Visual Learning in the 21st Century: Cape Breton Step Dance on the Small Screen and as a Learning Tool in the Dance Class

Mats Melin, Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick, Ireland

I have been engaging with Cape Breton step dance culture since the early 1990s. I have taught, performed, and researched the dance form extensively from that point. As a Swede, having worked professionally with Scottish and Cape Breton dance in Scotland since the mid-1990s and in Ireland since 2005, I have taught and performed it in numerous contexts, but almost always on the remote. However, my recently finished Ph.D. research on the dance genre did bring me into close and prolonged contact with it in Cape Breton itself. Having taught dance for over 30 years, I have observed how dance students in recent years increasingly access video clips on the Internet to learn and explore dance.

It is July 2011 and, with one mouse click, access is granted to view a YouTube clip. Cape Bretoner Harvey Beaton is step dancing on the stage at Broad Cove Scottish Festival in July 1985 to the fiddle and piano playing of Buddy MacMaster and Maybelle Chisholm MacQueen respectively.[1] This clip was uploaded to YouTube in 2007 and has been viewed close to 5900 times since then, according to the clip statistics. Who watched the clip is not known, but access is granted globally. This is in contrast to those acting out the dance, the music, and the act of filming, as they more than likely knew many of the people present around them, perhaps were even related to them, on that occasion in 1985.

In this paper I contrast the "real-life" meaning providing experience of Cape Breton step dancing in context with that which is accessed through online technology, from a distance and at any moment in time. Taking the above-mentioned 1985 YouTube clip as an example, Harvey serves as a representation of "the Cape Breton dancer", and he was, at that particular moment, in a particular place and context, where as I understand it, he was embodying meaning to the perception of step dance of his Cape Breton community as movement signs. The notion of "movement" as "signs" aligns with Sally Ann Ness's questions about dancing gestures as inscription (2008). The dancing gestures are here understood or even observed migrating or drawn inwards (embodied) in order to be realized through the dancer's body as "a living, historically informed, continuous movement of gestural practice" (Ness 2008, 24). The dancing bodies' "tissues are structures that mould and are moulded by thinking in action" (ibid., 24). The dancer's body brings meaningful symbols to life, when the dancer lives to prevent the forgetting of "what it is that can be actively understood of the gestures that have been inscribed into" the dancer's body, according to

Ness (ibid., 24). As such, Ness's conception also aligns itself with Pierce's claim that "man himself is a sign" (ibid., 24).[2] The gestures/movements performed by the dancer's body "would posit a deepening and expanding of consciousness through the integrative, synthesizing faculty of performance" (Ness 2008, 25).

My own understanding of Cape Breton step dance, furthermore, also finds support in Sklar's (2008) theory of embodiment, where abstraction "is a movement of meaning that can be embodied by the human figure as a whole" (Ness 2008, 278). In Sklar's view, abstraction forms a bridge – a connecting process of active, transformative, configurational repatterning – that allows migration between sensation and what Sklar defines as embodied schema (Ness 2008, 278). According to Sklar, Ness, and Stimson, "embodied experience and the schema it generates are central to cultural organization of thought" (Ness 2008, 278). These views help us see, through dance, for example, how "place-like bodies can be, and how gesture-specific places can be, how movement survives in and gives definition to both virtual and actual places and bodies through time" (Ness 2008, 278). Here, the gestures of the dancing body may acquire the agency to migrate to new bodies which, in turn, may dance with them, host, conform, experiment, express them and in the end pass them on, to name just a few possibilities suggested by Ness and Sklar.

Gregory Dorchak's (2010) analysis of the different ideas of "understanding" and the rhetorical notion of "agency" in relation to Cape Breton fiddle music as experienced in Cape Breton itself and in Boston, Massachusetts, also align with my own perception. Dorchack points to certain aspects of hermeneutics, particularly Heidegger's project on fundamental ontology, but also to Husserl, Riceour, and Dilthey, as it does to Rice's (1997) concept of phenomenological hermeneutics: they are all important to the notion of us as beings, understanding ourselves through our understanding of everything that surrounds us. Each individual's experience of the same thing is thus unique. How each of us experiences a dance genre depends on how the preceding traditions of the context where we exist provide us with tools to use to understand a particular genre. The local tradition tells us how to perform, embody, in short, *use* the genre and as such conveys its meaning to us. For example, Gadamer as quoted in Dorchak states that "traditions are the only means we possess that allow us to understand something and make it meaningful" (Dorchak 2010, 251). The implications of our different understand-

ings of the meaning of a dance genre are greatly dependent on the contexts and the processes it is transmitted through. In short, Dorchack states that the further removed from the source we are, and the less frequent exposure we have, fewer and selected aspects of the tradition become important and have meaning for the performer. The level of agency of the embodied knowledge is reduced in these removed contexts.

The Cape Bretoners' Understanding of Their Step Dance Genre

In their own local context, dance and music in Cape Breton are inextricably linked, with music being primarily played as dance music in all local contexts. Dance is at the heart of the everydayness of their music (Dorchak 2010, 252). Whether the music is played at house parties, at square dances, or at local concerts, dance is the driving force behind the music's rhythm. Applied to both musicians and dancers (often the same people), their tradition values the individual's sense of embodied knowledge as set within unspoken parameters, rather than appraising it from some sort of homogenized standard. This value of individualization has allowed the Cape Breton music and dance traditions to adapt due to the community's responses to new elements and ideas introduced over time (Melin 2012). From a musical perspective, the innovations become individual trademark characteristics allowing many locals, even with closed eyes, to proudly identify who is playing. Similarly in the dance, dancers are recognized through their individual ways of performing, movements, motifs and steps, thus indicating to whom they are related, from whom they learnt, or at least at one time, from what area they came (ibid.). The local knowledge extends to a deeply fundamental level illustrated in a conversation between two women in the queue at the local Freshmart store in Mabou, where they discussed whether a young dancer's second strathspey step danced the day before at a concert came from his mother's or father's side of the family.[3]

Up until recent years, this was largely a community where dance was learnt informally in the home, from family and relations, at local dances, and by observing dancers in all other local contexts. Even when dance classes were set up in the 1970s, those who taught them brought with them their local contexts and values into the more formal context of the classroom. In the early 1970s, none of those taking a class were trained as dance teachers; they developed their own individual ways of passing on their knowledge, based on how they had picked up their dancing skills themselves. Thus individual trademarks and vocabulary regarding movements were developed and passed on. Their understanding of the meaning of their dance genre is based on all the ongoing and interconnected processes in their community, which happens (slowly) over time and through constant interaction within the local community. The meaning of dance and music is thus never removed from the people performing it, nor the place and context where it appears in Cape Breton (Melin 2012).

Local Traditions on the Global Arena as Heritage

As a dancer, performer, teacher, and researcher of percussive step dance genres, particularly Cape Breton step dancing, I listened with interest to Swedish professor of ethnology Owe Ronström's keynote speech at North Atlantic Fiddle Convention (NAFCo) 2008 in St John's, Newfoundland. Ronström outlined his thoughts on the shift of the notion of (local) tradition to being seen as heritage. Ronström outlines the process of heritagization due to the global popularization of "folk" musics in the 1970s and 1980s, which shifted the information and knowledge flow from what Ronström calls "knowers" of the local tradition to "doers" of the same in the initial stages; to further flow to the "marketers" who predominantly took control of "folk music" as a general genre and who also invented the genre "world music" (Ronström 2010, 271). Festivalization of the folk genre music took place, with workshops and summer schools being an important aspect of this change. Thus, in a very short time, the greatest possible impression was achieved, according to Zygmont Baumann (1994), or "the greatest possible number of signs in the smallest possible space", as Russian semiotician Boris Uspenskij put it when discussing the primary effects of festivalization (Uspenskij in Ronström 2010, 274). It was now possible "to learn" and experience another dance/music tradition away from its traditional context over just a few days. However, learning a lot in a short time cuts short many of the natural processes of transmission, where in this new context there is rarely any continual reinforcement of the genre's values nor any interconnection with other aspects of the culture of origin. In addition, the attendees of festivalization contexts are exposed to individuals who assume the role of representatives for their whole cultural expression (see Ronström 2010, 275).

It is important to note this difference in the use of time when the processes of moving the experience of a traditional mindscape[4] from the local, the inherited, and the community-connected to the dislodged, urbanized (even when placed in the rural) mindscape of heritage, with its emphasis on the international, are occurring. (Ronström 2010, 277).

In the last decade, due to the universalized and radicalized consequences of modernity, as stated by British Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990, 3), the uncoupling and disembedding of entire social systems that shifted aspects of local contexts into the

global domain has increasingly occurred through high-speed mediums such as the Internet. There these contexts, their time, space, and social relations, get restructured across unlimited areas of space and time. New communication technology creates new relations, which render all kinds of boundaries and all kinds of mental geographies problematic. This accelerated uncoupling is, at the same time, a cause and effect of an increasing globalization. As Ronström continues, these global structures are dualisms which, on the one hand, create "extreme homogenization, standardization and even monopolization", but on the other hand, "creates extreme mobility and diversity". "When objects, behaviours, styles, and expressive forms are carried on them, they are disconnected from their original contexts and become accessible to people in completely different places, for completely different purposes" (Ronström 2010, 275).

I here take the liberty to use as reference my own learning experiences to illustrate examples of remote dance learning before the Internet era, and furthermore some of the realizations I have had that are pertinent to this article. I started my own learning of a dance genre in a formal class situation, doing a standardized form of Scottish dance removed from its original context, as the classes took place in Sweden. The weekly classes were based on written manuals, taught mainly by Swedes who had acquired their skills at short-term workshops in Scotland or been taught the genre in Sweden, thus giving the students a second- or third-hand account of the tradition when passed on. Later, I attended workshops and classes on various types of Scottish dance in Scotland and in other places, which, on reflection, substantially altered my perception of what values, meanings, techniques, and so forth the Scottish dance traditions incorporate. I had thus several realizations of the same dance genres to negotiate when embodying and performing the same, even though only rarely did a teacher discuss context or place of the dance genre in question during class. Written manuals as guidelines governed most of these Scottish dance traditions, while others were completely orally based and thus open to interpretation on a different level. I finally encountered Cape Breton step dance at a weeklong summer course in the Isle of Skye, Scotland, in 1992. Two Cape Bretoners, advertised as among the greatest exponents of their tradition – fiddler Buddy MacMaster and step dancer cum pianist Harvey Beaton – were brought over to share their music and dance. This occasion, and those that followed, offered something above and beyond just learning the technical aspects of the movement system, which was generally the case at similar types of workshops. If the learner was willing to listen, Harvey Beaton would constantly, while teaching, contextualize his dance genre by referring to local Cape Breton dance and music contexts,

other local dancers and their way of executing similar movements, how he himself had learnt, the connection to the music, and perhaps most importantly, the essential aspect of the individual putting his or her own stamp on the dancing. The level of consciousness of place and meaning of the dance for Harvey and his community became quite apparent.

Reflecting on this, I recall observing the learners at the time, experiencing the two different levels of learning and processing at these workshops. There were those who were happy just to mechanically learn the movements and go off and do their own thing with them, and there was a smaller group who decided to find out more about the Cape Breton culture and context and the interconnectedness of music and dance in addition to learning the movement repertoire.

The last and current step in my own awareness of Cape Breton step dance in particular was to go to the Island, attend the social dances, house parties, and sessions, dance in the kitchen, and observe and dance at concerts. Only when fully interacting with the local community life, and thus getting a flavour of the "place", did I feel better qualified to make statements about this context. It also provided me with a different meaning and deeper personal level of understanding of what step dance means to that community.

This brief summary of learning scenarios all involve direct human interaction at some level, either directly in the place and context where the dance genre originates and exists on an everyday basis, or as short snapshots of a dance genre at workshops with representatives of a particular dance genre, thus engaging all of one's senses, particularly visual, aural, and kinaesthetic modes of transmission.

When Cape Breton Step Dance is Accessed Remotely via Global Internet Highways

In the last 20 years or so, we have had access to instructional videos and latterly DVDs on how to play and dance a multitude of different genres. My personal experience indicates that these are often bought to complement one of the short-term learning experiences mentioned earlier. The live action was the trigger and the video/DVD acted as a means of remembering and possibly learning a bit more about the genre in question. In the case of the only two instructional DVDs on Cape Breton step dance, they are both well-produced and pedagogically well-structured, each one including a section explaining the place of step dance in the Cape Breton community, presented both visually and told as a story. Accessing these videos/DVDs would in both cases be through mail order or by contacting the two dancers responsible for the productions.

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The internet, on the other hand, provides instant access to, for example, YouTube clips of Cape Breton dancers performing locally in various contexts. For the locals and those deeply involved and interacting with this community, they serve as snapshot reminders of parts of the culture and have deep meaning for those with knowledge of what came before and after the clip, who all the actors are, and how the dance and music communicates certain values and meaning to those who are part of the community. But let's play with the notion for a moment that you are a dance enthusiast, perhaps with a particular interest in percussive dance, and you find what you see in these clips appealing, making you want to learn to do the same. You could be inspired to seek out workshops on the genre or even travel around the world to Cape Breton to experience the dancing in its context. Modern technology, however, enables us to slow down video clips; we can dissect the movements into their smallest parts and thus visually piece it back together ourselves. I say visually, as often the sound of the feet is not audible in these clips, because the music tends to dominate in the majority of these recordings. Indeed, a number of dancing gestures can migrate from body to body in this fashion, to use Ness and Sklar's terminology, and the learner could copy the movements and later perform them in their own fashion. What about the multitude of layers of culturally embedded and transmitted information that can be understood only through local knowledge of the genre? This recorded performance is still transmitting this information to the "knower", but the same is lost to the "doer" or "learner" across cyberspace. As Ronström points out, this disconnected viewing or learning of a dance genre will enable a completely different purpose in a completely different context. It could be argued that by watching multiple online clips, or accessing this knowledge through workshops, for example, these processes would provide a certain amount of information. My own experience, however, of doing exactly this, to enhance my own understanding, only made me acquire certain levels of understanding of the dance genre. Only after prolonged actual interaction with Cape Breton step dance in context in Canada, in addition to workshops taught by Cape Bretoners elsewhere, was I provided with many additional layers of understanding that I would not otherwise have accessed through visual means only. When, in turn, passing on my dance knowledge in a class situation, I have noticed that not all layers of my own understanding are passed on or picked up by the learners. In a forthcoming article I describe one knowledge layer in particular, that of movement segment combinations that are used in Cape Breton and Scotland vary. Here I argue that the difference in learning context greatly influences how the same movements are combined differently in the two places,

Cape Breton being the source and Scotland where the dancing is applied differently (Melin: forthcoming). We all learn differently, so this is based only on my personal experience.

Here, I return to the clip of Harvey Beaton dancing as an example of what aspects of the genre may not be understood by the visual clip alone. To begin with, and as the comments indicate, Harvey's ability to dance can be, and is, appreciated. But local knowledge would add meaning that the observer across the Internet highways could not even begin to guess at or attribute importance to. What is Harvey's relationship to the musicians, the other characters on the stage and the audience? It is important to know that Buddy plays for the same man who often accompanies him on the piano. They share the knowledge of tune repertoire, preferences in speed and choice of actual tunes to dance to at that moment, even though they would seldom, if ever, discuss this beforehand. They perform in front of a predominantly informed local audience, and I say informed because when you stand among them, they continually discuss the dancers and their dancing. They analyze steps, they discuss the relationships between dancers and who they remind them of, of dancers of yesteryear and so forth. This is a crowd who observes every movement and listens to every note with appreciation, which is highlighted when they applaud certain step combinations. This has to do with not only their ability to perform them but also connotations of movement and tune relationship, and movements seen as important in connection with people past and present and the continuation of valued embodied aesthetic preferences being performed. These are only a few things that the clip alone cannot convey.

In a contrasting example, I observed a young Irish dancer, excellent in his own genre of expertise, accessing clips of Cape Breton step dance during the spring of 2011 at Irish World Academy at the University of Limerick, Ireland. The young dancer accessed these clips in order to find something different for his final performance on his traditional dance performance course. Even though his technical ability as a dancer made it possible for him to copy the movements visually almost to perfection, I felt something was absent. It was the lack of soul of this particular dance performance, as I understand the Cape Breton perspective, that was greatly missing. That the musician playing for him could not play in the Cape Breton style was only one aspect of why the performance failed, in my mind. The Cape Breton cultural understandings of all those little interconnected aspects of the whole tradition, such as music-dance interconnection, that make up its meaning were missing. So, while the dancing was still good and pleasing to the eye in its own right, it was not done in an informed embodied way, as would be recognized as part of their dance tradi-

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tion by a Cape Bretoner. So what, then, was it, and what should we call it?

This example, and many others, has made me consider the way I conduct my own teaching of the dance genre, in particular in my current position as lecturer in dance at the Irish World Academy (of Music and Dance) at the University of Limerick. Since autumn of 2011 I have actively explored different ways, in a formal class situation (one to one and group classes), of creating a teaching environment where sustained and regularly repeated visual, aural and kinaesthetic transmission of the Cape Breton step dance genre in some way mimics aspects of the traditional transmission. This mainly occurs through my own dancing as an example. This is not new per se, but I have started to reduce the level of spoken instructions as to where and how to place the feet, etc. Instead, I am encouraging observation and listening to pick up movements (cells, motifs, and phrases) and any motif variations that occur. I concentrate on highlighting what aspects to observe, to listen to, and how to "feel" this step dance genre. I do this in practical class situations and give my students tasks to analyze the dance (and context) through video clip observation. The video clips are both documentaries about Cape Breton as well as dance clips. Furthermore, the few academic writings on the dance and music tradition is also recommended reading. The Cape Breton step dance genre is, to my mind, improvisational, illustrating a multitude of "the different same" motifs linked in many ways; it therefore becomes essential to understand the music-dance connection and the way motifs can be linked in various ways to the music. One of my teaching aims is to encourage and enable my student dancers to "think on their own feet" in real time. This is predominantly different for the majority of my students, where Irish dance is choreographed for them by a teacher, to be practiced to perfection, with performance or competition as the primary aims of its realization. To counter the singular raw model of the dance genre that I come to represent, I actively use online and DVD video clips to enable the students to see many different Cape Breton dancers using the same steps but in different contexts, to different music (or songs), and from different time frames. Understanding the music repertoire and how it is played forms another key aspect of my teaching. Exposing the students to many different recordings of Cape Breton musicians is also of high importance. Finally I access, whenever possible, visiting Cape Breton step dancers (and musicians) from the tradition to give master classes to the students, with the same aim of exposing the students to as many role models and personal interpretations of the movement repertoire as possible. This still falls short of visiting the tradition itself, but it does provide the beginning of a framework for a more holistic approach to accessing the Cape Breton step dance genre (and any other dance genre or movement tradition) in the classroom. Thus I hope to expand the students' knowledge base from a currently predominantly technique-based one to a more holistic one.

The results of this approach are yet to be defined and analyzed, but after a recent (autumn 2012) visit from pianist and step dancer Mac Morin, the Academy students expressed a better understanding of his movement repertoire and Mac's approach to dancing and teaching by having a previous contextual understanding of aspects of the Cape Breton music and dance scene. My initial observations of my current student body, however, indicate that those who fully engage in this particular transmission process are showing signs of a deeper level movement repertoire embodiment on visual, aural, and kinaesthetic levels.

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Notes

[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_J5P3sL_W_A (accessed 17 July 2011).

[2] Ness (2008:30) refers us to Milton B. Singer's discussions in *Man's Glassy Essence: Explorations in Semiotic Anthropology* (Indiana University Press, 1984), and to Vincent M. Colapietro, *Pierce's Approach to the Self: A Semiotic Perspective on Human Subjectivity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

[3] Conversation F. McConnell 2004.

[4] I align myself with Ronström's definition and usage of the word "mindscape" which is, in short, a kind of virtual reality or "world" made up of, for example, the sum of certain stories, ideas, norms and values. In this case the dancing and the related music is understood as both mental ("mind") and physical ("scape") phenomena. "Mindscapes are set up by establishing a certain perspective or gaze that makes us see a few things and overlook a whole lot more." (Ronström 2010:265). Refer to the complete article for the full discussion.

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