useful graphic representation of the tripartite division and the respective similarities and oppositions between *nāṭya*, *nṛtya*, and *nṛtta*, see Bansat-Boudon 1994: 207.

44 *Avaloka*, p. 89: [...] *gātravikṣepārthatve samāne ’py anukārātmakatvena nṛtyād anyan nṛttam [...] tanmātrāpekṣo ’ṅavikṣepo ’bhinayaśūnyo nṛttam iti*.



only in other texts that we find the definitions of the Ḍombī and the other forms. Abhinavagupta, for instance, reports the definitions of eight new forms as conceived by some ancient masters;<sup>45</sup> however he never uses the term *nṛtya* to refer to them as a class, but rather uses the term *nṛttakāvya* (“danced poems,” or “poems based on dance”), stressing their being grounded in a poetic text, a *kāvya*, and the specificity of the medium through which they are rendered, namely dance.<sup>46</sup> We also get the impression, from Abhinavagupta’s allusions to these forms, that they were based on poetic texts in Prakrit or Apabhraṃśā, Middle Indic languages with a literary status different from that of Sanskrit.<sup>47</sup> These poetic texts were rendered vocally by a singer—sometimes by the dancer herself—and through musical instrumentation by an orchestra. They were moreover performed through dance by a solo performer, which seems to be their characteristic feature. They developed themes of profane love, having as their main protagonists the types of heroines codified in the Sanskrit literary tradition and their royal lovers,<sup>48</sup> or the exploits of the gods in their various incarnations.<sup>49</sup>

These independent forms of performance on the verge between theatre and dance, which I regard as kinds of narrative dance, must have developed in the time span that runs from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* to the *Daśarūpaka*. By the time of the *Daśarūpaka*, they must have gained so much momentum that they started to be recorded in the scientific treatises. Of course, one cannot rule out the possibility that such forms were already known to Bharata, who might purposefully have chosen not to record them due to his exclusive focus on Sanskrit drama. However,

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**45** These are the Ḍombikā (Ḍombī in the AL), Bhāṇa, Prasthāna, Ṣidgaka (Śṛigaditam in the AL), Bhāṇikā (Bhāṇī in the AL), Rāmākriḍa, Hallisaka, and Rāsaka. For their definitions, see the Appendix.

**46** *Kāvya* or poetry becomes the main category for genres based on a literary text, be they heard, enacted, sung, or danced. Echoing the first description of theatre in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as an object “to be seen and to be heard,” Sanskrit poetics were quite early to adopt a distinction into poetry “meant to be seen” (*prekṣārtha*), and poetry “meant to be heard” (*śravya*) (cf. *Kāvyaśāstra* 1.39), conceived in some texts as a difference between “poetry [whose meaning has] to be enacted” (*abhinaya-[artha-]kāvya*), and “poetry [whose meaning is] not to be enacted” (*anabhineya-[artha-]kāvya*) (cf. *Kāvyaśāstra* 1.18; 1.24 and *Vṛtti* ad *Dhvanyāloka* 3.6).

**47** On the use of Prakrit and Apabhraṃśā in theatre, for instance to render the speech of women or inferior characters, with Sanskrit being reserved mostly for men and gods, see Nitti-Dolci 1972 [1938]. For their use in some of the new performance genre, see Bhayani 1993, and for their status as literary languages in general, see Ollett 2017.

**48** On the typology of heroes and heroines, which was first laid out in the dramatic tradition and which was to become a fundamental feature in the composition of medieval poetry and its interpretation through dance, see, e.g., Lévi 1963 [1890]: 72–77 and Cattoni 2019.

**49** See the definitions of the various genres in the Appendix.

the categories he uses are only two, and he never seems to envisage a third category. On the other hand, the celebrated poet Kālidāsa (early 4th c. AD?, possibly not much later than the *Nāṭyaśāstra*)<sup>50</sup> makes reference to what might have been a prototype of such performances in his work *Mālavikāgnimitra*, when he describes the competition between two dance masters and their pupils, two expert female dancers competing before the king's assembly.<sup>51</sup> The familiarity of Kālidāsa with the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is well known, and in his description of the dance competition and its judgment, he employs much of the technical vocabulary laid down in the seminal treatise on theatre, which suggests that these were forms of performance strictly regulated by rules and aesthetic standards, although clearly different from dramatic genres involving several characters and being performed over a longer period of time. The description of the form performed by the dancer-heroine Mālavikā, called Chalita, in my opinion suggests that this might have been similar to those genres later codified in the technical texts as *nṛtyabhedas*, *uparūpakas*, etc.<sup>52</sup> The Chalita is in fact different from both Sanskrit drama and pure dance: it was performed to a text—notably in verse, since Kālidāsa speaks of *catuspadā* (a composition in four verses)—that contained a story line; the lyrics were first sung by a solo actress-dancer, who successively enacted their meaning through gestures, facial expressions, and bodily movements set to rhythm and tempo, which were supposed to evoke sentiments and emotions.<sup>53</sup> This was clearly a form of intermedial performance that combined dance, *abhinaya*, and vocal and instrumental music. Kālidāsa calls it a *saṃgīta(ka)*, a term used in later technical texts from the thirteenth century to designate a form of solo dance performance with

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50 See, e.g., Sathaye 2019.

51 This episode is described in the first and second acts of the play, which have been the object of an in-depth study by Lyne Bansat-Boudon (1992: 389–451). My remarks are largely based on this study; however, they differ in their conclusions.

52 For a discussion of whether Chalita should be the name of a genre or the title of a written work, see Bansat-Boudon 1992: 404–406, who opts for the second, more likely option.

53 In regarding the Chalita as a form of narrative dance, a precursor of what was later variously designated in the technical texts by the name *nṛtya(-bheda)*, *uparūpaka*, and the like, my interpretation differs from that of Bansat-Boudon, who considers it to be a *nāṭya* based on the interpretation of some of the technical terms Kālidāsa uses to describe this performance, which are grounded in Bharata's theory and applicable to *nāṭya* alone. Bansat-Boudon's argument is also based on the clear presence of *abhinaya* in Chalita, and its absence (theoretically) in *nṛtta*. However, as we shall see in the next section, someone like Abhinavagupta opted to classify the new genres under *nṛtta* by enlarging the category of dance so as to include the independent new genres of narrative dance, and by giving the *abhinaya* displayed in them a weaker, not fully mimetic sense.

musical and vocal accompaniment.<sup>54</sup> As such, it differed from the *nṛtta* described by Dhanañjaya and, to a certain extent, by Bharata, as pure dance devoid of acting.

As is usual with technical texts such as the *Daśarūpaka* and its commentary *Avaloka*, things appear simple and clear-cut at first, while a closer look might reveal further complexities and gray zones. After the definitions of *nāṭya*, *nṛtya* and *nṛtta* as main classes of performance, including subgenres, the author of the *Daśarūpaka* affirms that both *nṛtya* and *nṛtta* are used as auxiliaries to the ten dramatic genres, hence to *nāṭya*, and that they possess two varieties each, a gentle form called *lāsya*, and a vehement one called *tāṇḍava*.<sup>55</sup> It is thus evident that *nṛtya* and *nṛtta* are not only broad categories of performance used to incorporate new performance genres that are different and independent from drama, but they also serve to indicate the auxiliaries or ancillary arts that are different media combined in a dramatic performance, as was the case with some descriptions of dance in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. As Dhanika explains:

The meaning of the expression “[*nṛtya* and *nṛtta*] are auxiliaries of the ten dramatic genres” is: *nṛtya* is sometimes used in the [dramatic genres], such as the heroic comedy and the like, in the form of an enactment (*abhinaya*) of the meaning of intermediate words, while *nṛtta* is used in the Nāṭaka and the other genres, since it is the cause of beauty.<sup>56</sup>

Clearly resonating in Dhanika’s explanation of the role of dance as auxiliary in a play are Bharata’s words that “dance generates beauty.” As to the new category of *nṛtya*, it is said to function within a play as an enactment of the meanings of intermediate words, a statement strongly recalling Bharata’s etymological explanation of *abhinaya* as “that which carries the meanings in front of the spectators.” The term *nṛtya* in this passage obviously indicates something different from the seven *nṛtyabhedas* that are independent performance genres: it is possibly a technique of acting privileging bodily movements over the spoken word, but nevertheless connected to a textual meaning, whatever the term “intermediate words” might mean.<sup>57</sup> These apparent inconsistencies might leave the modern reader perplexed and even disoriented, but they are perfectly in line with the very

54 On *saṃgītaka* and its definitions in the technical texts, see Bansat-Boudon 1994: 96 and Bose 2007 [1991]: 164–165.

55 DR 1.10: *madhuroddhatabhedena tad dvayaṃ dvididhaṃ punaḥ | lāsya tāṇḍavarūpeṇa nāṭakādyupakāraṅgam ||* AL *ad locum*, p. 10: *sukumāraṃ dvayam api lāsyaṃ, uddhataṃ dvitayam api tāṇḍavam iti.*

56 AL *ad* DR 1.10, p. 10: *nāṭakādyupakāraṅgam iti. nṛtyasya kvacid avāntarapadārthābhinayarūpatvena nṛttasya ca śobhāhetutvena nāṭakādāv upayoga iti.*

57 Given the extreme concision of Dhanañjaya’s verses and the uncertainty of the meaning of the expression *avāntarapadārtha*° in Dhanika’s gloss, it is not possible to decide what kind of spectacular practice was meant by the word *nṛtya*—here opposed to *nṛtta* alone—in the *Daśarūpaka*.

nature of these texts: while they incorporate a great deal of material considered traditional, such as that issuing from the uncontested authority of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, at the same time they promote new theories. On the other hand, they also have to deal with the ineluctable development of the living practices. Such a process of adaptation and negotiation allows for older categories to be slightly modified, and not altogether replaced, even when the old ones may appear obsolete.<sup>58</sup> As Bansat-Boudon states:

[O]n s'aperçoit que le *nṛtya* n'a eu d'autre fonction que d'offrir aux théoriciens le moyen de regrouper sous une même rubrique les formes qui ne correspondaient pas aux normes exigeantes que Bharata avait fixées pour le *nāṭya*. (Bansat-Boudon 1994: 211)

Besides being a useful label for new forms of performance on the verge of theatre and dance, the category of *nṛtya* was used to talk about a new way of delivering meaning within a theatrical performance, possibly reflecting new aesthetic sensibilities and an increasing role of dance to carry out the narrative function, whose exact place in a theatrical performance is bound to remain a matter of speculation.

## 4 Abhinavagupta on the frontiers of dance

Writing a few decades after Dhanika in the remote but culturally flourishing Kashmir Valley, Abhinavagupta came up with a very personal and innovative take on the question of the developing new genres of narrative dance, and on dance as a narrative medium within the performance of a play. This he did in his major work on dramaturgy, the *Abhinavabhāratī* (“The New Dramatic Art” or “Abhinava’s Commentary on Bharata’s [*Nāṭyaśāstra*]”). One must first of all notice that, unlike Dhanañjaya and Dhanika, Abhinavagupta was not writing a new treatise on dramaturgy, in which the letter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* would be, at the most, an authoritative and venerable reference. On the contrary, he was commenting directly on the seminal “Treatise on Theatre,” an act that was quite different and crucially implied a closer adherence to the root text. This does not mean that novelty was banned altogether from this massive exegetical operation (Abhinavagupta comments on the totality of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, an approximate 6000 verses divided into 37 chapters in the editio princeps of K. Ramakrishna Kavi), but that it had to be negotiated within the limits of the *śāstra* through strategies such as filling up the ellipses, spotting double meanings, assigning special value to expletive particles, or simply by considering that the *śāstra* itself covers all possibilities, theoretical and practical, including novelty itself, which therefore ceases to

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<sup>58</sup> On these ongoing processes in technical texts on performance, see Ganser 2011.

exercise its dangerously subversive potential.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Abhinavagupta mentions several times that one has to look at the practice of the authoritative masters of theatre and dance in order to restore the unsaid, yet potentially implicit, and to accommodate new developments.

A close look at the fourth chapter of the *Abhinavabhāratī*, which comments on Bharata's chapter on dance, reveals that Abhinavagupta was well aware of a plethora of new genres of performance that did not fit perfectly into Bharata's twofold distinction between theatre and dance. Nevertheless, he decided not to introduce the new category of *nṛtya* to accommodate such new genres, which I regard as narrative dance, into the textual lore, and opted instead to subsume them under the older category of *nṛtta*, dance tout court. As other scholars have proposed, it is reasonable to seek the reason for Abhinavagupta's disregard of the category of *nṛtya*, though known in contemporary texts, in his fidelity to the letter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. However, I would like to argue that his tendency to classify these forms under the category of dance (*nṛtta*) instead of theatre (*nāṭya*) is not self-explanatory: narrative dance clearly consists of the enactment of a text, a characteristic common to theatre as well. Why would Abhinavagupta decide to categorize the *Ḍombikā* and the other genres under the heading of *nṛtta*, given the fact that dance was generally understood to contain no enactment, or the representational function proper to theatre? The whole discussion in the *Abhinavabhāratī* revolves around the set of questions posed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which is worth recalling briefly:

“Given that dramatic representation (*abhinaya*) has been devised by those experts in [theatre] for the sake of attaining the meanings (*artha*) [of the dramatic text], why indeed has this dance (*nṛtta*) been devised [and] what is the nature to which it conforms? It is not connected with the meanings (*artha*) of the songs, nor does it bring any meaning (*artha*) into being. Why has this dance been devised in [connection with the musical compositions of the preliminary rite,] the *gītakas* and *āsāritas*?”

Abhinavagupta interprets this question as expressing the doubt raised by an opponent:

In this regard, the doubt amounts to the following: is dance different from theatre or no different from [it]? And if it were [considered] to be different, would it have a purpose or not?<sup>60</sup>

To make a long story short, the question is held to be a rhetorical one: the main opponent in fact maintains the identity of theatre and dance, since both share the same characteristics, namely they contain a throwing of limbs, i.e., dance, as well

<sup>59</sup> On the idea of *śāstra* and attitudes to it, see the seminal studies of Pollock 1985, 1989a, and 1989b.

<sup>60</sup> ABh ad NŚ 4.261cd–263ab, vol. 1, p. 168: *tatrettham āśaṅkā: nṛttaṃ nāṭyād bhinnam abhinnaṃ vā. bhinnatve 'pi saprayojanam aprayojanaṃ vā.*

as songs. Thus, as concludes the advocate of the identity of theatre and dance, they should not be designated by two different names, i.e., *nāṭya* and *nṛtta*. This position will gradually be revised and refined, faced with the objections raised by another opponent, who holds that theatre and dance are, on the contrary, different. The question of what we should take as the objective referent of the word *nṛtta* is also considered in its various possibilities, some of which are clearly not contemplated in Bharata's text. One of them, the one I want to focus on in what follows, is that the word *nṛtta* does not just refer to a pure dance devoid of enactment, but to independent new performance genres that rely on dance as a medium for narrative. Following this specific view, the objection in Bharata's text is reinterpreted as follows by the advocate of the identity of theatre and dance:

Since **dramatic representation** (*abhinaya*), i.e., the *rāgakāvya* and other [genres of narrative dance] that are given staged representation (*abhinīyamāna*), **has been devised by those experts in [theatre]**, i.e., by the poets who are seers,<sup>61</sup> **for the sake of attaining [its] meanings** (*artha*), i.e., the ends [of man] such as *dharma* and others,<sup>62</sup> therefore, for which reason would this dance not be theatre? And why would theatre not be dance? In fact, even [theatre] consists in throwing the limbs about. And since their goal is equally similar, **what is the nature**, entailing a difference [from theatre], **to which [dance] conforms?** This amounts to saying that such a distinct nature does not exist. [...] Therefore, since [their] nature and purpose are no different, dance is no different from theatre.<sup>63</sup>

**61** The text is problematic at this point. My conjecture is based on a set of parallel verses quoted in the *Abhinavabhāratī*, where the poet is described as similar to a seer. I explain the reasons for this choice at length in the notes to my translation of ABh ad NŚ 4.261cd–268ab, based on a new critical edition of the text (see Ganser forthcoming a). For the other passages of the ABh on the fourth chapter translated here, I provide the Sanskrit text as reconstructed in my edition, on the basis of the available editions, a long parallel in the *Kāvyaṅuśāsanaivēka* of Hemacandra, and four manuscripts. Here I have indicated only the conjectures, while for the full critical apparatus the reader may refer to my forthcoming edition.

**62** One of the two declared aims of theatre, apart from aesthetic pleasure, is that it provides instruction about the means to achieve the ends of man, typically classified as four: *dharma* (“moral law,” “norm”), *artha* (“profit,” “economic gain”) *kāma* (“sensual love”), and *mokṣa* (“liberation”). By seeing the appropriate actions displayed on the stage, together with the results of those actions, the spectator develops a capacity to act in the right way. See, e.g., Bansat-Boudon 1991–1992 and Cuneo 2015.

**63** ABh ad NŚ 4.261cd–263ab, vol. 1, p. 170: \**tad āha yato* [conj. ; *yadā prāptyartham iti. yadā yato* Ed.] *’rthānām dharmādīprajoyanānām prāptyartham tajjñair nāṅṣibhiḥ* [conj.; Om. Ed.] *kavibhir abhinaya ity abhinīyamāno rāgakāvyaādih kṛtaḥ. tasmāt kasmād dhetor etan nṛttam na nāṭyam. nāṭyam ca kasmān na nṛttam. gātravikṣepātmakam hi tad api. tulye ca tathā ’rthe kam bhedakam svabhāvam apekṣate. nāsty asau bhinnasvabhāva iti yāvat. [...] tasmāt svabhāvasya prajoyanasya cābhedān nṛttam nāṭyād abhinnam iti.*

Playing on the polysemy of the Sanskrit language, the word *artha* in Bharata's verse, which I had rendered as "meaning," is reinterpreted here as "purpose." *Abhinaya* ("dramatic representation," "enactment") is reinterpreted as the genre meant to be enacted, playing on the well-known distinction, established by literary theorists, between poetry to be enacted and poetry not to be enacted.<sup>64</sup> Although the name *rāga-kāvya* refers yet to another kind of poetry (*kāvya*), i.e., "poetry based on a musical mode (*rāga*)," it is clear that this was also a kind of poetry to be enacted. The same is established for the *nṛtya* types designated by Abhinavagupta with the name *nṛtta-kāvya*, "danced poetry" or "poetry based on dance," which have to be read in filigree in this passage. The opponent establishes the identity between theatre and dance (read "narrative dance," which includes *rāga-* and *nṛtta-kāvya*) on the basis of their common nature—both use the bodily medium to communicate meanings—and purpose—both provide moral instruction about the ends of men. This last point is supported by the sheer observation that the new performance genres are seen to provide moral instruction through their narrative:

In fact, we find instruction concerning the four aims of mankind in *rāgakāvyas* such as the *Rāghavavijaya* ("Rāma's Victory") and so on.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, in [forms of narrative dance such as] the *Ḍombikā* and the others, there is instruction in love (*kāma*), whose supreme secret is illicit passion. [...] And in [some forms of narrative dance, such as] the *Bhāṇa*,<sup>66</sup> the *Preraṇa*, the *Bhāṇika*, and so on, one sees that instruction in the goals of mankind is [provided] by means of the depiction of [animals] such as lions, boars, bears, and buffalos,<sup>67</sup> through [figures of speech such as] allegory (*aprustutaprasaṃsā*), illustration of a general truth through a particular case (*arthāntaranyāsa*), exemplification (*dr̥ṣṭānta*), and so on.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, we cannot establish a distinction [between theatre and dance] even on the basis of a [possible] difference in purpose.<sup>69</sup>

64 Cf. n. 46 above.

65 After the list containing the definitions of the new genres starting with the *Ḍombikā*, Abhinavagupta also mentions two such specimens of *rāgakāvya*—the *Rāghavavijaya* ("Rāma's Victory") and the *Māricavadha* ("The Slaughter of Mārīca")—both lost to us, along with their *rāgas* and a definition of the genre attributed to Kohala. See Appendix.

66 Note that this *Bhāṇa* is a genre of narrative dance, called *nṛtya* in other texts, and not the *Bhāṇa* listed among the ten dramatic genres as a monologue play. As Bose (2007 [1991]: 49) has noticed, sometimes the dance *Bhāṇa* is given with the alternative name *Bhāṇaka* for the sake of disambiguation.

67 The definition of the *Bhāṇa*/*Bhāṇaka* includes descriptions of Viṣṇu in his incarnations as a man-lion and as a boar, while the *Bhāṇika* mentions the play of boars and lions among its subjects. The latter might have been allegorical performances. See Appendix.

68 On these rhetorical figures, see Gerow 1971.

69 ABh ad NŚ 4.261cd–263ab, p. 170: *caturvargopadeśasya rāghavavijayādikarāgakāvyeṣu dr̥ṣṭatvāt. ḍombikātau tu kāmasyaiva pracchannarāgaparamarahasyopadeśāt [...] siṃhasūkara-bhallūkākāsarādivarṇanenāpi bhāṇapreraṇabhāṇikādāv aprustutaprasaṃsārthāntaranyāsa-dr̥ṣṭāntādinā puruṣārthasyaivopadeśadarśanād iti prayojanabhedād api na bhedaḥ.*

Clearly enough, these forms of staged performance had narrative content, based on the epics (certainly the *rāgakāvya* “Rāma’s Victory”), on the theme of love (the *Ḍombikā*), or on animal stories with a moral ending. This narrative content was embedded in a text, as the word *kāvya* indicates, which was delivered through enactment, most prominently through the register called “bodily acting.” In view of this evidence, the opponent who wants to prove the distinction between theatre and dance tries to argue in favor of maintaining a restricted definition of dance as bodily movement devoid of any kind of representational function. The new genres of narrative dance are then placed at the opposite end of the spectrum, on a par with theatre, so as to keep a strict dichotomy on the basis of the presence or lack of the representational function:

To this argument, it is answered that staged performances such as *rāgakāvya*s and so on are indeed [forms of] theatre, since they make use of enactment (*abhinaya*). But that which, devoid of the various registers of acting (*abhinayādiśūnya*), merely consisting of spinning and whirling, knitting of eyebrows, casting of glances, placing of feet, shaking and oscillating, splitting of hips, rolling [of feet, hips, hands, and neck], etc., is what we mean by [the word] “dance” (*ṅṛtta*), which cannot even be suspected as being [a form of] theatre.<sup>70</sup>

This line of argument certainly conforms, as we have seen, to the most common definitions of dance—such as those of the *Daśarūpaka* and its commentary the *Avaloka*—as pure movement devoid of *abhinaya*, subject only to the control of rhythm and tempo. This, however, is still part of the prima facie view, which will be superseded by a more refined one.<sup>71</sup> As anticipated at the outset of this section, Abhinavagupta’s final position supports the difference—in nature and purpose—between dance and theatre, but keeps narrative dance on the side of dance (*ṅṛtta*) alone.<sup>72</sup> How does he manage to accommodate the narrative-cum-representational vocation, so evident in the new performance genres, within the category of dance without collapsing the distinction between theatre and dance altogether? My hypothesis is that Abhinavagupta redefines the concept of dramatic mimesis by imbuing the word *abhinaya*, which I have until now variously translated as “acting,” “enactment,” or “dramatic representation,” with a new meaning that is exclusive to the sphere of theatre. This redefined *abhinaya* will become definitional of the dramatic genres and will contribute to reshaping the frontiers of dance—be it

<sup>70</sup> ABh ad NŚ 4.261cd–263ab, p. 170.: *athocyate rāgakāvyaḍiprayogo nāṭyam eva, abhinayayogāt. yat tv abhinayādiśūnyam kevalam valanāvartanābhrūkṣepatārācalanacaranadhāraṇakampasphuritakaṭicchedarecakādi tad asmākaṃ ṅṛttaṃ bhaviṣyati. yatra nāṭyaśāṅkāpi nāsti.*

<sup>71</sup> Differently, L. Bansat-Boudon seems to take this as Abhinavagupta’s final position, on which see Bansat-Boudon 1992: 399–404 and Bansat-Boudon 1994: 198–199.

<sup>72</sup> On this point I follow Mankad (1936: 18–19), although I disagree with his evolutionary view of the performance genres (*ibid.* 16).



narrative or not—as distinguished from theatre, on the one hand, and from other forms of bodily communication on the other. Before looking at Abhinavagupta's arguments for the exclusion of narrative dance from the sphere of theatre, let me take a step back and say a few words about the centrality of his conception of aesthetic experience in theatre. This will help us understanding why dance cannot qualify to the full status of dramatic mimesis.

## 5 Less than mimesis: On the status of *abhinaya* in narrative dance

At the outset of this essay, it was shown that acting enjoys a prominent position in the definition of theatre starting with the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Based on the etymological derivation of the word *abhinaya*, acting is defined as that which carries the meanings of the dramatic text in front of the audience, and is divided into four main rubrics according to the medium it mobilizes: the body, the voice, the mind, and costume. Besides these technical classifications, there exists another, conventional meaning of *abhinaya*, known from philosophical sources, especially in discussions about knowledge acquisition and the valid means thereof. Bodily gestures, including facial expressions and movements, have been recognized as having the power to make something known, which is sometimes identified with the inner states of the mind. Some philosophical traditions thus list gestures among the valid means of knowledge, where they are typically listed as a subtype of inference. The *Praśastapādabhāṣyam*, a text of the Vaiśeṣika system—which possibly comes close, in India, to a philosophy of nature—dating to the fifth to sixth century AD, states that gestures produce a cognition for someone who knows *abhinaya*, that is, one who knows the invariable concomitance between a bodily action and that which is expressed by it:

We see that a cognition comes about through bodily gestures for the one who is acquainted with gesticulation (*abhinaya*); therefore, even the [cognition issuing therefrom] has to be regarded as a case of inference.<sup>73</sup>

The paradigmatic example given by a commentary on this text, the *Vyomavatī* (ca. 900 AD), is as follows: I see someone reaching up to his mouth with the hands in the shape of a cup and I infer that the person is thirsty. The source for the

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<sup>73</sup> PDhS (*anumānaprakaraṇam*), p. 48: *prasiddhābhinayasya ceṣṭayā pratipattidarśanāt tad apy anumānam eva.*

knowledge of the invariable concomitance between the two is said to be the world. However, it is added:

In this way, other kinds of gestures, [namely, those] known from the science of theatre (*nāṭyaśāstraprasiddha*), should also be subsumed under inference.<sup>74</sup>

These stray examples must suffice to show that, outside the specialized field of theatre, the word *abhinaya* was understood primarily as gesticulation, as a worldly way of communicating meaning without words, and that this was mainly understood to work by inference, by means of a conventional relation between gestures and meanings.

Abhinavagupta disagrees with such an analysis. First of all, to say that acting and what is understood thereof works through inference is problematic, since what Indian theatre primarily seeks to communicate through the fourfold *abhinaya* is the emotions. Indian theoreticians understood quite quickly that the emotions are highly dependent on a context for their comprehension. If I just see someone crying, I would not know whether the person is crying out of sorrow or happiness, which is why one needs the full array of aesthetic factors—the so-called determinants (*vibhāva*), consequents (*anubhāva*), and transitory states (*vyabhicāribhāva*)—for conveying an emotion in drama and eliciting the appropriate aesthetic response in the spectator: a young couple in the vicinity of a lotus pond (the “determinants”), the heroine casting side-glances, exhibiting tremor with her voice (the “consequents”), showing at the same time confusion, longing, and shame (the “transitory states”) will evoke the stable state of delight, and will incite the tasting of the corresponding amorous *rasa* for the spectator.

Moreover, to postulate that in theatre the emotions of a character are inferred by the spectator by seeing their imitation by an actor, consisting in the display of their external symptoms, would simply be unacceptable for Abhinavagupta, who famously dismantled the thesis that theatre is imitation.<sup>75</sup> This is not the place to go into detail, but to say that an actor is imitating the emotion of a character, say Rāma’s valor, is a logical impossibility, since the actor has never come across Rāma-the-god, and imitation requires the original, which is made into the object of imitation, to have been perceived at some previous moment. Abhinavagupta goes

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<sup>74</sup> *Vyomavatī*, p. 175: *evam anyāpi ceṣṭā nāṭyaśāstraprasiddhā anumāne ’ntarbhāvanīyeti*.

<sup>75</sup> The thesis of imitation or *anukaraṇavāda* was postulated by Śrī Śaṅkuka, who claimed that the character’s emotions are inferred by the spectators as being imitated by the actors through the display of their external symptoms, acting as inferential signs. The critique of the theory of imitation proposed by Śrī Śaṅkuka and its refutation by Abhinavagupta is available in translation in Gnoli 1968 and Pollock 2016. For the full argument against imitation in connection with acting, see Ganser forthcoming a.

even further: while he rejects imitation in theatre as a mimicry of somebody's emotions working through inference, he preserves *abhinaya* as the special way to communicate emotions in theatre, which is still mimetic but dissociated from inference and imitation. My hypothesis is that this reconfiguration of *abhinaya* as the dramatic representation of something in a particularly vivid way allows Abhinavagupta to actually preserve a strong sense of mimesis in theatre without the problematic burden of mimicry. Let us now have a look at this redefinition of *abhinaya*:

In this way, how can such an object defined as theatre (*nāṭya*) become an object of cognition? [In reply to this question, Bharata] says, [when it is conveyed by means of enactment through] the body and the other media. The enactments (*abhinaya*), such as the bodily and so on, cannot be assimilated to inferential signs or to linguistic convention. On the contrary, they are akin to an immediate direct perception (*pratyakṣasākṣātkāra*). †The entity defined as theatre does not consist in worldly knowledge and so on, [to be established as] true or false. Its essence is indeed the [*rasas*], such as the amorous one and others, which are instrumental to the cognition coinciding with a relishing, different from that of [the states of] delight and so forth. Precisely because they are causal in bringing (*anayana*) [the meanings] directly in front (*abhimukya*) [of the spectators], they are technically designated by the word *abhinaya* (“intended,” “dramatic representation”), unknown with this meaning in the *śāstra* (read: the Veda, sacred knowledge), in the world (read: in ordinary discourse), or elsewhere.<sup>76</sup>

In this passage, Abhinavagupta clearly distinguishes the process of dramatic representation achieved through acting both from the sphere of inference and from that of linguistic convention, giving it a totally new interpretation as a case of direct perception, though of a very special, lifelike type.<sup>77</sup> The whole discussion of whether narrative dance should be considered as theatre or dance centers on the analysis of the kind of *abhinaya* that is seen in forms of danced poetry (*nṛttakāvya*) or in poetry set to a musical mode (*rāgakāvya*). This analysis triggers an even stronger reconfiguration of the concept of *abhinaya*, from a mimicry consisting in gesticulation working through inference—the conventional meaning of *abhinaya*

<sup>76</sup> ABh ad NŚ 1.119, vol. 1, p. 44: *evambhūto nāṭyalakṣaṇo 'rthaḥ katham pratigocaribhavatī āha —aṅgādīti. ye 'bhinayāḥ āṅgikādayaḥ na ca te liṅgasaṅketādirūpāḥ, api tu pratyakṣasākṣātkāra-kalpāḥ. tñāṭyalakṣaṇo 'rtho' 'laukikasamyamithyājñānādirūpaḥ tasyaiva bhāvaḥ śṅgārādayo ratyādivilakṣaṇāsvādaparyāyapratītyupayogināḥ. ata evābhīmukhyānanahetutvād anyalokaśāstrāprasiddhenābhinayaśabdena vyapadeśyāḥ.* My translation is based on the text of the in-progress critical edition of the first chapter of the *Abhinavabhāratī*, currently under preparation by the author, together with Lyne Bansat-Boudon and Daniele Cuneo. The text is corrupt and requires a conjecture, which is placed within cruxes.

<sup>77</sup> One may notice that the cognition of theatre and what appears in it is never simply equated with direct perception, but it is always qualified by the adjective *-kalpa* “similar to,” “quasi” perceptual cognition. For more on this special cognition, for the construction of which enactment or dramatic representation (*abhinaya*) plays a fundamental role, see Bansat-Boudon 1992: 150–151.

—to an actual process of embodiment, of making things *as if* they were present in front of the audience. In this light, one can now read Abhinavagupta's answer to the opponent who tried to keep the new genres of narrative dance within the sphere of theatre by arguing that they too use enactment to bring out their narrative content:

To explain: in danced poetry (*nṛttakāvya*), such as in the Ḍombikā and the like, no discussion about acting (*abhinaye kathā*) is ever possible, just as [no discussion is possible] concerning the good usage of syllables and so on in poetry where [those very] syllables have been dropped or added, or in other [kinds of poetic riddles]. Therefore, what is there to debate on this point? In fact, the nature of [danced poetry] is just dance, and nothing else. The way the bodily movement appears just depends on a delicacy whose nature inheres in the meaning of the poetic text that is brought into being [through the song].<sup>78</sup>

As the comparison in this passage suggests, it is not the case that *abhinaya* is totally absent from a form like the Ḍombikā, just as syllables are not absent in poetic riddles in which they have to be dropped or added to get to the intended meaning.<sup>79</sup> However, just as poetic riddles do not lend themselves to a discourse about the appropriate use of syllables, nor does the Ḍombikā use enactment in an exemplary way, i.e., in the fullest sense of dramatic mimesis that is proper to theatre. In a long and convoluted argument that I can only summarize here, Abhinavagupta reviews the four registers of acting as they are found in the Ḍombikā. Vocal acting, first of all, does not really bring anything to direct experience, since the dancer interpreting this genre does sometimes take up the singing herself, while other times the lyrics are transferred to the main vocalist accompanied by the orchestra, so it is difficult to identify the text vocally enacted with the voice of a character. Moreover, in the middle of the performance, the dancer becomes the narrator of stories of clandestine love, where she evokes some fictional characters solely through gesticulations, without embodying them. Finally, at the end of the performance, she addresses the king or sponsor of the performance in the first person or makes allusions to him. Her bodily acting is, as seen in the passage above, nothing but a bodily movement that adapts its quality to the poetic content (delicate in this case, since the literary text at the basis of the singing expresses the amorous flavor), but it is not used to bring any fictional character to life. The poetic content is in fact expressed primarily by the song, not

<sup>78</sup> ABh ad NŚ 4.261cd–263ab, vol. 1, p. 173: *nṛttakāvye ḍombikāḍau varṇacyutādāv* [conj. ; *varṇacyutād* Ed.] *iva varṇādiprayoge tāvad \*abhinaye kathāiva* [conj. ; *abhinayakathāiva* Ed.] *nāstīti kiṃ tatra vicāryate. kevalanṛttasvabhāvamātraṃ* [KĀ ; *kevalaṃ nṛtta°* Ed.] *hi tat, kevalaṃ bhāvitakāvyaṛthagatārthatattvasaukumāryakṛtam aṅgasya tathātvam iti nirṇeṣyata ity āstāṃ tāvad etat.*

<sup>79</sup> The poetic riddle specifically discussed here is the *varṇacyuta(ka)*, a poem where it is necessary to drop or add some syllables in order to make sense of the verses. For more on *varṇacyuta*, see Bansat-Boudon 1992: 400, n. 60, who first brought to attention and discussed this comparison.

by the bodily acting, since the dancer does not put on the costumes corresponding to the fictional characters in her stories. From this discussion it emerges that the *Ḍombikā* indeed qualifies as a case of intermedial narrative, a narrative involving different media that interact with each other, although they do not all have the same narrative force.<sup>80</sup>

In the *Ḍombikā*, which I take to be a sort of parodistic genre,<sup>81</sup> the dancer is said to interpret the character of another dancer, called a *ḍombikā*, probably due to her belonging to the class of the *ḍombas*, one of the lowest on the social scale. This enigmatic figure, who must have lent her name to the genre, is known to us from historical sources of the period as a worldly dancer, traveling around with her musical ensemble and performing at the kingly court in order to get material gains from her performances, aimed at seducing the king.<sup>82</sup> The dancer, who makes a parodic interpretation of the *ḍombikā* character in the *Ḍombikā* genre, is said to use the psycho-physical acting, which includes the display of the involuntary symptoms of love, such as horripilation and the like, in order to charm the king. However, as Abhinavagupta points out, she does it simply by conforming to ordinary behavior, while at the same time dancing in line with the rhythm and tempo, without bringing out the literary meaning of the song. As to the accoutrements, the dancer is just dressed as a dancer and neither puts on the costumes of the fictional characters evoked in the more explicitly narrative portion, nor that of the real-life *ḍombikā* she interprets. In this regard, it is worth looking at the conclusion of the discussion of the *Ḍombikā*, this form of hybrid dance that one could have mistaken—but no longer does—for a dramatic genre.

In the part of the [performance genre called *Ḍombikā* in which the dancer mainly dances to the musical accompaniment], the essence [of the performance] is simply worldly. In it, how could one even suspect the relationship of the performer to the performed [character], just as when people refer to Rāma and to the actor [enacting the god as two distinct entities]? Or else, what sort of spectator could [such a performance] ever aim to instruct? And it follows closely that the [worldly] dancer performs in a way similar to that in which the [*ḍombikā*] used to perform songs, dances, etc. But she does not show the *ḍombikā* as similar to a directly perceived (*sākṣātkāra*) [character], since she does not conceal her own identity or [appearance] by putting on the costume or other [accoutrements] of a [*ḍombikā*]. For this very reason, the [dancer] does not show the *ḍombikā* [character] as if directly present (*sākṣātkāra*) [on stage], but makes a display of dance just like that [of a real *ḍombikā*], with enactment and without it. Therefore, those [hand gestures], such as

**80** I take this idea from Laura Gianvittorio-Ungar 2019, which uses an innovative approach to combine the insights of intermedial narratology and textual analysis to explore the narrativity of dance in ancient Greek theatre.

**81** For this new interpretation of the *Ḍombikā* in a parodic key, with a translation of all the relevant passages in the *Abhinavabhāratī* and a discussion of the evidence coming from other texts, see Ganser forthcoming a.

**82** On the *ḍombikā* as a historical figure, described in the chronicles of Kashmir, see *Rājatarāṅginī* V.354–386.

the *patāka*<sup>83</sup> and others, which are commonly regarded as part of a dramatic performance, [should be regarded in the *Ḍombikā*] as merely for display. That is why saying that theatre provides refinement to dance, and that the latter should consequently be defined technically by the bodily and other types of [acting] (*aṅgādi*), is [just] a metaphorical way of speaking, [since nothing in dance is really brought to direct manifestation].<sup>84</sup>

In the protocol of performance of the *Ḍombikā*, insofar as we can reconstruct it from Abhinavagupta's terse descriptions in the fourth chapter of the *Abhinavabhāratī*, the dancer first announces and introduces the topic of the *Ḍombikā*, after which she turns into a narrator and starts to tell stories having a hero, a heroine, and a go-between (typically a female friend of the heroine or hero) as subjects. This phase is followed by an implicit address to the king or leader of the assembly, and by a song where the speech of the *ḍombikā* is taken up by the singer. In this phase, the *ḍombikā* just dances in a worldly manner, first by displaying the signs of love directed at the king's seduction, then with pure movements set to rhythm and tempo. If, in the first phase of the performance, one might have wondered if the dancer dramatically represents the heroine, the hero, and the other characters of the story she narrates—most probably by way of gesticulation and facial expressions—in the last phase of pure dance, no narrative content is incorporated, so that no suspicion might even arise that the dancer is enacting one character or the other. In theatre, on the contrary, the spectator is aware of the actor and character at the same time throughout the performance, which guarantees the aesthetic distance needed to identify and empathize with the character without losing sight of the fictional status of the representation.<sup>85</sup>

**83** The *patāka* (lit. “banner”) is one of the numerous codified hand gestures that actors use to enact the textual meanings.

**84** ABh ad NŚ 4.261cd–263ab, vol. 1, p. 174: *tatretyaty aṃśe laukikamātrasvabhāva eva rāma-naṭādivyavahāravat kva prayojyaprayojakabhāvāśaṅkā. kasya vā sāmājikasya vyutpādanam abhisamhitam. tadanantaram ca yathaiva sā gītanṛttādi prāyuṅkte tathaiva tatsadṛṣam nartakī prayuṅkte, na tu ḍombikāṃ sāksātkāralpena darśayati, tadīyāhāryādinā svātmarūpa-pracchādanādyabhāvāt. tata eva na ḍombikāṃ sāksātkāralpena sā darśayati, api tu tathaiva nṛttam sābhīnayaṃ kevalam ca pradarśayati. tena nāṭyāṅgatayā [conj.; nāṭyāṅgatāyāṃ Ed.] yad dṛṣṭam patākādi tad darśanamātratayā. ato nāṭyam saṃskāraṃ nṛttasyety aṅgādivyapadeśa ity upacārād ucyate.*

**85** As D. Cuneo (2013: 64–65) explains it, “Abhinavagupta argues that in every aesthetic experience there is a sort of clash between cognitive stances. On the one hand, we do have the deeply grounded foreknowledge that what we are experiencing is unreal, obviously and intrinsically unreal, as it has been fictionally created by the artwork. On the other hand, we have the clear, straightforward data of our immediate perception. The result of this cognitive incongruence is the generalization of emotions. [...] On the one hand, the enjoyer of art is engrossed in the sympathetic contemplation of the emotional focus represented by art. Yet, on the other hand, he remains aware of the ultimate and constitutive unreality of the imaginary universe created by the artistic medium.”

This is indeed what Abhinavagupta means when he speaks of theatre as the object of a quasi-direct perception, and a quasi-direct perception of the character is achieved when the actor conceals his/her own identity by adopting the costume as well as the speech, gestures, and psychophysical reactions appropriate to the character. Not only does the dancer in a *Ḍombikā* performance fail to hide her own persona under the disguise of the interpreted *ḍombikā* or any other fictional character appearing in the narrative lines, but she also does not employ the other registers of acting so as to produce a lifelike experience on stage. A sharp contrast is drawn in this passage between *abhinaya* proper, in the etymological sense of “bringing the objects as directly present in front of a spectator,” and *abhinaya* as a mere display of movements and gestures, in the nontechnical sense of gesticulating as seen in the philosophical sources. The unbridgeable gap between these two senses of *abhinaya* is further emphasized by the choice of words used to refer to the pseudoenactment of the *Ḍombikā* interpreter: she is just “showing” or “displaying” the behavior of the *ḍombikā* character, and performs in a way that is “similar” to the way a *ḍombikā* performs. The relation of similarity, it must be noticed, typically defines imitation-qua-mimicry (and hence also parody), which is based on the recognition of some common features between the imitated and the imitation, and works through inference. As shown above, imitation was exactly what Abhinavagupta wanted to ban from theatre in general and from dramatic mimesis in particular in the reconfigured sense of “quasi-direct perception.”

By the same token by which narrative dance is distinguished from theatre in essence, namely its lack of an enactment of the characters as if they were directly perceived, its purpose is also distinguished: in the absence of any narrative content that one sees as if taking place directly in front of him, by way of the character embodied on stage, no instruction (*vyutpatti*, one of the two aims of theatre together with pleasure, *prīti*) can ever take place. In theatre, in fact, the spectators learn to behave like the god Rāma and unlike the demon Rāvaṇa, since they are made to see the results of their respective actions in a vivid and lifelike manner.<sup>86</sup> But if no character is enacted, there can be no question of instruction by way of narration. Again, if the narrative part of a *Ḍombikā* might mistakenly have been thought to provide instruction in the means to attain love (as in the argument of the advocate of its identity with theatre, presented above), in the phase of pure dance, nobody’s instruction is aimed at. The explicit aim of the *ḍombikā*’s dance is, moreover, to entertain and entice the king so as to get material benefits, and not to

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<sup>86</sup> On the determinant role of *abhinaya* in bringing the narrative content to a quasi-perceptive cognition, and on the role of the latter for achieving the twofold aim of theatre, see Bansat-Boudon 1992: 128.

provide moral education to the whole audience, whence a difference in their purpose.

Whatever gesture, speech, psychophysical symptom, makeup, or dramatic feature can be seen in a *Ḍombikā* or in other genres that combine dance with other narrative media, it never reaches the status of a lifelike presentation. It is only metaphorically that the representational-cum-narrative function of dance can be called *abhinaya*;<sup>87</sup> not in the full meaning of dramatic mimesis, but in the weaker sense of mimicry.

## 6 Conclusion

Throughout the history of Indian performance, dance has been—and still is—one of the privileged media of storytelling in secular and religious contexts, for audiences of kings, gods, and common men. The art of the storyteller is deeply entangled with that of the actor, dancer, and bard, so much so that in the early sources, figures of performers and their roles are as conspicuous as they are ambiguous. Such fundamental ambiguity does not come to a halt when theatre becomes a body of expert knowledge endowed with an ur-treatise, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. In this text, theatre functions as the overarching category that subsumes within its framework a number of ancillary arts with which it shares several characteristics and techniques. The art of dancing, for instance, overlaps with theatre in its being grounded in the body of the performer and in its use of a codified vocabulary of gestures and movements. Notwithstanding such commonalities, dance is conceptualized in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as an independent art endowed with its own basic movements and larger sequences that are mainly nonnarrative and nonrepresentational. However, as soon as it is incorporated within the larger framework of drama, the beautiful and self-contained bodily movement called dance becomes intertwined with theatre's ends, be it the praise of the deities in the preliminary rite, the surplus of pleasure it confers to help the spectator identify with the emotional focus of the performance, or the enactment of battle scenes and stage circumambulations that require stylized and superlative bodily movements.

The question of whether or not dance means anything beyond the mere performance of physical movement can be said to be “always on the table”—to borrow the words of Karin Schlapbach (2018: 281)—even in South Asian sources. If it is now recognized that classical authors developed different models for understanding

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<sup>87</sup> Cf. Bansat-Boudon 1992: 402 and n. 70. For other uses of the adjective “metaphorical” when one speaks about *abhinaya* with reference to dance, see Bansat-Boudon 1994: 200, n. 19, 20.



mimetic representation in dance,<sup>88</sup> the same can be said of Indian authors, who took seriously the challenge of attributing a representational-cum-narrative function to dance, without altogether dismantling the specificity of Sanskrit theatre as laid down in the sacred lore of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The category of *nṛtya*, which has entered the common vocabulary of every performer of Indian dance today as a useful label in talking about mimetic dance, in fact represents a late and nonubiquitous entry into the technical vocabulary of ancient dramaturgy and dance theory. Absent from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which records only the two categories of *nāṭya* (theatre) and *nṛtta* (dance), the new category of *nṛtya* appears for the first time toward the end of the first millennium in the *Daśarūpaka*, although this latter work appears to incorporate it from an earlier source, where it was used to collectively designate a group of new performance genres hitherto absent from the scientific tradition. As seen above, although the *Nāṭyaśāstra* does not record a category called *nṛtya* as such, it does recognize an expressive quality to dance and acknowledges an interesting discussion about the difference between dancing and enacting. While the *Daśarūpaka* adopts the category of *nṛtya* to talk about narrative dance, both as independent performance genres that combine dance, acting, and music, and as a particular method of stage presentation within a dramatic spectacle, Abhinavagupta opts for maintaining the single category of *nṛtta* from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and expands it so as also to include narrative dance and any type of expressive dance.<sup>89</sup> In this paper, I have argued that he manages to do this by means of a sophisticated reconfiguration of dramatic mimesis, which results in a distinction between two kinds of *abhinaya*: the first is the *abhinaya* specific to theatre, a full mimesis in which the characters and events are brought into the presence of the spectators in a particularly vivid way, using all the registers of acting; the second is the *abhinaya* of dance, which is an incomplete mimesis or a mimesis only by name in that it does not bring anything to a lifelike presentation but rather indicates, describes, or displays its objects, drawing on the nontechnical meaning of the word *abhinaya* in nontheatrical sources, which makes it akin to a worldly mimicry.

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**88** A.-E. Peponi, for instance, identifies three models of mimesis in dance in ancient classical descriptions of dance performances: “Based on the available evidence we can trace at least three models of apprehending dance that either question or alter a conventional understanding of mimetic representation. The first model is entirely non-mimetic; the second relies on analogy; and the third is what I would like to call a meta-mimetic model!” (Peponi 2015: 211).

**89** On the distinction between narrative and expressive dance, see Gianvittorio-Ungar/Schlapbach forthcoming. By expressive dance, I mean to include forms of nonrepresentational dance that do not contain a plotline or characters, like narrative dance, but that nonetheless can be used to express meaning in a more indirect way, for instance through the iconic value of some of the dance movements, like *karaṇas* and *aṅgahāras*.

Although the path traced by Abhinavagupta in this particular domain did not become mainstream in later dance discourse, and went almost unnoticed in modern studies, his discussion of narrative dance gives us a unique overview of the new genres in terms of content, form, aesthetics, and performance.<sup>90</sup> A number of considerations about narrative dance that emerge from Abhinavagupta's descriptions are worth recalling. First of all, the genres of narrative dance do not contain only dance, but other media as well, such as songs and instrumental music. Although dance is the overarching category, the primacy of communicating characters and plot—the narrative force, one might say—is assigned especially to the text that significantly bears the name *kāvya*, a term commonly used to designate the poetic text, whether a poem or a play. What distinguishes drama from poetry is, classically, the fact that in drama, the text is represented or enacted, it is conveyed through *abhinaya*, and therefore acquires a visible dimension that poetry lacks. The visual element, produced by the stage representation embodied in the activity of the actors, combined with the psychagogic effect of dance and music, accounts for theatre's accessibility to a larger public, who gain easy access to pleasure and instruction, the twofold goal of theatre. In narrative dance, just like in theatre, the visual element is dominant in the body of the dancer. Yet dance has a narrative force that is different from dramatic acting, since, unlike theatre, it does not convey characters and events as vivid and lifelike. This is due not only to the lack of costumes that concord with the various characters narrated by the dancer, but also to the use of descriptive gestures rather than a full character embodiment, as well as to the voice of the text shifting between the first person and the third person, as is typical of the narratorial instance, and its vocal rendering partaken by the dancer and the vocalist. All these features, one may conclude, create for the spectator a distance from the narrated events, which prevents a fully fledged aesthetic identification like that of theatre, thereby invalidating its twofold aim and demoting narrative dance to the rank of entertainment.

Beyond the variety of answers given to the question of the narrativity of dance, among which Abhinavagupta's is certainly the most elaborate one, this paper has attempted to link the emergence of such discussions to the historical moment when hybrid forms on the verge of dance and theatre—possibly the most common form of performance in India today—began to be recorded, first in the literary sources, then in the technical treatises toward the close of the first millennium. If taken as collective evidence, these sources capture the moment, between the fifth and tenth centuries, when a number of intermedial forms of performance

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<sup>90</sup> The only other lengthy discussion connecting issues of mimesis and specific performance techniques that I am aware of in Indian sources is the one found in the *Naṭāṅkuśa*, an anonymous medieval text from Kerala that describes a performance method similar to present-day Kutiyattam.

crystallized into new genres, which confronted Sanskrit theorists with the necessity to enlarge the field of stage performance and its expert knowledge so as to meaningfully include them.

## Appendix: The new genres of narrative dance

As the Ancients said:

When the mind of the king is seduced by words full of concealed passion, that mild [genre] is known as *Ḍombikā*.

When a dancer utters the description of *Nṛsiṃha* (“the man-lion”), the Boar, and so on, [that genre] is [known as] *Bhāṇa*, [which is] performed with vehement bodily movements.

[When the dancer] adopts a gait similar to that of an elephant and the like, and sets out on a journey, [that genre] endowed with scarce vehement [movements] and plenty of mild [ones] is called *Prasthāna*.

When the vehement behavior of the husband is reported in the presence of a friend, commingled from time to time with [the narration of] his mild coquettish exploits, [that genre] is called *Ṣidgaka*.

That [genre] which features the sporting of young children, combat, and so on, as well as sports relating to boars and lions, played by using banners and other [props], is called *Bhāṇikā*.

The [genre called] *Preraṇa* is mainly [characterized by] mirth and is endowed with riddles. When it is connected with the description of seasons, [the genre is] called *Rāmākrīḍa*.

The dance that is performed in a circle is called *Hallīsaka*. One single person should lead the [dance], just like *Hari* (i.e., *Kṛṣṇa*) among the shepherdesses.

[The genre] endowed with various *tālas* and *layas*, performed by more than one dancer, up to sixty-four couples, [is called] *Rāsaka*, [and] it has mild and vehement [movements].

As [Kohala] said:

[The *rāgakāvya*] is known to be a poem (*kāvya*) with a well-performed story, [endowed with] various *rasas*, [distinguished by the use of different tempos (*layāntara*) and melodic patterns (*rāga*)].<sup>91</sup>

<sup>91</sup> For the Sanskrit text, see ABh ad NŚ 4.267cd–268ab, vol. 1, p. 179–180. As pointed out by Bose (2007 [1991]: 182), the same definitions are also given by the later authors Hemacandra, Vāgbhaṭa, and Śāradatanaya.

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