



0197-4556(95)00033-X

**AESTHETIC LISTENING:  
CONTRIBUTIONS OF DANCE/MOVEMENT THERAPY TO THE PSYCHIC  
UNDERSTANDING OF MOTOR STEREOTYPES AND DISTORTIONS IN AUTISM  
AND PSYCHOSIS IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE†**

LEONELLA PARTELI, DOTT.\*

Abstract in Italian

L'ascolto estetico: contributi della danza-movimento terapia alla comprensione psichica delle stereotipie e distorsioni motorie nelle psicosi infantili.

Questa relazione si propone di far risaltare le potenzialità psicoterapeutiche della danza-movimento terapia nell'ambito delle psicosi in età evolutiva. Parlare ed utilizzare il linguaggio senso-motorio, prelogico e preverbale, usato prevalentemente dai bambini psicotici, rappresenta un valido ponte per giungere alla relazione condivisa e creare un ambiente facilitante. L'ascolto e la comprensione delle forme e manifestazioni estetiche del movimento sostengono la capacità della danza-movimento terapeuta di sviluppare un dialogo significativo e trasformativo con i modelli di movimento ripetitivi con cui si presenta il bambino psicotico, restituendo ad essi la loro valenza comunicativa, psicologica e simbolica. Il background artistico permette alla d.m. terapeuta di guardare e recepire il 'bizzarro' stile di espressione del bambino come lo svolgersi di una danza: immagine dinamica della vita interiore. Esempi clinici illustreranno il mondo emotivo, immaginativo e relazionale che è racchiuso nel soggetto psicotico ed

espresso direttamente dalle sue stereotipie ed alterazioni della motilità.

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Let's imagine a six-year-old child coming into the consulting room swaying like a drunkard, his gaze absent, and always on the verge of losing his balance, making you feel he has no idea of or interest in or attention to the space around him, but finding precisely the center of the room. There he keeps on swaying as if this was his way of avoiding to perceive an extremely dangerous experience: to be rooted in his feet. We follow the child, who goes on walking like a drunkard and draws a perfect circle on the floor around the central point and starts swinging his arms around his body, forming another ideal circle around himself. He reminds me of a planet that can't leave its orbit around the sun. In this repetitive and uninterrupted sequence of movements without any evolution, time seems to stop in an immobile eternity.

Let's now imagine another child, a seven-year-old, coming into the consulting room and jumping up and down contractedly without elasticity and without moving from the chosen spot. He ends his movement with a sudden blow of his hands joined in a fist directed to his stomach, but he contracts just before

\*Leonella Parteli, a registered psychologist/psychotherapist and dance/movement therapist, is a member of Art Therapy Italiana. She has a private practice in dance/movement therapy, works with the Public Institutions of the National Sanitary System and is a scientific participant at the Diagnostic Day Hospital for autistic children at the Neuropsychiatric Department of the University of Rome "La Sapienza."

†Translator: Daniela Molino.

hitting himself. He stands still for a moment, whirls around himself and starts his contracted action all over again.

The sequences of motions presented by these two children did not happen in specific or exceptional moments, but were continuously repeated during everyday life. I followed these children in therapy for quite a long time. The use of the Laban/Kestenber System for the Analysis and Observations of Movement—which I shall discuss later—allowed me to determine the psychic ages of these children through the motor patterns each child presented, characterized by specific combinations of rhythms and qualities of movement. It also suggested the modalities to establish a relationship with them through movement interactions that gradually fostered the opening up of their motor schemes. This opening up allowed the children to bring to light the deep meaning of those patterns that communicated aspects of their internal world. I was then able to grasp their symbolic value.

The first case, the child who always found the center of the room and made a circle around it, did not show a spatial intention through the overall bodily attitude, but, paradoxically, the drawing by his steps on the floor seemed to speak of a perfect recognition of space. The same applied to his arms, which although passive and apparently not directed by a conscious intention, actually drew a perfect circle around his body. I saw what was apparently a contradiction, but actually was not. In fact, the motor qualities and spatial dynamics the child adopted conveyed that he could not yet stand on his own legs. He could not bear the feeling and perception of himself as a physically and psychically separate entity. The spatial image he made on the floor and around himself was just another way for externalizing and expressing the state of his being, his experience: his feeling of being one with the object, the illusion of unity. I started walking in the opposite direction, drawing an orbit that encompassed his and from there every once in a while I reached out my hand to see if contact was possible. I had introduced my presence in the form of a circle.

When the child could trust an environment that tried to establish contact and then a relationship using language familiar to him—the language of his rhythms and forms of movement—his actions started to take on new forms. Additions and variations of his movements gave back to the child and the therapist the complex, not univocal sense of those movements. Starting from a game where he hit my hand any time

he crossed it, his arms began moving down toward his stomach. I felt he wanted to grab something and take it to himself. I followed this intuition and, starting from his pattern, I let my arms widen around him and then hold him and let him go again. My action was recognized and accepted by the child, who started running to me in his typical swaying manner.

This child openly avoided contact with other human beings. With this repetitive movement he made me feel that he wanted no contact whatsoever. With the very same movement he expressed exactly the opposite need. I assumed that his action allowed him to keep in himself the feeling of unity in order to avoid that of separation. This explanation would agree with what Tustin (1981/1983) defined as the basic experience of child autism: experience of separation at a time when the child is unable to face it. Thus, through stereotypes, he produces a world of self-sensual stimulation that keeps nameless terrors at bay. But motor stereotypes, in this case, should also be understood as symbolic activities. I wish to stress also another function of stereotypes: that of recalling the places and ages where the traumatic and overpowering experiences took place. One should go back to these ages to gain access to the underlying fantasies and imagery that are thus kept at bay. By developing these repetitive actions in movement during the therapeutic process, we allow children to give a more definite form to their motor patterns. This form externalizes the underlying intention and makes it more understandable and thinkable.

By maintaining and sustaining the child's illusion and need for unity in the therapeutic choreography, I allowed him to risk and undertake other new experiences of his body that changed his perception of his body. He started changing and increasing his muscular tone; he started holding and retaining me with more intention and showed regret when I moved away and created a spatial separation. From these responses, which became more and more evident, I could start a dialogue that gave rise to other choreographies. We could identify and name emerging emotions. In this way the experience of contacting the world and feeling human appeared less threatening. It is a slow and gradual process that leads the child to find the words to describe the functions of his bodily actions. With this child, the image of the circle surrounding and closing also kept at bay the fear of not being wanted and being excluded: "Do you want me? Can I come? Is there place for me too? All together."

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