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DORKY DANCE.COM: DORKY DANCING, VLOGGING AND THE RISE OF SELF-
PRODUCED DANCE ON THE INTERNET

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Dedicated to all my fellow dorky dance aficionados and to those whose talents may still remain hidden. May we unite and continue to burn up the carpet in our bedrooms and living rooms and, more importantly, in the clubs and crosswalks of the world.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis traces a lineage from historical onscreen awkward dancing to contemporary online dorky dancing. This evolution encompasses Edison's actualities, the stars of silent film, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, the expert awkward dancer, Donald O'Connor, and the more recent awkward dance stars, Pee Wee Herman and Napoleon Dynamite. This foundation contextualizes the rise of self-produced, "dorky dance" on the Internet, a form beloved for its genuineness and lack of fabrication and immensely popular due to "viralization" and transmission as "Internet memes."

Dorky dance is further distinguished from awkward dance by examining the specific criteria that compose its definition. This investigation utilizes both movement analysis and socio-cultural studies, drawing particularly from gender studies and recent sociological theorizing about the Internet. The current role of Internet participation advocacy is linked to a long-standing precedent for participation-fuelled art-making, drawing from Walter Benjamin to the post-modern artistic collaborators of the 1960s and 1970s.

This study analyzes the impacts of the online dorky dance movement, including those personal in nature—either for the creator or the viewer, the new audience member—and those on a societal level, both the positive and potentially negative. Although participation in the dorky dance genre is still limited by the existing restrictions of the digital divide, the technology necessary to participate is rapidly becoming cheaper and more available. This greater accessibility is continuing to bring fascinatingly diverse examples of online dorky dancing.

Finally, the thesis explores the points of intersection between Internet dorky dancing and other arenas that it is permeating—the live concert dance stage, the cinema house, the video art realm, and the commercial world of advertisements and sponsorship.

INTRODUCTION

The burgeoning popularity of the Internet from the mid 1990s has had a strong impact on the production and reception of dance. Specifically, it has become instrumental in promoting “dorky dancing,” that is, what was once considered socially awkward movement is now being embraced and even celebrated. As the early domain of the Internet was intricately linked to stereotypical “nerd” culture, young, computer literate males in America and around the globe found a new rapid distribution outlet for their artistic expressions. With the advent of video-sharing websites, like YouTube with its motto urging all to “Broadcast Yourself,” this self-expression has moved beyond mere written language into a realm of moving images—often expressed as dance. YouTube, the most widely known video-sharing site, was created in February of 2005, but quickly became one of the fastest growing websites. According to a survey completed in July of 2006, 100 million clips are viewed daily and 65,000 new videos are posted to the site every 24-hour period.¹ Internet users are no longer merely confined to confronting issues of identity online with words (either written or verbal), they can now investigate and craft their own embodied moving (video) explorations precisely in the realm where these questions are most tangible—the body itself.

Despite limitations of access determined by the economic constraints of the digital divide, many proponents argue that the Internet continues to develop as a forum for meaningful, non-profit driven, participatory communication and artistic creation. It does so by allowing for an instantaneousness that was not previously possible, a temporal and geographical speed that can connect across the globe within seconds. It empowers dance to move away from the staged, concert world or the filmic domain of Hollywood, since clips can be easily produced and quickly posted on the web from the privacy of home. The sheer speed of this transmission and reception creates the perfect forum for

¹ "YouTube serves up 100 million videos a day online," *USA Today*, Gannett Co. Inc., 16 July 2006; Internet; available from http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-07-16-youtube-views_x.htm?; Accessed 24 Feb. 2007.

instant spoofs and parodies and invites wider participation and dialogue in dancemaking. This technology also revolutionizes the role of the audience, who need very little interest in dance to be exposed to it. On the contrary, we are now bombarded by dance images, particularly of the dorky variety, as examples from film, commercials, television shows, and music videos all find their eventual home on the Internet. The viewer, the new audience, often adopts a more active role in this cutting-edge virtual world of dance. This involvement ranges from critic to collaborator, and occurs in an atmosphere that makes participation in dance fun, rather than pretentious or laborious.

The success of dorky dance on the web, however, might also bring its demise. As the commercial world witnesses the immense popularity of online dorky dancing, it has been quick to adopt the form for its own purposes, transforming what it most attractive about these dances—their innocent believability, courageous vulnerability, and quirky charm—into contrived semblances of what “authentic” dorky dance truly is.

Chapter One outlines the parameters that delimit dorky dancing, a definition that is often defined as much by what it is not than solely by what it is. Awkward movement, though a significant component in the equation, is not the same thing as dorky dance. Dorky dance uses awkward movement as its natural base and then adds multiple, complicating layers that result in dramatically different but equally dorky dances. Costume choices, body stature, and other physical designators intersect with manipulations of viewers’ normative expectations about gender, sexual orientation,² class, ethnicity and age, all of which are united under an umbrella of intent, which, at its core, is most deeply concerned with having fun. This chapter explores why the Internet is a particularly appropriate crucible for dorky dancing and why the element of humor allows dorky dancing to tackle and enrich some of the most deeply rooted beliefs about embodied identity. It analyzes the peculiar paradox created in this situation in which dorky dance displays are both incredibly risky and vulnerable while remaining simultaneously masked behind a screen, existing in the safety of a virtual world. Most importantly, this chapter begins to identify why viewers love watching dorky dance videos and what makes them refreshing, unique, engaging and overwhelmingly popular.

² Hereafter the term “sexuality” will be used to refer to perceived ideas about sexual orientation.

Since the earliest moving pictures, dancers have stumbled awkwardly across the screen to generate laughs. In Chapter Two, I outline the lineage of the awkward dancer on-screen, a genealogy that is rooted in the antics of the earliest film stars. Beginning with the first dance clips Edison so passionately filmed with his new moving picture machines to the physical humor so deftly displayed by Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, numerous dancers have crafted their steps in deliberately awkward manners. However, looking at the last sixty years, Jerry Lewis, Jackie Gleason, Donald O'Connor and Lucille Ball developed the tradition during the 1940s and 1950s, while the Monty Python gang and Gilda Radner gyrated across TV screens in the 1960s and 70s. Pee Wee Herman made a lasting impression on the generation growing up in the 1980s and he figures prominently as a direct precedent for the current proliferation of dorky/awkward dancing that we see today. This decade also produced two other outstanding predecessors--Richard Simmons and his ebulliently supportive aerobics routines and *America's Funniest Home Videos*, the enormously popular television show that privileged the amateuristic homemade look long before this aesthetic found a niche online. Finally, Chapter Two examines another recent dorky dance precursor, Napoleon Dynamite, the awkward dancer extraordinaire, who has single-handedly done more to promote and validate awkward dance than anyone else in the last decade. Although all of these examples originated in the film medium and were shared with audiences in movie theaters, they have all secured a revitalized, virtual presence on the web.

Chapter Three investigates the transmutation of awkward dancing into the affectionately-termed phenomenon, "dorky dancing," that showcases the amateur, the movements of the average person whose body has not been molded by years of institutionalized technical instruction. The Internet has become the ideal site for showcasing these displays, as any participant can film him/herself dancing and then post it on the web. In comparison to consciously awkward dancers on film, dorky Internet dancers emit a sense of veracity, of being authentically amateur and genuinely vulnerable. They have not constructed their clumsiness to drive the plot of a big (or even small) budget film. Before video-sharing capabilities became common online, the inventive director, Spike Jonze, developed an idea for a transitional dorky dance video that now proves itself to be years before its time. Created for the music video for "Praise

You,” a song by Fat Boy Slim, Jonze so brilliantly melds deliberately awkward dance with flawless artifice that the result appears to be an utterly believable dorky dance.

Chapter Four examines the various ways in which video-sharing website users participate in the experience of dance. The Internet enables an approach to participation that expands previous ideas about participatory-based art makers. Proponents of an online global community value the Internet’s ability to ignore financial barriers that have traditionally barred participation in conventional media, like film and television. The Internet transforms mere spectators into active dance collaborators; participation can range from something as simple as re-posting or e-mailing dance videos, to adopting the role of the critic by writing commentaries about other’s creations, to becoming both a critic and artistic-collaborator by creating a dancing response-video. To illustrate how ideas of participation function in practice, this chapter details the phenomenon of the “Numa Numa Dance,” a deliciously dorky dance that erupted on the Internet as the first viral video³ that was popular primarily because of its dance content. Created by 19-year old Gary Brolsma as a clip he intended to share with a small group of friends, Numa Numa became an instantaneous sensation and, to date, has been viewed well over 14 million times.

The Numa gained widespread notoriety by establishing itself as a meme. This term, first coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976, accurately describes the process by which units of cultural information are propagated in manners similar to genes (thus the name). This process has grown exponentially on the Internet. Together they are responsible for the label “Internet phenomenon,” a term used to explain Internet memes like the “Numa Numa Dance” craze. Parodies of Numa began sprouting up within days of its original posting and hundreds have since been created. The popularity of Numa has no geographical constraints. Numa’s fame is clearly evident in Japan, for example, where many people use its music as their cell-phone ringtone and have learned the Numa dance moves, though performed with a distinctive Japanese flavor.

Dorkiness is not, however, construed solely through physical designators. Oftentimes the “awkwardness” comes from a deliberate layering or blending of iconic

³ A viral video is “video content which gains widespread popularity through the process of Internet sharing, typically through e-mail or IM messages, blogs and other media sharing websites” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viral_video).

socio-cultural markers. Awkwardness is created from the friction between preconceived expectations and notions about how something *should* appear and the incredulity about what is *actually* appearing. Chapter Five analyzes this layering by looking at a progressive series of videos created to the song “Ignition Remix.” First is the original video by creator R. Kelly, the African-American R&B and hip hop singer. In general, it fulfills expectations of how a hip hop video should look, though it features towards the end one very short sequence of an awkward dance performed by a young, white male. Next, a response video was created and posted by a group of four, young Asian males at Duke University. Although this video is actually quite sophisticated, with precise choreography and skilled editing, the final product appears dorky, provoking laughter because it parodies Kelly’s hip hop music video scene-by-scene. However, instead of the polished MTV-style video with ubiquitous, scantily-clad, gyrating women, these young male Asian performers shake their butts and flash fake gang signs. Dorky dancing frequently torques our expectations about gender, sexuality, class, age, and ethnicity. Gender and sexuality, in particular, are crucial ingredients in the dorkiness recipe. The explosion of self-produced dance on the Internet is primarily male-created. Yet even when young women film themselves for the web, viewers are more inclined to read this movement as coordinated and even sexy *based solely on their gender*. When males present themselves dancing, they open themselves to a public questioning of their sexuality.

Chapter Six scrutinizes how the commercial world has been quick to exploit the potential to profit from the dorky dancing movement and homemade video aesthetic. Two videos by the Swedish band Ok Go serve as unmistakable examples of the (accidental) profit potential of dorky dancing. “A Million Ways” is a simple dance video shot in their backyard that was never intended to be widely released. Given out as DVD freebies to a couple of friends, it was surreptitiously posted on the web and quickly became an overnight Internet sensation. A second successful video was then created to accompany the song, “Here It Goes Again,” this time using multiple treadmills, and the band has become synonymous with dorky dancing. Most recently it collaborated with YouTube to host the “Ok Go Dances With YouTube” Dance Contest, in which participants submitted “audition” videos online. Despite this blatant promotion, the band

never lost its legitimacy as authentic dorky dancers, and this reputation has earned many new fans.

On the other hand, the commercialization of dorky dance is not usually so well-received. *Numa Numa*, the original dorky dance so beloved by the Internet community, was re-visited in the form of the *New Numa*. *New Numa* has its own website, merchandise line, and dance contest with prizes totaling \$45,000, all of which are supported by multiple sponsors who see dorky dance as “good for the bottom line.” This attempt at branding *Numa* has elicited vocal and often scathing responses, the most effective and funny of which are posted in the form of a video-response.

The conclusion, finally, explores the overall significance of these examples and the impact they are having on the larger dance world. It poses useful questions, outside the scope of this thesis that warrant future analysis. How is “awkward” conceived differently around the world? What dorky dance videos might develop from this altered foundation as the population of Internet users grows exponentially in Asia, Africa and South America? How will future commercialistic and technological endeavors impact the Internet and dorky dancing? How is dorky dancing transferring from its virtual home to the performative sphere? Can these translations in other media pack the same punch as the finest online examples?

The primary sources for this study were the videos themselves, posted online by countless users and commented upon by numerous viewers. What began years ago as personal interest and fondness for this clumsy style and approach to dance-making developed into a more nuanced understanding of its cultural ramifications and, consequently, a deep appreciation for this form as a new genre of dance creation that is enormously popular. I have waded through innumerable online videos and have kindly received myriad links from others as my search was clarified. Beyond the specific examples presented in this thesis, many other clips have provided information from which I draw my comparisons and form my final conclusions. The clips selected for this investigation, however, strike me as the most significant for chronological, aesthetic or social reasons. I also watched many historical films in order to see historical precedents for “dorky dancing” on film. I devoted particular consideration to the work of Pee Wee

Herman (Paul Ruebens), re-watching much of his oeuvre, including his cinematic feature films in addition to his even more inventive television series, “Pee Wee’s Playhouse.”

Additionally, the Internet provided many sources for commentaries on the works (videos) themselves. YouTube and other video-sharing sites have built-in feedback forums where any viewer can post his/her own commentaries. These forthright critiques by and for the peers of those posting the original clips serve as timely and accurate barometers of public opinion about online video content.

In analyzing these original sources, my methodology utilizes several theoretical approaches. Movement analysis brings attention to physical clues that we read as “awkward,” which assists in constructing a definition of “dorkiness” in relation to movement, gesture and dance. This analysis extends beyond sheer movement, taking into account visual information such as clothing, physical stature, and the posturing of the dancer. Complementing this, gender, sexuality, class, age and ethnicity are explored in order to investigate the relationships of identifiers that signify awkward or coordinated. Gender studies proves to be especially significant. We tend to read male movement as inherently more awkward than female-produced movement. Other substantial topics in this thesis fall under the rubric of cultural studies and dip into some of the most recent theoretical understandings of the Internet, using newly coined-terminology such as “viral video,” “meme,” and “Internet phenomenon.” Because the Internet changes so rapidly, books about the Internet are often already outdated by the time of publication. Therefore, many of the best sources theorizing the Internet and video-sharing websites were also found online. Theory about the practice of participation in art making, both pre- and post-Internet, is useful, as are the writings of early film theoreticians who shed light on the comparisons and similarities between early awkward dancers on film and today’s online dorky variety. These sources aid in establishing the historical precedence for dorky dance on the web, rooting this very contemporary phenomenon in its rich chronological and theoretical context.

CHAPTER ONE

IS THIS THE NEW VAUDEVILLE?

“Awkward dance” is not necessarily the same thing as “dorky dance.” Awkward dancing is certainly one substantial component of dorky dance, but many other factors also come into play. Awkwardness is culturally specific. The definition outlined here is based on how dance is perceived by Western audiences, primarily in the United States, and includes several common ingredients.

Movement reads as awkward when it is uncoordinated, jerky, arrhythmic, hysterical (an obvious reason the term for “funny” derives from the chaotic way a body moves when experiencing hysteria), off tempo (of both the music and any sense of internal rhythm), when limbs move in contrary directions, the dancer makes faces and/or the dance cannot be aligned with any known style of dancing. Whether dance is read as awkward, or not, depends as much on the viewer’s comprehension of “proper” movement as it does on the (non) technical ability of the dancer.

Although dorky dance is rooted in awkward movement, there are other essential designators that complete and distinguish the “dorkiness” definition. The clothes tend to be ill-fitting, out-of-date, or badly matched, and the wearer often has odd or unkempt hair styles and spectacles, the thicker the better. The physical stature of the dancer assumes a weighty role as bodies that are too short, too tall, stout or scrawny are perceived to be outside the normative range. Since male-produced movement (especially white males) is still interpreted as inherently dorkier than that of females, gender remains an essential factor in the production of dorky dance. One reason dorky dancing is so humorous is that it manipulates how audiences think dance should appear. First, we are not accustomed to watching males dance, and certainly not in any manner that does not conform to the ways in which men are occasionally allowed to dance—for example, as men dance in boy bands or in the current refined style of hip hop videos. Secondly, and coupled with this manipulation of traditionally pre-conceived notions of gender and dance, dorky dance

trespasses into the territory of sexuality, class, age and ethnicity, happily transgressing normative expectations. Manipulations can vary from being aggressively contrasuggestive to expectation to being just slightly offbeat.

Significantly--just as it functions in the larger world of art-making--the indispensable ingredient of dorky dance is intention. Fun is fundamental. As much as dorky dance can comment upon and critique society and our restrictive conceptions of dance aesthetics, its real purpose is to entertain. Therefore, it is no accident that dorky dance finds a perfect home on the Internet, which is the fastest growing site of entertainment and favored leisure activity for many.

People have always liked watching funny, awkward movers, who have figured prominently in the pantheon of beloved Hollywood characters. The Internet creates an even more convenient forum where people can see funny dancing, a space that feels welcoming and unpretentious, utterly unlike the atmosphere of the concert performance hall. Even more important, viewers can watch these knee-slapping videos and immediately record and share their own riotous creations with an ever-expanding online community of dorky dance lovers. Yet another reason dorky dance and the Internet intersect so fortuitously is that the overriding intent of dorky dancing is to generate laughs, not profits, which fulfills Internet ideals. It removes traditional barriers between worker/laborer and consumer and the financial obstacles of dance production and distribution—there is no need to rent a studio or a theater, to sell a required number of seats, or, in the case of film, have million dollar budgets and sales. All of these elements are built into the Internet and, at this point, remain free to access.

As YouTube's motto suggests, the Internet does create the perfect space for "broadcasting oneself," and it is no accident that video has become the favored forum for this self-expression. Video-sharing websites are, in fact, the new Vaudevillian stages. Though not highly visible during the reign of feature-length, narrative-driven cinema (the trend that began with the advent of talkies), Vaudevillian impulses⁴ are once again

⁴ This is really a misnomer as what we think of as "Vaudevillian" characteristics actually date back to the earliest theatrical traditions of the Greeks. D. Travis Stewart traces a lineage that begins with traveling Greek mimes, "a motley lot who lumbered out of southern Italy during Greece's Golden Age to juggle, perform acrobatics, dance and perform comical sketches..." *No Applause, Just Throw Money* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 15.

thriving voraciously on the web, thanks to video-sharing websites. The special Vaudevillian “aesthetic of constant surprise brought about through calculated novelty,” in which variety is valued above all and “incongruity is cheerfully, flagrantly flaunted”⁵ just as easily describes the (il)logic of the Internet. A quick perusal of the list of videos YouTube recently selected for their first annual awards contest harkens back to the variety show program list. One video shows a man creating “spit” graffiti on the asphalt⁶, another “dog-and-pony-trick” video reveals a cat, Gizmo, who repeatedly flushes the toilet just to watch the water swish around the bowl, much to the confusion of her owners⁷. There are guitar players, a beat-boxing parrot,⁸ gravity defying card tricks⁹, and a video called *Things You Can’t Do When You’re Not in a Pool*, in which a man walk-swims around town, cannonballs onto the pavement, and even politely paddles away from a group of his friends before he wets himself.¹⁰ Of course, the Vaudeville stage was incomplete without awkward dancing, and dorky dancing is just as well-represented on YouTube. The video awards list includes several dorky dance videos, including Ok Go’s dancing treadmill extravaganza.

Many of the most popular initial self-posted videos on the Internet, the ones that so quickly became viral, are those of dorky dancers. It is difficult to pinpoint with exactitude the rationale for their immense popularity. On one hand, these Internet dances indulge our voyeuristic tendencies and allow us the opportunity to watch a style of dancing that has often been considered taboo or socially inappropriate. We are literally getting a glimpse into dancing habits that are often left confined to the privacy of people’s kitchens and dorm rooms. And as one might expect, there are multitudes of clips produced in dorms, the ideal breeding grounds for dorky material. Dorms offer free and fast Internet connections and students generally have their own computers and technological prowess. Moreover, these students are often males living in close proximity with ample free time and access to that most powerful of dorky dance

⁵ Stewart, 7.

⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2IoNygC-K0>

⁷ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WofFb_eOxxA

⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnFV-fvgOu0>

⁹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbSR5_boMcc

¹⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gw4bQKiLkQ4>

enablers—alcohol. Video-sharing websites also act as male meeting grounds,¹¹ analogous to the supposed favored communal female space, the women’s restroom. YouTube creates a sort of virtual dancehall or online cypher¹² where the posse of this much-enlarged “circle” now collectively improvise and fiercely riff off one another, often through movement and dance, without having to be in the same country, much less the same ballroom or street corner. Luckily, online viewers, like real world viewers, are particularly smitten with watching dancing males--a significant portion of the population who are too often left out of the dance equation. It is a fascination that is, at times, perverse but that is also mediated by the element of humor that is so crucial to this movement style.

Profound attractiveness is inherent in the sheer simplicity of dorky dances, the genuineness and vulnerability they exude, and the admirable courage of the dancer. Dorky displays resonate on a deep personal level, because all of us, at some point, experienced the awkwardness of adolescence, when our bodies underwent changes beyond our control. Generally we try to forget these awkward stages, not revel in them. But dorky dancing also evokes images of the awkward toddler, whose body is also out of control, but whose stumbling and sheer perseverance to remain upright is deeply endearing. The best dorky dancers connote both of these awkward sensibilities through a single body.

We viewers are not necessarily bold enough to project ourselves in such goofy grandeur to millions of people, but we certainly respect others who have that confidence. This communal respect is sparking widespread social change and the endorsement of “weirdness.” Dorky dances also have an innocent sincere quality that is both refreshing and witty, not merely naïve. It optimistically counteracts the cynical and sarcastic impulses that fuel so much of our current humor. Dorky dancers express an overwhelming sense of believability and give the spectator an invigorating opportunity to watch something without having to willingly “suspend disbelief.” There is no need to *pretend* we believe because these are true dorky dance videos. As soon as they feel in the least contrived or artificial, they are outed as inauthentic “astro-turfs” or “sell-outs,” and

¹¹ As of July 2006, 56% of YouTube.com users were male. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YouTube>

¹² Cypher is a term used in hip hop for the circle in which spontaneous art-making (dance, poetry, graffiti) is created by collective improvisation.

provoke a spate of dorky dance video-responses. The genre is unapologetically unpretentious, militantly eschewing social expectations of dance propriety and any sense of pretension that comes with high production values. Who needs a state-of-the-art camera, film crew, and professional editing, when a stationary web cam or even a hand-held bouncing cell phone camera will not only suffice, it will actually add to the aesthetic of amateuristic charm?

Dorky dance can, and does, act as a site for real dialogue and exchange. Because its main impetus is fun, participation is also motivated by pleasure, though it has direct and meaningful consequences. This is a dialogue rooted in the body, the site where deep, impactful exploration of embodied characteristics and identities takes place. The Internet, then, also acts as a sort of disembodying mask that makes these explorations feel safer. A constant paradox exists between the vulnerability of displaying oneself versus the safety that comes with creating these displays in the privacy of one's home, and then, having that creation remain in the virtual world. If one chooses, these performances can be made even less risky by hiding behind the creation story that the videos were only intended for the viewing pleasure of a few friends. The Internet is certainly still the safest space for these displays. Although the popularity of online dorky dancing might eventually influence our reception of live displays of dorky dancing, at this time it remains much more daunting to pull out dorky dance moves at the club or to audition for a show like Fox Network's "So you Think You Can Dance," in which celebrity judges with English accents seem to take pride in being disparaging.

What this suggests, then, is that the Internet *really is* creating a space where blended identities—where notions of gender, sexuality, class, age and ethnicity all intersect with dance as situated in the body--can exist in a less problematized realm. The removal of commercialistic incentive creates a freer space for the trying on and commixing of personalities that would be perceived, in other financially-driven venues, as pernicious and objectionable. The minimally-restricted space of the Internet, in which

(virtually) anyone can participate with little governmental or big-business mediation or censorship, gained a momentous boost with the advent of video-sharing websites.¹³

In reality, Internet dorky dancing is still primarily a middle-class domain prescribed by the restraints of the digital divide. Still, as computers become cheaper, high speed Internet access becomes standardized, and more and more cell phones have video camera capabilities, the realm of dorky dance videos will continue to expand. With this expansion, we will see increasing participation by progressively diverse populations, involvement that will likely continue to defy and dismantle mainstream media-supported, normative constructions of identity.

As the Internet continues to develop, it will become increasingly influential as a source for defining what is “cool.” In the past, this aesthetic has been determined by the commercial worlds of film, television, fashion, advertisements and mainstream music and music videos. The Internet has already tampered with this by creating cracks in existing ideas of coolness, and, as the virtual world continues to usurp the power of conventional media, it will simultaneously wield more power as the arbiter of the cool. Although the Internet will become more commercially-tethered as its popularity and use increases, if it is able to maintain spaces that do not constrict access based on the financial prowess of its users, our definitions of coolness will become ever more cool with the diversity of the voices (bodies) providing input. Even if the Internet is transformed into yet another purely economically-driven forum, dorky dance will certainly find yet another forum through which to reveal itself.

The popularity of the dorky dance phenomenon demonstrates a change in attitude about dancing. Of course it makes us laugh. Still, we are residing in a period when this style of dancing (like nerdiness) is being embraced and even celebrated. We enjoy watching this kind of dance and, in truth, we are watching it by the millions. These Internet dancers are breaking down discouraging barriers that have established tedious conceptualizations of what dance should be and they are creating a place for amateurs of varying body shapes and sizes--specifically for young males--who wear whatever clothes they see fit. Internet dorky dance participants are challenging notions of who can dance,

¹³ Although some sites, like Newgrounds.com, allowed user postings as early as April 6, 2000, the phenomenon has only gained its current widespread popularity with the advent of YouTube.com, founded in February 2005 and opened to the public six months later.

for whom, in what manner and by what medium. As they engage in an instantaneous process of production, reception, and reaction they are re-claiming masculine identities as they display to millions their right to dance, whether awkwardly or not. And, if they are sometimes ridiculed, more often they are given a collective high-five by the larger Internet community.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PROFESSIONAL AMATEUR: FAUX PAS, N'EST PAS?

The fundamental difference between still photography and film is moving images. Inevitably, filmmakers were occupied capturing the most enthralling movement, the dancing human figure. From Thomas Edison's earliest short film clips, filmmakers have been recording dance in all its variations. Since the beginning, audiences have had a soft spot for the awkward mover on screen, and as the medium of transmission has evolved from film through television and video and, now, to the Internet, this enchantment has only intensified. Moreover, what is so extraordinarily fortuitous in this web-connected era is that the spectator can conveniently locate and view dance gems from early cinema simply through an internet connection and a few keyboard clicks.

Thomas Edison was famous for a multitude of inventions and patents. Certainly two of the most influential creations were the Kinetograph, a motion picture camera, and the Kinetoscope, a peep-hole motion picture viewing device. After his earlier success with the phonograph, Edison commented in 1888 that he was "experimenting upon an instrument which does for the eye what the phonograph does for the ear, which is the recording and reproduction of things in motion."¹⁴ The same year, with the invaluable help of his assistant, William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, Edison began filming hundreds of short film clips. His first experiments were primarily "actualities," clips documenting life as it happened around him, including disasters, people at work, trains, police and fire activities, expositions, *and* a whole slew of dances, from a version of the Native American Ghost Dance to Bowery waltzes to renditions of Japanese and Turkish dances that emblemized the Orientalist fervor of the times.

Many of his short dance clips can be viewed online in the Library of Congress' (LOC) wonderful "American Memory" site that showcases 341 of Edison's filmic

¹⁴ Library of Congress: American Memory. "Edison Motion Pictures," available from <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/edhtml/edmvhm.html>. Internet; accessed 25 January, 2007.

experiments. While viewing LOC's collection of dance clips more than a century later one is struck by their awkwardness. It is an alluring artlessness generated by many factors: the film is grainy, the images are glitchy, the camera is bouncy, and the movement itself is also delightfully coarse. American dance at that time showed little to no refined balletic technique, few of the pointed feet and precise port de bras that would later become de rigueur. Furthermore, the dancers Edison selected to film—mostly Vaudeville performers-- were not necessarily proficient in their forms. He filmed some well-known copyists, like Ella Lola, who donned Grecian garb and danced in the style of her contemporary, Isadora Duncan. She may have secured her popularity on Vaudeville stages by the turn of the century, but an Isadorable she was not.¹⁵

One of the most enlightening clips, filmed in Edison's Black Maria studio in New Jersey on March 24, 1896, shows dancer Amy Muller en pointe, clad in a white dress that resembles a billowing wedding cake festooned with enormously puffy sleeves. The overall effect succeeds in making the arms of the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man (of *Ghostbusters* fame) pale in comparison.¹⁶ The 20-second snippet shows Muller half execute a tour jeté before deciding to high kick a la seconde. Grasping her extended leg with one hand, she continues by bouncing around in a full 360 degree revolution *en pointe*. But the icing on this (wedding) cake comes with the final move—bourré with bent knees to wind up for a full cartwheel that launches itself straight into the eye of the camera with flailing legs and flopping ankles. If these first dance films look like an amateur's rudimentary attempts to use his recently acquired camera to capture his kid sister's recital routine, this is, in fact, *exactly* what it is (despite Muller being a vaudeville performer--or, perhaps, because of it--she was a very enthusiastic but very poor dancer). And, if this scenario sounds uncannily familiar, it should, because it is highly analogous to the initial forays of presenting moving images that we are witnessing on the Internet.

Within ten years of Edison's first experiments, films began to be projected onto screens for larger audiences, which rendered the kinoscope and its private viewing space obsolete. This popularity also brought the demise of the "actuality" as audiences began to demand plot, character development, and other conventional devices borrowed

¹⁵ [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/varstg:@field\(NUMBER\(1364\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/varstg:@field(NUMBER(1364)))

¹⁶ <http://memory.loc.gov/mbrs/edmp/4037.mov>

from theater, an impulse that would also concurrently lead to the decline of live, Vaudeville stage performance.

Like Edison's actualities, films were silent until the late 1920s. Without sound and dialogue, narrative, character development, and emotion were conveyed through movement. Gestures and expressions were magnified in order to be more easily read by viewers. This provided the perfect platform for privileging physical comedy, humor that exploits the body and its movements for its own devices. This kind of clownishness is rarely subtle and even young children have little difficulty understanding its jocular language. Though it played a significant role in the live performance of the Vaudeville stage, physical comedy found a special opportunity to thrive in early silent cinema. The most famous stars from this era, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd, are remembered for how they moved. Each had his own distinct style: Keaton's signature deadpan face magnified the movement of the rest of his body; Lloyd pushed his body to its boundaries, constantly testing his physical limitations by performing his own daredevil feats; and Charlie Chaplin created one of the most beloved film personas in history—the Little Tramp—by combining his precise, contained and controlled quirky-movement style with a poor man's getup, a take-off of the gentleman's hat, jacket and cane.

Plenty of clips from these early moving masters can be found online, and, in fact, most frequently the excerpted scenes *are* the dance scenes. These movement routines are still immensely intriguing, and the Internet is bringing them to entirely new audiences. Today's Internet user is not content with simply watching the originals, though there are plenty of clips that remain true to their sources. One adulterated clip of Buster Keaton dancing (an excerpt from the 1936 movie *Grand Slam Opera*) features Keaton as Elmer Butts, a contestant hoping to win an amateur radio hour show by dancing, but it is set to the song "Devil's Dance Floor" by the Irish-American punk band, Flogging Molly.¹⁷

At the beginning, Keaton's movements look like an idiosyncratic attempt at ballet. After picking up a flower he leaps from side to side, in a bent leg grand jeté, then proceeds to bourré in parallel with cockeyed arms drifting above, finishing with several beating jumps, quite reasonable renditions of entrechat, all while clutching his blossom. At this point his movements begin to seem inspired by folk dance and the new musical

¹⁷ <http://youtube.com/watch?v=CoNWQS4K7d4>

accompaniment adds a delectable layer of humor. The Irish-sounding lyrics uncannily begin right as Keaton enters into his first jig. Keaton rests his hand on his hips as he bounces, kicking both legs quickly beneath him, and when his arms move to his sides he looks like he could be auditioning for an understudy role in “Riverdance.” His antics shift into low, Russian-style kicks on the ground, with arms crossed in front of his chest. Keaton’s grand finale is a double pirouette that goes awry and ends in a crashing, front flip to land abruptly, but safely, on his back. The plot context for this film--Keaton competing in an amateur context--provides the perfect rationale to showcase awkward movement. Seventy-one years later his routine still seems fresh; but with the addition of this particular updated soundtrack, the effect is simply brilliant. Viewers on YouTube document its appeal by posting their feedback, displayed beneath the clip for others to read. One admirer writes, “Congrats! Not easy to mess with the master and still end up amplifying the fun!” and another “Very...well done. Wish Buster could've seen this one himself.”¹⁸

After the arrival of the “talkie,” physical humor and awkward dance did not retain the limelight as before, though they have maintained a place on screen. Arguably the funniest dance routine in the 1950s was Donald O’Connor’s aptly named “Make ‘Em Laugh” number from the movie musical *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952), which can be viewed online. O’Connor can be seen at the height of his uniquely adroit, awkward abilities.¹⁹ In comparison to the aforementioned Keaton clip, “Make ‘Em Laugh” is much more polished in several noticeable ways. With twenty years of technical improvements, the production quality is much cleaner and viewing it in Technicolor gives O’Connor’s work a less dated look than Keaton’s black and white film. More to the point, the movement itself is highly polished, despite its intended goofiness. O’Connor’s character, Cosmo Brown, is presented as a silly, comical mover, although O’Connor is a highly trained dancer performing moves that would be impossible for the average viewer. Still, the audience is still able to relate to and empathize with his physical chaos.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Py730_Bcaew

Cosmo²⁰ is marked by an overarching obliviousness. Things just seem to happen to him without his noticing. Jumping around backstage in a movie studio, he is accidentally picked up by two men carrying a long piece of lumber, so he inexplicably begins “swimming” on it just before he is tossed off by the two muscle men, whose sheer stature make O’Connor look even scrawnier. Cosmo has “dancey” collisions with several other moving objects including a sofa and a fake door that opens into a brick wall. His absentmindedness is coupled with a striking perseverance. Each time he is knocked down he springs back into dancing action. He might be the underdog, rejected by both human and inanimate objects, but his dancing is pervaded with inspiring optimism. His only friend appears to be the mannequin he encounters on a couch. After flirting with her in vain, and unable to elicit any reaction from her (she is, after all, stuffed), he animates her by twirling her in his arms and tossing her in the air. At one point Cosmo is spinning on the ground in a “coffee grinder” move akin to amateur breakdancing floor moves. O’Connor performed all his own stunts, including his culminating move of running up several walls and executing a perfect backflip—that is, until he crashes through the final wall. Even after this dramatic, awe-inspiring crash, he pops his head right back through the newly formed hole, smiling and singing. The scene is performed and recorded in one long take, and O’Connor, with his amazing feats and incredible endurance, inspires a Jackie Chan-esque awe, even to contemporary spectators. His costuming, though perhaps not as exaggerated as Charlie Chaplin’s distinctive oversized trousers and shoes, contributes to his comedic appearance. He is the only one on the entire set who is wearing a squashable bowler hat—all of the many other hat-wearing characters wear newsboys’ flat caps. Of course there are practical reasons O’Connor uses a bowler—its flat, round brim makes it easier to grasp and toss about in numerous hat tricks—but, it is also an anachronistic addition, a throwback to the earlier comical film stars, like Chaplin.

Despite all of these classic examples from early film, very few people growing up in the 1980s and 1990s have seen them. This is, however, changing with their resurging displays on video-sharing websites. Instead, this generation was taught by the funny movers on “Saturday Night Live” and the distinctive dancing antics of Paul Reubens in

²⁰ Incidentally, Cosmo is also the first name of Kramer’s character, another wacky sidekick from pop culture fame, on the television show *Seinfeld*.

his Pee Wee Herman persona. Much like Chaplin's Tramp and O'Connor's Cosmo, Pee Wee is a peculiar character constructed through costuming choices and awkward moves. Chaplin's oversized trousers and shoes meets its counterpart in Pee Wee's miniature three-piece grey suit and equally miniscule red bow tie. Both outfits serve a similar comedic purpose of oversizing or miniaturization, distorting the body to tamper with the viewer's expectations of how male bodies should move and dress.

Although Reubens created his Pee Wee character for the live stage, Pee Wee skyrocketed to national attention with the release of the 1985 movie *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*, written by Reubens, Phil Hartman, and Michael Varhol, and directed by Tim Burton (his first feature film). This classic comedy, ranked eleven on Bravo's list of "100 Funniest Movies," charts Pee Wee's quest to find his stolen bicycle. The highlight of the film is a now famous dance scene, set to the 1958 surf song "Tequila" by the band The Champs.²¹ Pee Wee has inadvertently knocked over a line of motorcycles outside a tough biker bar. Intending to pound him into Pee Wee pulp, the bikers grant him one last request. Pee Wee selects "Tequila" from the juke box and borrows a pair of oversized, white leather shoes with extended heels, and jumps onto the bar. At first the biker crowd is unimpressed. But Pee Wee gesticulates wildly, with his arms meeting in front, behind, and above him, his pointer fingers touching, and his head moving like an arrhythmic clucking pigeon, and soon Pee Wee escalates to smashing beer bottles and glasses and the crowd warms up. Hopping onto the toes of his gargantuan shoes, he struts forward across the bar, much like Vaudevillian toe-dancer Amy Muller's bent knee bourré en pointe. The bikers go wild, and as the music ends, they all shout "Tequila!" in unison.

During the course of this dance, Pee Wee undergoes a remarkable transformation. He begins shyly and awkwardly, especially in contrast to the black-leather bikers who carry chains and sprout thick beards and thicker beer guts. These are physically large males who easily overpower Pee Wee. Through his dancing, however, Pee Wee can communicate with them. Once he finishes his dance Pee Wee is still a gawky, awkward guy. But he earned acceptance into the gang, utilizing courageous dorky dancing to validate himself and create approval for his dorky identity. This is a trope transformation

²¹ <http://youtube.com/watch?v=EQJexFOx0II>

witnessed regularly on the screen, most notably enjoyed again in relation to *Napoleon Dynamite*.

Pee Wee's popularity has lasted, despite nasty public scandals initiated in the early 1990s. Recently, Pee Wee's popularity has surged as Paul Reubens prepares a public comeback for his famous character. A third installment of the Pee Wee movie is tentatively set to begin production in 2007. This same year, Nike SB will release a pair of Nike SB Dunks named "Pee Wee Herman Dunks SB," with a gray and white color scheme and red detailing, modeled after Pee Wee's signature suit.

As much as Pee Wee's "Tequila" spectacle added to *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*, the recent film *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004) completely hinges on Napoleon's dorky dance routine. Napoleon (played by John Heder), who is himself ostracized, befriends a similarly cold-shouldered new student, the short, immigrant, mustachioed Pedro, and helps him run for school president against the popular captain of the female dance team, Summer. Each candidates' speech is followed by a skit or performance, and Summer and her team dance to wild audience acclaim. Pedro offers a shy speech, with muffled words, and although he promises to be the candidate who will fulfill the students' "wildest dreams," he has clearly already lost any hope of winning. But Napoleon makes a spontaneous decision to help his friend in need, and he slips the sound guy the cassette tape he has been secretly using to practice dance moves in the privacy of his bedroom. Napoleon walks to center stage, with hands thrust into the pockets of his jeans, his gaze always cast on the floor in front of him. The music begins--and so do Napoleon's hips. Never fully raising his gaze, Napoleon continues dancing, pulling out moves that Heder admits to borrowing from Michael Jackson, boy bands, Soul Train, and John Travolta.²² Because the independent filmmakers were shooting on a very tight budget, this scene was shot last with only one roll of film (equaling about 11 minutes). Heder improvised to three different songs, then the dance was edited together in the production lab. The result is something unique, a blend and presentation of dance that had never previously been seen on film--at least not in such an extended form that functions as the climatic crux of the movie. The response of the audience is similar to that received by Pee Wee. At first

²² "Special Feature: Commentary," *Napoleon Dynamite*, 2004. Hess, Jared, director. Fox Searchlight Pictures and Paramount Pictures, 2004, DVD.

they seem confused and lukewarm, but by the time the music abruptly stops and Napoleon continues dancing a few bars in silence before embarrassedly scuttling off, the audience bursts into wild applause and the entire auditorium stands in ovation (except, of course, Summer and her boyfriend).

Like Pee Wee, Napoleon is transformed. He remains the same gawky, awkward guy afterwards, but he is bettered in the eyes of those who had before hardly noticed or ridiculed him. Napoleon does not accomplish this on the singular behalf of a film character. The astonishing popularity of this film, which overwhelmingly stems from this dance scene, has single-handedly done more to validate dorky dance in real life than any other example, in film or on the Internet, in the past decade. The celebration of Napoleon's dorky dancing becomes a validating foundation for this dance form as a legitimate, valued way of moving and presenting oneself--which is crucial for the rise in popularity of amateur, made-for-Internet dances that will be discussed in more detail in coming chapters.

Napoleon manages to bestow coolness upon the essential, physical "dorky" accoutrements of the frizzy, out-of-control hair, tight and too-short pants, glasses and even the longstanding signifier of "un-coolness"--the fanny pack. Napoleon personifies everyone's awkward stages, though he resonates particularly strongly with the male audience. Critic David Stratton emphasizes this point in his movie review: "You know what I thought-- 'Who is this geek?' But he's got something about him....I think this is a film that resonates with the nerd in a lot of men...I walked out of the screening and another male critic said to me that that was the nerd he was at school, except he couldn't dance so well. And I sort of think that other men click into this."²³ This sympathetic and massive response to the eponymous character has sparked an equally massive *Napoleon Dynamite* marketing campaign--Napoleon-themed shirts festooned with "Vote For Pedro" slogans were quite ubiquitous for a time, and Napoleon's pithy but strange aphorisms are still popular ring tones.

Just as the original Napoleon swept through Europe, Napoleon Dynamite exploded onto the Internet. One can find clips from the original movie and a site titled "Learn to Dance with Napoleon Dynamite," in which all of his dance moves are given

²³ <http://www.abc.net.au/atthemovies/txt/s1228362.htm>

names and the viewer can change the accompanying music.²⁴ Pressing “play,” the user sees Napoleon begin his routine just as he did in the film, but other buttons allow us to skip around to different places, to rewind, or even to set the speed to slow motion, in case we really need to deconstruct his moves to better understand their subtler nuances. The most exciting feature allows a change the soundtrack—from “beat box” to “jump in the line,” each variation opening an appreciation of the movement in different ways. Napoleon’s moves are impossible to pigeon-hole as belonging to any one style, but with the added ability to watch him dancing to nine different styles of music, his movement becomes ever more amorphous. From hip hop to electronica to reggae to disco and soul train, it seems Napoleon is able to gyrate to anything, although the jazzed-up “Star Wars” track seems especially apropos. The nomenclature of Napoleon’s moves is witty and inventive. Dance notators, take note: “Turkish Twist,” “Raise the Barn,” and “Reverse Chicken Walk” are a few, but perhaps the best descriptions are “Greedy Buffet Patron” which is followed, aptly enough, by the “Pepto Bismol.”

On-screen awkward and dorky dancing has a venerable history and many memorable characters. As the Internet recycles these clips, it gives them renewed longevity and brings them to younger, adoring audiences, while clarifying the lineage and relationships among the different generations of awkward movers. A collective history of awkward dance is being established that also serves to sanction and legitimize the new wave of dorky dancers--who prefer the computer monitor over the film screen.

²⁴ <http://www.albinoblacksheep.com/flash/napoleon>

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT IS REAL, ANYWAY?

There exists a great spectrum of possibility for representation of dance from the complete amateur to the refined technical virtuoso. But in looking at what *is actually presented*, the space of the proscenium stage provides a particularly limited spectrum of diversity in terms of the technical proficiency of its participants. Amateur dance onstage²⁵ has traditionally been confined to the ubiquitous recital stage with its requisite audiences of proudly smiling family members. The moving picture, however, in all its mediated variety, historically has offered a much wider *mélange* of awkward dancing, as discussed in the examples presented in Chapter One. Now, with the recent explosion of video-sharing websites on the Internet that promote dorky dancing in a way that was previously impossible, a momentous rupture to pre-existing normative dance displays is occurring. Dance audiences are no longer limited to viewing conservative notions of what constitutes “grace.” On the contrary, we are now immersed in unconventional dance presentations that are actually reversing many previous notions of dance aesthetics: how it should appear, by whom it should be created, and where it should be presented.²⁶

The examples in Chapter One can be safely called “awkward dance,” although they exhibit a wide range of complementary compatibility with “dorky dance.” Although they may conform to many of the same qualifying criteria (such as their physicality of movement, compulsory corporeal and/or costuming appearance, and of course, gendered susceptibility) they diverge dramatically in terms of the final criterion: intent of purpose and commercial aspirations. Awkward dances maintain a certain relationship to intentionality and self-awareness that is particular to the big screen. By being constructed characters who dance in sequences intentionally created for the film by a profit-driven industry, they are rightfully interpreted by audiences as fabricated characters created, at least in part, for financial gain. However, there is still a range of perceived veracity.

²⁵ Of course, barring a certain lack of refinement apparent in styles such as Butoh, improvisation, and early postmodern dance.

²⁶ Perhaps in twenty years we will even retrospectively label this the time of the “Dorky Dance Revolution.”

O'Connor's Cosmo projects the most pronounced sense of being a manufactured display because of his years of dance training. The precision and advanced choreography of his routine, and the practice his performance requires, clearly shine through despite being masked by the goofiness of his character.

Heder's Napoleon falls towards the other end of the spectrum, since Heder had little to no prior dance experience and his movements are nearly entirely improvised. Furthermore, he was only paid \$1000 to film the entire movie.²⁷ With neither financial compensation nor the showcasing of advanced choreography figuring as essential priorities, his performance provides the illusion of being close to that of a complete, unadulterated amateur. But, of course, his character is still blatantly manufactured, as *Napoleon Dynamite* is not a documentary about Joe Heder. On the other hand, some of Edison's dancing actualities fulfill the criteria for dorky dancing most completely because any illusory element of constructedness is hardly present. Although it can be argued that every act that is viewed by even a single individual necessarily becomes performative, and thus is imbued with a sense of being constructed, Edison's dancers were not performing in the extended narrative sequences so evident in these later filmic examples of awkward dance. Amy Muller may have performed the exact same routine onstage, but she is still presented in this film clip as Amy Muller performing *her* dance, not as a character performing a routine within a contextualizing narrative. In fact, the act of labeling it an "actuality" serves to dispel any notions doubting its credibility.

Walter Benjamin, an early film theorist and astute movement analyst, discusses the idiosyncratic nature of film acting in his 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility." Benjamin maintains that presenting oneself in front of the camera is an inherently different process than presenting oneself in front of a live audience. The performance becomes "mediated" as the performer presents himself to an apparatus (i.e. the camera) rather than a live presence. Moreover, the performance is also carried out "before a group of specialists—executive producer, director, cinematographer, sound recordist, lighting designer, and so on—who are in the position to intervene at any

²⁷ "Commentary," *Napoleon Dynamite*, DVD.

time.”²⁸ Benjamin equates this type of performance to that of sporting exhibitions, a relationship he dubs the “test performance.” It is a performance that is repeated until all those concerned have deemed it adequate for the final product. Although one could argue that this is the same as the rehearsal process for an actor or dancer, whose performance is similarly crafted by the director or choreographer, the difference lies in the final product. The director or choreographer ultimately do not have final control over a live performance, whereas the actions of the film actor are immutable (barring editing) once committed to celluloid. Benjamin clearly sees a stark divide between live action and filmed action, a divergence rooted in the *intention* of that action. He writes, “[a]n action performed in the film studio therefore differs from the corresponding real action the way the competitive throwing of a discus in a sports arena would differ from the throwing of the same discus from the same spot in the same direction in order to kill someone. The first is a test performance, while the second is not.”²⁹

At the same time, there is something about awkwardness on screen that simultaneously counteracts how we normally perceive Hollywood fabrication. The characters who move awkwardly in movies are, indeed, still characters, but their “bungled” movement mitigates attempts to read them in the same convenient fashion as we do the other actors. Because their actions exist at the fringes of our normative expectations about proper movement, the characters themselves exist on the margins of assumptions about film actors: The paradox is that the movement reads as constructed, yet simultaneously it is unlike traditional movement in acting. This paradox is evident when looking at early film theorists’ observations of Charlie Chaplin. Rudolph Arnheim alludes to the deliberate production of Chaplin’s movement in his 1931 article “Chaplin’s Early Films.” He describes how Chaplin unrealistically responds to being pummeled by twenty police clubs:

In the whole history of the world, no one who has ever received a truncheon-blow to the head has ever then staggered along the street like a drunken duck, and with rolling eyes besides. In all Chaplin films, however, this is the conventional reaction to truncheons, and everyone recognizes and understands it because this is [his] pantomimic ideal form of a swoon. If, in real, life, swoons occur without all

²⁸ Benjamin, Walter, *Selected Writings: Vol. 3, 1935-1938*. (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 2002), 111.

²⁹ Ibid.

the desired vividness, it is nonetheless precisely the business of art to make the unsightly worth seeing.”³⁰

Yet Philippe Soupault emphasized in his 1928 essay, “Charlie Chaplin,” that he *did not* see Chaplin as a conventional actor-protagonist, much less a traditional star. Soupault saw Chaplin as presenting the subtle, but often unnoticed, beauty of lived reality. Soupault maintained that “[t]he undeniable superiority of Chaplin’s films...lies in the fact that in them a poetry reigns which everyone encounters in their lives—admittedly without always knowing it.”³¹ This “poetry” is undoubtedly linked to Chaplin’s unique movement portrayals, an assertion that is not far-fetched when reading the similar conclusion made by Benjamin. In a short fragment of text entitled “The Formula in Which the Dialectical Structure of Film Finds Expression,” written in 1935 (though unpublished during Benjamin’s lifetime), the author flexes his insightful movement analysis muscles scrutinizing Chaplin’s *sui generis* maneuvering. Benjamin credits Chaplin’s uniqueness to a sense of discontinuity, which he views as one half of the dialectic structure of film that concurrently allows, and juxtaposes, the twinned elements of continuity and discontinuity. Benjamin expounds:

Chaplin’s way of moving [Gestus] is not really that of an actor...His unique significance lies in the fact that, in his work, the human being is integrated into the film image by way of its gestures—that is, his bodily and mental posture. The innovation of Chaplin’s gestures is that he dissects the expressive movements of human beings into a series of minute innervations. Each single movement he makes is composed of a succession of staccato bits of movement. Whether it is his walk, the way he handles his cane, or the way he raises his hat—always the same jerky sequence of tiny movements applies the law of the cinematic image sequence to human motorial function. Now, what is it about this behavior that is distinctively comic?³²

Questions of perceived veracity on the part of the audience become immensely important when addressing self-produced dance on the Internet. As viewers, we are most likely to respond positively to a presentation of dorky dance when we are able to believe in its “authenticity” or its “genuineness.” The watcher can resonate deeply with a dance

³⁰ As translated by MacKay, John. “Walter Benjamin Rudolf Arnheim on Charlie Chaplin,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 9 (1996): 311-312.

³¹ As quoted by Benjamin, translated by *ibid*, 310.

³² Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings*, 94.

display that is truly offered by someone with little or no dance training, because we all recognize the position of great vulnerability that such dancing entails, *particularly for males*. It is a display that suggests courage--but also connotes a sense of contentment and embracement of one's identity. We see this acknowledgment played out in the famous dancing scenes of Pee Wee and Napoleon, but this scenario is much more exciting and monumental when we are able to believe in its fleshy, mundane verisimilitude, rather than someone (thing) presented in the chimerical world of Hollywood. This, then, is the beauty of video-sharing websites on the Internet. It is the perfect forum by which we are finally³³ able to see dorky dancing in its most genuine, least fabricated form.

But the transition of awkward dancing from the movie screen to the computer screen was not simple. Video-sharing websites ruptured previous restrictions constricting access to dorky dance, yet there were instigating fissures that helped tear the seams apart. Spike Jonze's 1999 music video for Fat Boy Slim's song "Praise You" was a major (if not the main) provocateur. The artistry of Jonze's video lies in its dramatic manipulation of the audience's perceived sense of veracity, resulting in a complex layering of extreme believability coupled with consummate artifice. The layers of fabrication become so convoluted that they can only be unraveled with careful research.

Spike Jonze established a successful career as a director of music videos (for bands like the Beastie Boys and Weezer) before expanding to full-length films, like *Being John Malkovich* and *Adaptation*, and most recently, he was nominated in 2006 for "Outstanding Achievement in Commercials in 2005" by the Director's Guild of America. "Praise You," created in 1999, was singularly inventive. It was a unique music video at the time for including both pre- and post-video dialogue, and, for *not* including the creator of the music, Fat Boy Slim, except during a cameo walk-by appearance towards the end of the shoot. Instead, the video presents itself as a "guerilla" performance by the "Torrance Community Dance Group," who arrive in front of a movie theater in Los Angeles with a boombox to perform their dance routine for the captive audience of ticket-buyers waiting in line. The variously-statured ensemble is clad in a variety of fluorescent

³³ Or, more appropriately, we were fleetingly able to view genuine dorky dance. Encroaching Internet commercialism and the likes of lonelygirl15, a popular YouTube video series that was outed by suspicious fans as a fake, have damaged our capacity for completely believing in these online postings.

colors, butt-clinging spandex shorts, sweatpants, sweatshirts with the shoulders cut out, and one Torrance dancer even sports a fanny pack. The dancers, ranging from young to quite old, shake, shimmy, wiggle, thrash, and gyrate, coordinated and rehearsed, but they really struggle so hard it gives them the realistic veneer of complete amateurs. One highlight is when “Richard Koufey,” the choreographer and main dancer, who claims to have “performed with several b-boy posses” growing up in Manhattan, breaks into his personal hip hop section—arms flailing, legs skanking, he barely avoids whacking the surrounding pedestrians as he launches into floor-work consisting of a forward roll and an attempted, but unsuccessful, eggbeater. At one point the performance is interrupted by theater officials who attempt to shut down the extravaganza and turn the music off, but the spectacle quickly continues.

This is how the video was presented on MTV; however, the reality of its creation is much more complicated. Richard Koufey is actually the alter-ego of a mustachioed Spike Jonze. Ironically, to further complicate things, “Spike Jonze” is also a pseudonym. The director was born as Michael Spiegel, part of the wealthy Spiegel family, made famous and rich through their catalogue business.³⁴ Although Jonze’s music videos for the likes of the Beastie Boy, Weezer, and Bjork were well known at this time, he always maintained a low-key, non-public persona that allowed him to perform the role of choreographer, Richard Koufey,³⁵ incognito. The Torrance Community Dance Group was equally fictional. Torrance, a suburb of Los Angeles, does not have a community dance group. The dancers were assembled by audition. Michael Grier, one of the chosen dancers, documents his experience on his website entitled “Filming the Fat Boy Slim Music Video.”³⁶ He comments that over 100 men and 150 women attended the audition, but only six were selected. Grier writes: “It’s kind of funny, at the audition they taught us this great dance routine. But when we started rehearsals for the video we were pretty much doing anything except dancing. You didn’t really need to be a dancer to do what we ended up doing.”³⁷ The rehearsal lasted two days and the video was shot on day

³⁴ Smith, Ethan. “Spike Jonze Unmasked.” *New York Magazine*. Oct. 25, 1999.

³⁵ This Richard exudes an earnest, cheerleader-like quality, pumping up his dance team with smiles and positive feedback, that brings to mind another earlier dorky movement guru, Richard Simmons.

³⁶ <http://www.michaelgier.com/fbsstory.htm>

³⁷ Ibid.

three. Many of the dance moves were learned from watching a video Jonze had made of himself improvising to the song.³⁸

One of the most unique elements of the video is the manner in which it was filmed. Shot on handheld, digital cameras, it gave the appearance to the audience (both to those waiting in line and those watching the final product) that it was just tourists who happened to capture the moment. The images are shaky and the views are often half-obstructed by fellow pedestrians. This method certainly creates a convincing illusion that the performance just “happened” to be captured by someone standing in line or passing on the street, a possibility even more feasible today with the ubiquity of cell phones with video capabilities. Grier discusses the directorial rationale supporting this unconventional filming approach. “They didn’t want anyone to know that we were filming a music video. So all the cameramen were dressed like tourists, using small digital cameras that looked like tourist camcorders. The cameramen just mixed into the crowd.”³⁹

All of these elements combined to create a very convincing portrayal of the big performance break for the local amateur dance group, just as Jonze intended. Grier explains that the directing team “wanted us to look like we were this very serious amateur dance troupe performing the first time our routine to Fat Boy Slim’s song. We supposedly had been rehearsing for months for this big performance. We were dressed to look like dancers from the 80’s. It was very funny because we were dressed to look out of place for the 1990’s.”⁴⁰ But this representation is not entirely false, either. Many of the moves were choreographed by Jonze, who is not a trained choreographer, though much of his oeuvre demonstrates an advanced kinesthetic appreciation and understanding. Certainly, the audience who watch the routine in front of the movie theater are not actors. The documentation of their reactions to the spectacle, which are overwhelmingly positive though also clearly confused at times, are not staged. Their reactions exude a sense of genuineness impossible to feign or re-create. The dancers, though intentionally selected by audition, were diverse enough in terms of age and body shapes to appear convincingly amateur. Moreover, the video only cost \$800 to make, most of which paid for the boombox and food for the dancers. Clearly it screams for neophyte legitimacy since no one, at the time, could imagine well-established producers backing such a low-budget project.

The endorsement received from the captive audience during the shoot was echoed on a

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

national and international scale once the video was released on MTV. It became an instant sensation and won three awards during the 1999 MTV Video Music Awards. It was also voted the “Best Video of All Time” in a 2001 poll of MTV viewers. One critic has commented “It’s difficult to fully explain the brilliance of this video; it’s so bizarre and funny that it’s not entirely a pleasurable thing to watch, but you’ll watch it more than once.”⁴¹

The success of the video prompted the continuation of the great dorky-dance illusion. The Torrance Community Dance Group was invited to perform live at the 1999 MTV Video Music Awards where they performed the same routine but with spruced up, costumes that begin as white, cavernous toga-body bags that are stripped off midway to reveal black body suits adorned with flashing red bicycle lights. A mockumentary, “Torrance Rises” was made about the group’s rehearsal process in L.A. and their performance at the Metropolitan Opera House. The video won “Best Breakthrough Video,” “Best Choreography” and “Best Direction,” which was awarded to the group and they all accepted it together. During his speech, Jonze as Koufey remained true to character, remarking how the company had been together for seven years and “accept[ing] the award with the unabashed glee of an amateur.”⁴² The documentary is now included on *The Work of Director Spike Jonze*.

Many postings of “Praise You” can now be found on YouTube and other video-sharing Internet sites. Viewing it in this context is markedly different, however, from how it was first broadcast, when it was originally screened between other music videos on MTV. In 1999 it was out of step and radically contrastive to everything else that could be seen on cable music video stations. On YouTube it seems to blend right in. In terms of content and stylistic approach, “Praise You” was several years before its time. It is almost as if Jonze created a genre of movement display, but the forum which best communicates this genre had not yet been invented. Once this forum was created, “Praise You” was quick to find its own hospitable niche. One zealous fan created a tribute website. It shows a full clip of the video, interesting because this site was established well before video-sharing websites were created. It also breaks down all the dance moves, as in the later Napoleon Dynamite website. The creator suggests a method of practicing the moves: “The best way to learn

⁴¹ <http://www.sputnik7.com/features/spikejonze/indextwo.jsp>

⁴² Katz, Daniel J. “Victory for Hill and Praising La Vida Loca.” *The Tech*. 119, no. 40. (1999).

them is by taping the video, and practicing along. Don't practice too much, or you'll be too good. Once you can remember the moves, take 'em to the dance clubs and upstage the go-go girls.”⁴³

Sprinkled around YouTube, one can access homemade “Praise You” renditions. One video has a group of five males who appear to be in late middle school or early high school.⁴⁴ They perform their version of the “Praise You” moves in the atrium of a mall as busy crowds swarm around them. Their costumes are much simpler and more contemporary than the originals—jeans, short sleeve shirts (in either black or white—the coordination seems deliberate) and tennis shoes. The funniest highlight comes when the “Koufey” stand-in performs the improvisation section and flails wildly enough to lose a shoe.

Another fascinating video comes from France. This one features a group of 13 dancers, both males and females clad in quotidian clothing, who perform the dance in the parking lot of a French supermarket, close to the front door (though not blocking it) and in prime view of passing customers.⁴⁵ The group mainly receives sincere smiles and bemused grins, and one mother and daughter can be seen dancing along in the crowd. There were certainly no hurled tomatoes or other supermarket sundries, but the store manager is seen intervening at the end, dialing digits on his cell phone, presumably calling the police. One feature of YouTube is the ability to e-mail anyone who posts work through a YouTube-specific internal messaging service. Through personal e-mail dialogue with the poster, “Sylvain,” I was able to ask questions concerning process and intent⁴⁶.

The video stemmed from an annual summer gathering of artists in a small village in rural France, an “improvised festival where everyone who is invited is supposed to bring a project (music, dance, cooking, film...) and we spend four days realizing each project.” One project idea was to stage a guerilla dance in the neighboring town.

⁴³ Torrance Community Dance Group. “Fatboy Slim’s ‘Praise You’”; available from http://www.members.tripod.com/praise_you/; Internet; accessed 3 Feb. 2007.

⁴⁴ Fromruskwithlove. “Praise You Dance,” available from <http://youtube.com/watch?v=CLoOwqursB0>; Internet; accessed on 3 Feb. 2007.

⁴⁵ “Tribute to Spike Jonze ‘Praise You.’” Available from <http://youtube.com/watch?v=N2776tDupGM>; Internet; accessed 3 Feb. 2007.

⁴⁶ Sylvain. Personal communication. 6 Feb. 2007.

“Something like twelve friends decided to do it. None of us were dancers at all.” Sylvain had brought *The Director’s Label* DVD boxed set with him and after watching Spike Jonze’s work, the group decided it was “one of the best [videos] ever” because it was inexpensive to make and occurred in a very public space that had the potential to “shake people up” and, most importantly, because it looked as if everyone involved was having fun, both the dancers and the audience.

Sylvain invokes a long tradition of public performance work and even cites Guy Debord and the Situationist art-making of the 1960s as a primary influence. But he also quotes Bjork, the famous Icelandic pop singer, whom he cites as proclaiming “I dream that one day everyone around me will sing and dance as if life was a musical comedy for while.”⁴⁷ Sylvain says that this is his dream, too. The piece was performed twice in August of 2005, the first time outside of the town hall and the second, as is shown on the YouTube video. Sylvain writes that broadcasting it online was not an original motivation for creating the work, but once he “discovered YouTube, [he] immediately uploaded this video” because he felt it was such an appropriate place for this performance. He writes, “For me this performance is not just a joke. It’s a kind of gift for common people.”⁴⁸ The open nature of the Internet, its ease in both distribution and accessibility, resonates with Sylvain’s artistic sensibilities. He sees YouTube as a “revolution in front of the computer screen” where “for the first time we can [make a performance] and give it to anyone without [monetary] interest.” He hopes “that YouTube will make a new generation of spectator, more involved in life and action, [and] less interested by the big TV show.”⁴⁹

These two video examples indicate how “Praise You” has become a template⁵⁰ upon which others are motivated to stage their own live “guerilla” dances in public spaces. This template works in several ways. Primarily, as with any good template, it serves as a device of convenience. It allows those who adopt the template to quickly learn the movement and it creates an expedited process that can progress quickly from rehearsal process to performance event. Secondly, it provides a sense of legitimacy to the project. Although the “Praise You” dance may not be as instantaneously recognizable to

⁴⁷ As quoted by Sylvain. Personal communication. 6 Feb. 2007.

⁴⁸ Sylvain, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ In fact, it functions as a meme, a concept that will be detailed later in Chapter Four.

all potential audience members as, say, the Macarena, it is recognizable enough to provide a platform of validation. For example, although the French “Praise You” dancers might not have required such a connection and could have more easily staged any live dance event in its place, it is reasonable to imagine that this element of validation was important as illustrated in the first example performed by the young males. There is a sense of pleasant irony that comes when quoting an already-established and famous display of dorkiness that makes one’s own display seem slightly less risky. Finally, and most crucially, a template acts to unite. In this case, it serves as a guide that can spark global participation, because it is a movement template and participation does not involve a written language. The Internet allows for these dances to be crafted on any body and to be shared with any body, expanding these dance events to worldwide citizen-participants.⁵¹

Questions of veracity are central to Internet audiences and they become increasingly problematized with Spike Jonze’s “Praise You” music video. Even in its original, pre-Internet manifestation, it demonstrates a very complicated and bemused layering of self-presentation created by performing as an “awkward” dancer. Despite its incredible believability, its very real audience reaction, and the tangible copies it has inspired, this video differs dramatically from presenting awkwardness with no element of fabrication--when it moves to the unequivocally “dorky.” “Praise You,” one can argue, marks an intermediary realm. It is more genuine or “authentic” than, say, the filmic personas of Herman or Chaplin, but less transparent and more constructed than the first self-produced dance videos posted to the web, like Gary Brolsma’s “Numa Numa Dance,” which is alluring because of its sense of genuineness of person and homemade production.

⁵¹ This type of movement template (or meme) is markedly different from another prominent template. Yvonne Rainer’s “Trio A.” Despite intentions to bring dance to “any body,” post-modernism was never able to escape from a realm considered pretentious by mainstream/pop cultural audiences. The Internet and video-sharing websites are creating a remarkably expanded scope of participation.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVERYBODY'S DOING IT

If the Internet allows for more universal access, it is certainly not yet universally accessible--a clear digital divide still bars many from currently participating.⁵² Moreover, since the early domain of the Internet was dominated by male input, the Internet has been an amenable space for masculine innovation and artistic expression.⁵³ But as technology becomes increasingly affordable, Internet dance will reach a larger audience than any previous medium.

Many participants view the Internet as a means for extending previous ideas about universal participation in the creation of art. Though the drive for participatory art can be traced through a long history, these ideals were especially prevalent in the artistic philosophies of the 1960s and 1970s—in visual and performance art, film, dance, music, and especially in the blending of all of these forms in Happenings, Situations, the Fluxus Movement and other audience participatory events,

Claire Bishop, editor and author of the introduction to the recent book *Participation*, identifies three approaches that have historically motivated participatory art, which she labels activation, authorship and community, divisions that are also useful to our discussion of Internet-produced dance. The first approach intends to “to create an active subject, one who will be empowered by the experience of physical or symbolic participation.”⁵⁴ The goal, Bishop maintains, is that the empowered individual will be encouraged and enabled to determine personal political and cultural destinies. Modes of participation driven by activation therefore derive their legitimacy “from a (desired)

⁵² O'Hara, Kieron and David Stevens. *Inequality.com: Power, Poverty, and the Digital Divide* (Oxford: One World, 2006).

⁵³ In the late 1990s the Internet was only beginning to shed its “image of being predominantly a medium of communication for highly educated and affluent white males living in metropolitan areas of the industrialized world.” From James Slevin, “The Characteristics of Internet Users.” *The Internet and Society* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 41.

⁵⁴ Bishop, Claire. “Introduction: Viewers as Producers.” *Participation* (London and Cambridge, MA: Whitecapel and the MIT Press, 2006), 12.

causal relationship between the experience of a work of art and individual/collective agency.”⁵⁵ The second application that deals with authorship is (partially) politically motivated, since the act of relinquishing authorship creates works “more egalitarian and democratic than the creation of a work of art by a single artist.”⁵⁶ The hoped-for result in social systems is that they too will be similarly less hierarchical. Yet this also belies an aesthetic rationale, as Bishop attests: “[S]hared production is also seen to entail the aesthetic benefits of greater risk and unpredictability.”⁵⁷ The third approach stems directly from Marxism and has become particularly pronounced, Bishop avers, since détente and the fall of Communism. It involves a “perceived crisis in the community and collective responsibility” that derives from the alienating effects of modern capitalistic culture. Participatory art can ameliorate isolation by refashioning the conventional “social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning.”⁵⁸

These same approaches are germane to examinations of participation on the Internet. If anything, proponents of the Internet feel this forum will actually allow and enable heightened accessibility and participation by removing geographic and financial barriers to self-production and broadcast. Jay Dedman and Joshua Paul recently published *Videoblogging*, one of the first handbooks detailing the process of creating one’s own vlog (video blog). In the chapter “Get the Vlog Mindest” they outline the motivations for creating vlogs, adopting vocabulary very similar to that employed by Bishop. The authors feel the Internet, and specifically the ability to post video onto the web, creates a “global community.”

The web is nearly infinite in its capacity for distributing information. The videoblogging world is one of vision and shared experience....Why is video so powerful on the web? Much of what we know and interpret is done through visual communication. When someone talks to you, you are learning and interpreting her intentions through her unspoken gestures, such as facial expressions or speech patterns...Video creates empathy, and videoblogging enables people from the opposite side of the world to see what life is like in another country.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Dedman, Jay and Joshua Paul. *Videoblogging* (Indianapolis: Wiley, 2006), 5-6.

In addition, Dedman and Paul stress the Internet's role in deconstructing financial barriers that limited access to production. Videoblogs "enable person-to-person communication, with no gatekeepers in between." Ryanne Hodson, creator of FreeVlog.org, elaborates upon this communal element. Hodson originally worked in the commercial television world but quickly became attracted to videoblogging once the technology supporting it was created.

Videoblogging was like my saving grace from a life of editing for television. I found that TV is severely limiting for artists because there are no open distribution methods, no chance for feedback, and no dialogue with viewers. Plus, there is a such a high barrier to entry. Videoblogs allow individuals to produce video with no censorship... Artists and non-artists have a level playing field for producing and expressing themselves through a visual medium in a way never before available. Videobloggers can have their voices heard just as loudly as any network television show.⁶⁰

Thus, the Internet extends participatory ideals, expanding them in two primary ways. It alters the scope and role of the audience, expanding the sphere of these events to include potentially limitless viewers. In the Happenings, Situationist, and Fluxus events of the 1950s through the 1970s, especially those occurring unscheduled in public spaces, there was an inherent element of randomness in audience composition, with the audience stumbling upon the performance. This audience, however, was still finite. Either one had to be "in the know" in order to be physically present or had to fortuitously happen upon the event. With the Internet there is still a great factor of arbitrariness involved in viewing specific displays of dance, but it is a potentially infinite happenstance, where an audience member (the viewer) has the chance to stumble upon virtually any performance (video) that has been posted on the web. By obliterating the geographic demands of live events, potential viewers are not limited by physical boundaries or proximity. Temporal restrictions are also obliterated. Once a video is posted a viewer may watch it instantly, or even years later, and either in its entirety or in an abbreviated form.

As early as the 1930s, Walter Benjamin elucidated the usefulness of collaborative art-making by arguing that "the work of art should actively intervene in and provide a model for allowing viewers to be involved in the process of production...this apparatus

⁶⁰ As quoted in "An Interview with Ryanne Hodson of FreeVlog.org, in *ibid*, 7.

[of art-making] is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers—that is, *the more readers or spectators it is able to turn into collaborators*” (emphasis mine).⁶¹ The Internet enacts this transformation. Video-sharing websites have blended the roles of its users and many participants operate as more than just viewers—by acting as critic (posting commentary and feedback to other’s submissions), producer/choreographer/artist (posting their own submissions), or even artistic collaborators (by simply re-posting someone else’s submission or propagating it through e-mail or other means or by manipulating someone else’s posting and re-formulating it to make a new, unique creation).

What makes the Internet so adept at fostering integrated social experiences is that it so closely blends the roles of producer/consumer and viewer/critic/collaborator of created works that one may not, and need not, even realize that he or she is participating in some concept of the “artistic process.” Posting and watching videos online is seen as a pleasurable leisure activity, and it is quickly becoming integrated in the daily life for millions of people. It is not art (dance) that has to be sought out and paid for, as it does for a museum, on a concert stage, or even in the public space of performance events. If anything, the problem with the Internet is that it almost *forces* participation, even on those who may not wish to become collaborators. Even with the best spam-blocking e-mail accounts, we cannot prevent others from forwarding videos in their attempts to include everyone in their process.

One of the most fascinating illustrations of self-produced, dorky dance for the web is the “Numa Numa Dance.” The webcam-produced video was created by Gary Brolsma, a nineteen-year old young man from the suburbs of New Jersey. His video is set to the incredibly infectious Romanian pop-techno song, “Dragostea Din Tei” (“Love Among the Linden Trees”), by the group O-Zone. He made it for a few friends and posted it to the site “Newgrounds,” the original flash-video portal and web-sharing site that is especially popular with video game users.⁶² Brolsma discusses his motivation for creating the original Numa Numa video on the “New Numa” website:

⁶¹ Benjamin, Walter, as quoted in *ibid*, 11.

⁶² Newgrounds. “Numa Numa Dance,” available from <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/206373>; Internet, accessed on 7 February, 2007.

I've always been a fan of making little video clips to entertain friends, by making mini-documentaries on stupid things, or just plain old goofing around. Honestly, the original Numa Numa Dance was exactly that. I'm just a regular guy that sits in front of his computer bored out of his mind messing around on the internet looking at funny videos and other websites to pass the time. The video was originally intended to make a few friends laugh by just goofing off. It only took one take and about 15 minutes to put all together. A lot of people ask me if I planned the video out or took multiple tries with it. The real answer is... no.⁶³

Brolsma's minimal movements performed while seated in a chair, consist of precise lip-synching, well-timed facial expressions, pumping arms, sparkly fingers, tongue flicks, and, the climax, musically synchronized eyebrow raises--two in quick succession, with the right eye in isolation. Despite the simplicity of the movement component of Numa, Brolsma himself labels the video as "dance," and this is the context in which it has been received—not as a mere video of lip-synching, but as an inceptive, choreographic movement phrase.

The video is obviously filmed in front of his computer in his bedroom on a webcam. In the background, an aquarium and blue curtained window are seen. Brolsma never rises from the chair and his physical exertion is minimal. All that is visible of his body are his upper shoulders and head, so the movement occurs primarily with his arms above his head, a positioning that connotes enthusiasm and victory. The "dorkiness" of this video shines through in its obvious amateur dance presentation, a routine so simple that anyone could repeat it. And, as with any good dance template, many people *have* learned and repeated its pattern.

When compared to most of the videos we see posted online today, the quality of the Brolsma's digital video already looks primitive, cheap and pixilated, making it difficult to discern subtle details, especially when Brolsma moves quickly. Two years have brought noticeable changes in affordability of less expensive, higher quality video cameras, wider access to high-speed Internet, and sites that allow uploading of larger, less compressed files. Numa Numa also maintains "dorky" physical designators—Brolsma, an obviously plump male, wears glasses and oversized headphones that distort the shape of his head. Furthermore, it negotiates layers of cultural representation in humorous ways, by

⁶³ New Numa. "The Numa Story: Interview with Gary Brolsma," available from <http://www.newnuma.com/story.html>; Internet, accessed on 6 Feb. 2007.

coupling his well-accepted dorky movements with an incomprehensible but addictive Romanian song. Had Broolsma been lip-synching to an already popular song with completely comprehensible English lyrics, it would have read quite differently, and likely less successfully. And, though the song “Dragostea Din Tei” was a huge hit throughout Europe in the summer of 2004, topping the charts at number one for many weeks, the song was virtually unknown in the United States before it was adopted by Broolsma. Despite the notoriety generated through his video, the song was still rarely played on the radios within the U.S. The band O-Zone even created a re-mix of the song with English lyrics, but it never moved beyond number 83 on the Billboard Charts.⁶⁴

Finally, Numa incontestably satisfies the important criterion of dorky dance-hood in that it was clearly not created for financial gain. Being commercially unfettered is what allows Internet-posted dance to fulfill this crucial criterion of dorky dance-dom so irreproachably. Dance in film is always read as ultimately having financial aims, even in low budget productions like *Napoleon Dynamite*. But a self-produced video, posted gratis on the web, for a potentially globe-spanning audience radically alters the viewer’s acceptance of it as amicably amateur. And although dorky dance on the Internet is now being adopted and sponsored by large companies seeking financial profit, this was not true when the “Numa Numa Dance” was first released. Being the first dorky-dance-viral-video to gain widespread popularity, there was no precedent by which to evaluate it. “Numa Numa Dance,” in fact, *has become* the standard that proves the marketability of these web-posted dorky dance displays.⁶⁵ Moreover, Numa’s importance transcends discussions of dorky dance and stands as an archetype of viral videos in general, which figures prominently in expanded analyses of Internet theory. In *Videoblogging*, Dedman and Paul utilize Broolsma’s Numa Dance as the prime example to demonstrate how a video can become viral;⁶⁶ even in the minds of the larger Internet community, the Numa Dance will stand as the viral-video phenomenon to surpass.

In fact, the dancier appeal and acceptance of Broolsma’s video is proven through its alterations. The very first version had images spliced with his dancing—flashes of

⁶⁴ Wikipedia. “Dragostea Din Tei,” available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragostea_din_te_i; Internet; as accessed 7 Feb. 2007.

⁶⁵ This will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Six.

⁶⁶ Dedman, Jay and Joshua Paul. *Videoblogging* (Indianapolis: Wiley, 2006), 13.

random people, presumably friends or perhaps other Newgrounds users, many with heads crafted to fictitious alien or cop bodies, a steak, feta cheese, and text like “Give Me Lots of Kiss.” The viewers, however, felt these arbitrary images detracted from what was most appealing about the video—Brolsma himself. To underscore the dancing (however minimal), he then posted a second, unadulterated version of the video, the version that has ultimately concretized the “Numa Numa Dance” as an Internet phenomenon and launched Brolsma into Internet celebrity status. This example stands out as one of the sincerest and most transparent exemplars of the dorky dance Internet-video form. Self-created, produced, and distributed intentionally for the Internet, it erases any remnants of artifice that linger in Spike Jonze’s “Praise You” video. Brolsma is simply presenting himself—not a theatricalized or alter-ego version of himself.

The “Numa Numa Dance” has become a huge hit on the web. It can be placed into the annals of Internet history as the first dorky dance “viral video,” the term coined for video content that gains widespread popularity through e-mail forwarding and media sharing websites.⁶⁷ As of February 2007, the video has been viewed over 14 million times on Newgrounds--a figure that does not even take into account the countless other sites to which it has been re-posted.⁶⁸ Brolsma has been interviewed or featured in numerous articles and television news programs, from ABC’s “Good Morning America” show to VH1’s “Best Week Ever.”⁶⁹ Joe Levy of *Rolling Stone* magazine says, “You’re wondering for a second when you’re watching it, is this for real? Is it a phenomenon? Oh yeah. Are people richly amused? Oh yes, very much so”⁷⁰ The *New York Times* even wrote an article about the “Numa Phenomenon,” on February 26, 2005, which explores the pitfalls of Internet celebrity experienced by Brolsma after his instant notoriety.⁷¹

The reaction to “Numa Numa” by fans is overwhelmingly positive, though with

⁶⁷ Wikipedia. “Viral Video,” available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viral_video; Internet, as accessed on 9 Feb. 2007.

⁶⁸ Newgrounds, “Numa Numa Dance.”

⁶⁹ New Numa. “The Numa Story.”

⁷⁰ www.dancefrontdoor.co.uk/blog/ct2000/index.php?cmd=showentry&eid=45

⁷¹ Feuer, Alan and Jason George. “Internet Fame Is Cruel Mistress for a Dancer of the Numa Numa,” *The New York Times*, 26 Feb. 2006, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/26/nyregion/26video.html?ex=1174708800&en=401d2538d98cd1e2&ei=5070>; Internet, accessed 12 Feb. 2007.

such sheer notoriety it does, of course, have its detractors. There are over 1000 pages containing 10,312 reviews for Numa on Newgrounds alone. Many reviewers, especially those writing before Numa became an Internet phenomenon, admire Broolsma's courage. One reviewer, swordman321, acknowledges: "Wow. I never give good reviews on movie imports, but this was too hilarious...and the fact that you had the courage is admirable. Very funny. You actually pulled of a video clip that will be remembered."⁷² Another response by Tripps exclaims "kudos man, that takes balls, but lord knows I'm glad you did it. I'm still laughing. I watched it like five times 20 minutes ago and I just can't stop."⁷³ One deeply poignant comment shares a woman's story of how Numa touched her on a personal level. XxJojexx, who awarded Numa a perfect score of ten, writes:

I just wanted you [Broolsma] to know that I played your video every morning while I was caregiver for my husband in his fight with lung cancer. I would play it when I got up and dance and sing and it gave me an upbeat frame of mind so that I could smile and go on with what I needed to do. When that dear man died I still played your video mostly when I was at my worst, when the darkness was tight around me and bouncing around to your Numa Numa dance would help me find my way back to the light. I still come and play it when being alone gets to be a little too much. I just wanted you to know that while this is a very funny and entertaining video it has served a higher purpose and helped save me in the darkest times of my life. For this I thank you very, very much.⁷⁴

This immense popularity would not have been possible without the participation of others, initially through viral-video techniques of e-mailing the link to the video to friends or re-posting the video in other Internet forums. But within days of the original posting, users also became true collaborators, in Benjamin's sense, by posting parody or copycat videos, starting with simple videos of others performing the moves, to animated characters performing Numa, to videos borrowing the song and not the movement, resulting in a myriad different Numa manifestations.

The logistics of the Numa explosion can be more clearly understood by exploring its relation to memes. Richard Dawkins, the zoologist and evolutionary scientist,

⁷² Newgrounds, "Numa Review" posted by swordman321, available from, http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/readreview.php?sort=date_mr&id=206373&page=1031; Internet, as accessed on 8 Feb. 2007.

⁷³ Newgrounds, "Numa Review" posted by Tripps, *ibid.*

⁷⁴ "Numa Review," posted by xxJojexx, *ibid.*

introduced the “meme” concept in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, to signify a “unit of cultural information transferable from one mind to another.”⁷⁵ A meme is thought to operate similarly to genes (thus the derivation of the word) by propagating itself as a unit through cultural evolution and diffusion. Memes can range from commercial jingles and catchphrases to ways of building pots and religious tenets. The concept of meme can itself be considered a meme, as it has permeated popular culture in ways that most scientific theories do not.⁷⁶ The term “Internet meme” has been formulated to explain memes that are spread through the Internet, and once Internet memes have gained enough popularity to be recognized beyond the Internet community, they become “Internet phenomenon.”⁷⁷ According to this terminology, the “Numa Numa Dance” began as a posting to a web-sharing site, which then transformed into an Internet meme when most members of that site became familiar with the video; then, as it traveled to other Internet sites and onto television and began being copied in the non-virtual world, it metamorphosed into a veritable Internet phenomenon.

Mememes transfer by imitation and are subject to mutation, crossover and adaptation,⁷⁸ precisely the manner in which the Numa phenomenon has spread. A search on Newgrounds for “Numa Numa Dance” results in 88 matches alone, a figure, again, that does not include submissions to other sites. These copycat videos generally maintain the integrity of the Numa concept by incorporating enough characteristics of the original so that an obvious lineage is visible. This evolution also brings alterations and adaptations at a rapid pace, forging a hyperspeed cultural evolution possible on the Internet. One favorite example of this memetic drift actually combines another meme, the dance of Napoleon Dynamite, to form the “Napoleon Numa Numa Dance,” (or, perhaps more succinctly, the “N(um)apoleon”) which shows Napoleon dancing to the Numa soundtrack.⁷⁹ Its creator, NeoScriptor, writes “[f]or the first time in history,

⁷⁵ Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁷⁶ As evidenced by its inclusion on sites like *Wikipedia* and *The Daily Meme*

⁷⁷ “Internet Meme,” *Wikipedia*, available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_meme; Internet, as accessed on 12 Feb. 2007.

⁷⁸ “What Is a Meme?” *The Daily Meme*, available from <http://thedailymeme.com/what-is-a-meme/>; Internet; as accessed on 12 Feb. 2007.

⁷⁹ Newgrounds, “Napoleon Numa Numa dance,” available from <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/search.php?terms=numa+napoleon&kind=j&x=0&y=0>; Internet, accessed on 7 Feb. 2007.

Napoleon Dynamite reveals his true love of the Ozone song “Dragostea Din Tei.” Unfortunately the sound does not match quite as well as the wonderful pairing of Keaton with Flogging Molly (discussed in Chapter One), but it does synchronize nonetheless. This examples best demonstrates the public is forging connections between various dorky dancers. The Internet creates a space where filmic dorky dance memes are united with their Internet dorky dance counterpart memes, allowing users to orchestrate filmic and television content into re-imagined forms that merge with their own lives and interests.

Other Numa spin-offs include: “Numa Numa Prance,” the original parody, a webcam-shot video showing a young male similarly clad in white shirt and headphones waving his arms in the air and lip-synching lackadaisically, but it is a forced display of rolling eyes and tongue-in-cheek emulation. It has none of the genuine enthusiasm that makes the original so endearing. Nevertheless, this video has secured its own role in this Internet phenomenon precisely for being the “official first Numa parody.”⁸⁰ “American Idle,” a submission featuring an animated Gary that looks remarkably like the original performing the Numa routine on the “American Idol” show, and receiving resounding applause from the “live” studio audience while an animated Paula Abdul dances along with the same pumping arms movement.⁸¹ Another submission, “Numa Coop,” is an animated character that looks nothing like Broslma who performs the same moves.⁸² This rendition transfers the movement and posits it onto an entirely different stereotypical representation of masculinity. In this case, the Numa moves are performed by a muscular, spiky haired, goateed, weightlifting male wearing a shirt with the sleeves cut off and the fish tank in the background has been replaced by a poster of a bikini-clad babe lounging on a hot-rod car. The animation is precisely crafted, and the cartoon dancer faithfully performs many of the Numa moves, including moving into the “camera” (the frame of the animation), thereby simulating a close-up shot and the infamous eyebrow raise (perhaps even more satisfying when performed in animation). But towards the end, he takes a decisively divergent path and headbangs for several measures. Even

⁸⁰ Newgrounds. “Numa Numa Prance,” available from <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/207440>; Internet; as accessed on 7 Feb. 2007.

⁸¹ Newgrounds. “American Idle,” available from <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/227808>; Internet; as accessed on 7 Feb. 2007.

⁸² Newgrounds. “Numa Coop,” available from <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/237597>; Internet; as accessed on 7 Feb. 2007.

in watching an animated character perform Numa, the performance infused with palpable awkwardness. In this case it arises from the juxtaposition of this hyper-masculine character dancing with dorky abandon and glee.

It seems no coincidence that Newgrounds was the forum out of which the first dorky dance viral-video arose. It was begun in 1995, well before the Internet had become a popular and widely used technology. Newground's teenage creator, "with a thirst for blood and violence," used the site to display his own video game creations (one early game was named "Club a Seal"). The site began using Flash (animation) in 1998 and was opened to input from other users. By the time "Numa Numa" was posted in 2004, users were accustomed not only to watching Flash animations, they also expected a certain level of violence in the submissions. In fact, the evaluation criteria by which other users ranked a submission included a violence category, in addition to graphics, sound, interactivity, style and humor. At this time, video-sharing websites had not garnered the immense popularity and ubiquity they now enjoy (YouTube, for example, had not yet even been created).

With its lack of violence and live, non-animated action, Numa appears as an anomaly on Newgrounds, but, in large part, this explains its immense appeal. Foremost, Numa appears so genuine, enthusiastic and unsullied in comparison to the surrounding violence and gore. Moreover, Newgrounds had been a site for exhibiting primarily male-created Flash projects and video games, thus Numa challenged these male creators to expand their artistic scope and gender accoutrements, widening representations of male forms of expression, perhaps even to embrace and display their own dorkiness.

The popularity of the Numa meme has not been confined to the States and has also transcended its virtual boundaries. When a Japanese colleague, Shoko Letton, traveled to Japan in the Fall of 2005, she observed that a tenacious Numa craze had taken root. In a series of video recordings (unfortunately they have not yet been posted on the Internet), Letton recorded family members dancing the Numa moves while another relative played the O-Zone song from her cell phone. To observe the movements transformed onto an entirely different gender and body is fascinating. This dancer is a young, thin woman, which effects blatant physical differences in the appearance of the movement. Even more curiously, the movements are filtered through a Japanese aesthetic. Although the moves

still clearly resemble their original models, the dance has been codified, angularized, tightened and the tempo is stricter. Broolsma's loose, released abandon has been contained and bounded. Instead of spread-fingered sparkly hands, this Japanese dancer's hands are held with fingers firmly together. Broolsma remained entirely frontal, dancing for the webcam. This Japanese Numa rendition rotates 90 degrees at times, performing a move with one hand behind the head, and the other offered at a lower angle to the front, which looks remarkably similar to a movement from the Japanese *bondori* dance.⁸³ This impromptu video was filmed during a family gathering, a collaborative improvisation made possible through technological innovations. Most of the younger observers could understand and participate in this performance, as evidenced by many who sang along and provided instructive dance tips. The Internet and viral-video techniques created a common dance knowledge within the group, and a cell phone ring-tone allowed them to perform and watch the performance without any advanced preparation, creating a participatory event that would have made Benjamin, Debord and other participatory-driven artists proud.

⁸³ *Bondori* dance is in celebration of the cherry blossom; as noted by Skoko Letton, personal correspondence. Nov. 2005.

CHAPTER FIVE

ARBITER OF THE COOL

Dorkiness is constructed in various ways, some more patently obvious than others. One tricky factor to pinpoint is the disjunctive clumsiness that derives from a deliberate layering or blending of cultural identities. Maladroitness is created from a tension between preconceived normative expectations of how something *should* appear versus what we are *actually* seeing. This conscious oxymoronic blending was evident in Koufey's nod to his alleged early breakdancing days and in the nerdy American Broolsma using a Romanian song. This dynamic becomes particularly pronounced when tracing the lineage of the hip hop song "Ignition" from its original video produced by R. Kelly (2003) through the numerous parody videos that have subsequently been created and posted in response. As humorous and seemingly innocuous as this cultural blending may first appear, a closer inspection reveals a problematic relationship inherent in this cultural borrowing that also serves to complicate the larger depiction of dorky dance on the Internet.

R. Kelly, the African-American R&B and hip hop artist, created the song "Ignition Remix" as an altered version (not a parody) of his earlier song "Ignition." Moreover, the remix version has become more popular than the original version and is unusual in that it actually admits to being a remix in the lyrics. The video, which can be viewed on YouTube, employs many of the signifying tropes of current hip hop videos⁸⁴: lyrics stemming from the theme "It's the freakin' weekend/ about to have me some fun," good times that involve "Kristal [champagne] popping," and, later, hotel trysts in which "privacy is on the door/ but still they can hear you screaming 'more'." Scenes are set in bars, in front of luxurious clubs, and in overly-large vehicles (in this case stretch Lincoln Navigators). Attractive, busty women, clad in micro-mini skirts or shorts, infinitesimal shirts, and high heels pulsate on the tops of bars (very different in style and intent than Pee Wee's earlier bartop dance). Guys clad in overly-adequate clothing and ostentatious

⁸⁴ "Ignition (Remix)," available from <http://youtube.com/watch?v=9JJnZoOWdJo>

gold necklaces, wear sunglasses, even inside, and sport ball caps, sweatbands or bandanas. Looking composed and in control but also smooth and relaxed, their composure extends to the self-possessed movement of these cool (primarily) black males. Their minimal, controlled movement relies mostly on hand gesturing: a stirring motion accompanies the lyrics “hot and fresh out the kitchen” and a recurring dribbling motion with both hands in unison is done whenever the “bounce, bounce, bounce” chorus returns. Their actions always emphasize the downbeat, and even when their hands raise above the heads--which is rare--they never straighten out completely.

These cool and contained men exist in stark contrast to the single white male who randomly appears towards the end of the video when he is pushed into the center of a dancing circle. At first he stands paralyzed, in his frumpy jeans, t-shirt and shaggy hair. R. Kelly can be seen in the background making a gesture that can be variously interpreted as either challenging or supportive (a “show-us-what-you-can-do” attitude that navigates a tricky-to-discern-ambivalence). But Gawky White Boy quickly explodes into dorky dance grandeur in a routine divided into two sections that last less than eight seconds. He slides to the rear, then executes some hip shakes to the front, with a loose head and arms that invariably raise above his head (a movement that is beginning to function as the iconic enthusiastic, dorky dance victory move). Despite this slightly random and short-lived dorky dance presentation, R. Kelly’s “Ignition (Remix)” is fairly conventional in its format and approach. Yet the spate of response-videos it spawned, that cleverly manipulate viewers’ expectations about hip hop videos, is quite extraordinary.

At first it seems the dorky dance phenomenon, especially as manifested via the Internet, is primarily generated by young white males, the early “settlers” in the domain of the web. But this ethnic distinction is not entirely true. The awkwardness that stems from blending cultural identities can certainly occur with other populations. This is wonderfully obvious in a video, “Ignition (Duke Style),” created by a team of mostly Asian, male students at Duke University--a parody of Kelly’s “Ignition Remix.”⁸⁵

This video takes a flagrant contradistinctive stance towards Kelly’s creation, but it also differs significantly from the “Numa Numa Dance.” First, it is created by a group, adopting a sort of strength-in-numbers sensibility that allows for more choreographic

⁸⁵ “Ignition Duke Style,” available from http://youtube.com/watch?v=_RT1vok6Qwg

creativity while simultaneously diffusing the risk of vulnerability that a solo performance entails. It is neither the scenario of the hundreds of sexy back-up dancers who surround and support R. Kelly, nor is it the independent, courageous solo performance of Broolmsa. In comparison to the Numa video, the quality of the Duke students' video is notably refined, with tight choreography and intricate editing. Careful attention was given to both the pre- and post-production processes, in comparison to Broolmsa's video that was shot in one take with less than 15 minutes of editing.

The choreography, however, is particularly noteworthy, and this is the area in which the cultural amalgamation shines brightest. The choreography is clearly designed, with phrases of movement crafted to match segments of the song. One montage reveals a quartet spelling out letters with their bodies. There are lots of hip hop-esque moves copied straight out of hip hop video protocol. Many of these iconic displays allude to or parody physical "thugness"--statements with arms crossed on the chest and complicated hand gestures that resemble gang signs. The Duke guys wear everyday outfits, baggy pants and t-shirts that reference hip hop but without the over-the-top sartorial splendor apparent in the attire of Kelly's men. It is almost as if each element drawn from the hip hop mainspring is directly paired with an element that infuses thugness with a strong dose of ridiculousness. Throughout, one dancer wears a white "wife-beater shirt" (a tight, white tanktop), which is offset by another wearing the blue (scrubs) top of medical apparel.⁸⁶ In the opening scene, two males wear the same head coverings as Kelly's posse—sunglasses and bandana—while the other two inexplicably don a fedora and a hat made of balloons.

The creators include numerous interpolations referencing the original video, but always with a comical twist. "Sippin' on coke and rum" is transformed by chugging from gallon milk jugs and water bottles. "It's like murder she wrote/ once I get you out of them clothes" does not show a femme fatale, as the original, but has, instead, one guy pull up his shirt to uncover his bare chest. "Hot and fresh out the kitchen" is interpreted by a dancer with his head inside an oven. To visualize "like the party was catered" the video shows one smiling dancer holding a pot full of Ramen packages, while others elbow into the scene from all sides, creating a sort of Busby Berkely-esque kaleidoscope

⁸⁶ Not surprising since Duke University is well known for its Medical School.

composed of shiny packets of this ubiquitous dorm-room staple. The only thing this video lacks is a breakdancing sequence akin to Spike Jonze's wonderful performance in "Praise You."

This video is noticeably peculiar in the way it portrays and negotiates gender representation. In contrast to Kelly's booty-babes, there is a noticeable lack of females, except for one short montage in which a young Asian woman is included, perhaps their token female companion. Instead of a micro-mini, she wears a "what-are-you-guys-up-to-now" grin. In this segment, as the lyrics purr "after the show it's the after party/ and after the party/ it's the hotel lobby," the streaming video changes into a series of still photos, suggesting celebrity paparazzi shots. The lobby in this case, however, is not in a chic hotel, but in the common area of the dorm. Successive frames show a narrative of drinking (water, not booze) and once the song kicks into "around about four/ gotta' clear the lobby" dancers are splayed in various states of supposed inebriation with the young woman actually lugging one unconscious male, hoisted on her shoulder, from the room. After this scene the streaming video resumes, and the male dancers lounge in various positions upon a couch. Now they are clad in more hip hop appropriate clothing, replete with bandanas, stocking caps, and wristbands. Yet the more thuggish this portrayal, the more outlandish their props: each one caresses his very own stuffed animal to the refrain "running her hands through my 'fro." In another scene, shyly smiling males are dressed as females, towels wrapped upon their heads, conjuring images of sturdy peasant women rather than hip hop divas. The bandana that was tied on the head earlier has now transformed into a babushka wrapped under the chin. But the most fascinating gendered display comes with certain segments of these male dancers' movements. They actually move similarly, in style, if not with the same technical proficiency, to the way the females moved in R. Kelly's video. Although they do a lot of hand gesturing (drawing from the controlled, male-sanctioned domain of hip hop hand moves), they also undulate their bodies and shake their bums. To the lyrics "bouncing up and down" they position their bouncing butts to face the camera. When the lyrics say "stroke it 'round and 'round," the dancers twirl their hips in quick circular motions—movements that we would *never* have seen performed by R. Kelly and his male cohorts. Very cleverly, this video acts to reverse--albeit tongue-amply-in-cheek--many pre-conceived ideas of gender

construction within the mainstream hip hop video. Not only do the male dancers dress and dance in conventionally feminine styles, the single female is the one who literally picks up the guy in the “fireman carry” and carts him off.

With these unexpected displays of male dancing come the expected retorts. The area in which the dorky dance world is clearly still most uncomfortable is that of sexual orientation. Throughout the realm of dorky dance online there is a pronounced thread of highly homophobic criticism. This is especially true of the commentary posted in response to the “Numa Numa Dance.” Although the majority are overwhelmingly positive, it is not uncommon to read comments such as “You’re a faggot,”⁸⁷ “This is some gay shit,”⁸⁸ “It’s not Numa guy, it’s Numa gay,”⁸⁹ or the very succinct one-word response “GAYNESS!”⁹⁰ There are also those who make similar hypotheses about Broolsma’s supposed sexual orientation, but who arrive at different conclusions regarding the video’s worth: MoonWarrior123 writes “He [Broolsma] is gay, he is weird, but he is also funny!”⁹¹ These homophobic accusations are not unique to Numa. Bobthehustla calls the creators of the Duke “Ignition Remix” video “faggots.”⁹² But the latter video has been viewed fewer times and has received less attention in the press, and thus has garnered less critical feedback in general, indicating that some of the negative criticism lodged at Numa was, at least, partially fueled by its sheer notoriety. But in general the feedback to dorky dance on the web is incredibly positive. As one fan of dorky dance, Jowody, writes: “Dudes, this...is awesome. If you don’t like it you’re probably gay and dude it’s the best thing ever.”⁹³ Though there is still progress to be made in dispelling this need to equate men dancing with postulations of sexual orientation, it seems safe to argue that these courageous early dorky dance stars are helping to further dismantle myths and stereotypes about these types of displays.

⁸⁷ Posted by ericthemann on http://youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=PK12XrnHcxs&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3DPK12XrnHcxs

⁸⁸ Posted by riceboii on *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Posted by gondorado on *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Posted by patrickisacutie on *ibid.*

⁹¹ Posted by MoonWarrior123 on *ibid.*

⁹² Posted by bobthehustla on http://youtube.com/watch?v=z_uklgxUUT8.

⁹³ Posted by Jowody on *ibid.*

Gender dismantling is even more evident while viewing the “Ignition Remix Parody” video, this time created by two white, very buff males.⁹⁴ This video borrows certain elements from the Duke-created video, but it differs significantly in further challenging the viewer’s normative expectations of how males can (and should) broadcast themselves moving. Again, it is clearly filmed in a dorm room, though it begins with the two males spooning in bed together, one dancer wrapped around the other. After a few seconds, the video cuts to them standing, clad in stocking caps and sunglasses, with messy desks in the background. When the lyrics say “you must be a football coach/ the way you got me playing the field” one male writes football play markings on the other’s bare buttocks. “Running her hands through my ‘fro” shows one dancer running his hand through the other’s hair (even in the Duke remix video the dancers never touched each other’s hair). “It’s like murder she wrote/ once I get you out of them clothes” is visualized by one guy aiming a gun (prop or real, the viewer cannot determine) at the other, who quickly strips off his robe to reveal himself in a blue speedo. There are also moments when they dance in slightly more effeminate style (i.e. similar to how female dancers moved in R. Kelly’s original video), with hands clasped above their heads, swiveling their hips, perhaps inspired by some idea of bellydancing. Although it is impossible to determine conclusively, one suspects that these males might be European or reside in a place where slightly more liberal views about male behavioral displays are accepted. In addition to the speedo bathing suit (not commonly worn in the States), one recurring scene, linked to “bouncing on 24’s” actually shows the dancers jumping upon handwritten sheets that seem to say “25,” not “24.” Surprisingly, there is little commentary about the hypothesized sexual orientation of these guys. Granted, it has only been viewed slightly more than 1000 times which is tiny when compared to Numa or even the Asian Remix. The one commenter who assumes a homosexual sexual orientation actually sounds supportive, not accusatory--Ttoonbiscayne says: “You are a fully cute couple!”⁹⁵ Another reviewer does not appear to question this display of masculinity at all; Looseprincess4ever responds: “WoW!! U 2 are totally hott! U can both

⁹⁴ “Ignition Remix Parody,” available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkhWrA-hCeA;> Internet; accessed 18 Feb. 2007.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

put your keys in my ignition any night!”⁹⁶ Assuming that “looseprincess” is female--far from conclusive, of course--this response suggests a relaxing of the parameters that have conventionally been prescribed as normative and have confined masculine displays of intimacy.

This video is also intriguing because it actually borrows more from the Duke-created “Ignition (Remix)” video than it does from R. Kelly’s original creation. The Duke-created video, which was certainly the first “Ignition” copycat video that gained viral-video notoriety, if not the first response-video altogether, quickly became the meme to which others then responded. When one is searching for “Ignition (Remix)” on video-sharing websites, it is much easier to locate the Duke version than any other copycat video or even R. Kelly’s original. In a sense, this illustrates the fashioning of an entirely new set of hip hop video tropes that are stereotyping the *homemade* (or amateur) hip hop video.

In the same way that these dorky dance response-videos manipulate gender and sexuality constructions, they also distort signifiers of class and wealth. All the expensive designators from the original video (the luxury cars and high-priced booze) have been replaced by the dorm-room, student-budget facsimile. Kristal champagne metamorphoses into water, catered parties are reduced to Ramen Noodles (in the Duke video) or a spread of half-eaten takeout food and bags of pork rinds (in the buff, white-guy video). The stretch Navigator becomes a line of chairs set up into a row, like children’s imaginary visualizations of the song “The Wheels on the Bus.” On one level this may read as a critique of the hyped-up luxury and commercialism of hip hop, as well as a corrective reversal of the hackneyed bling-bling mentality. But on a closer inspection one notices that both these videos were created by college students living in dorms. Even with financial aid, this is a space of privilege not equally accessible to all young people. Moreover, the first video was created by students of Duke University, a private institution where tuition alone tops thirty grand per year.⁹⁷ It seems most likely, then, that the overarching motivation to create these videos is to have fun, not criticize capitalistic impulses.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ <http://www.admissions.duke.edu/jump/applying/finaid.asp>

“Ignition (Duke Style)” and “Ignition Remix Parody” become dorky dances principally because of their aggregation of cultural representation and manipulation of the viewers’ assumptions of race, class, gender and sexual orientation, coupled, of course, with an overarching jocularity that is also gently critical. A re-mix response-video could have been made by a group of young black males, but the effect would have been entirely different from having Asian youth riff on a “borrowed” form, just as the effect would have been diminished had these dancers chosen to create their video to an Asian hip hop song. Theoretically there are limitless possibilities for various cultural amalgamations resulting in different but humorous creations. We are currently only witnessing a very limited number of black-produced self-presentations of dorky dance. The image of a goofy, dancing black male has an entirely different, more complicated and issue-laden, past than that of the goofy white male. Also, the dancing male is still highly respected among African-American males and there is greater incentive in this community to dance competently and with style.

This is not to say, however, that black-produced dorky dance is not to be found on the web. Although it is, as yet, less frequent, there are several gems being scuttled about. One noteworthy example is “Flea Market Montgomery (Long Version),” a video which began as an advertisement for—surprise—a Flea Market in Montgomery, Alabama. It was originally filmed for local television but found its way online, where it has naturally become an instant favorite.⁹⁸ In less than four months since being posted in November, 2006, it has been viewed over 734,000 times, and its star, singer and dancer Sammy Stephens, has since been featured on *The Ellen Degeneres Show*⁹⁹ and on *The DL Show* (a radio interview program).¹⁰⁰ The wonderful dorkiness of this video is generated slightly differently from previously discussed examples. Sammy Stephens is a very hefty, middle-aged, black male dressed in a full, three-piece business suit. What is so unique and simply hilarious are Sammy’s rapping and dancing skills. He performs a repetitive, simplistic and unavoidably catchy rap, with lyrics consisting mostly of “it’s just like/ it’s just like/ it’s just like/ a mini-mall,” in reference to the cavernous flea

⁹⁸ “Flea Market Montgomery,” available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJ3oHpup-pk>; Internet; accessed 3 March, 2007.

⁹⁹ <http://myweb.ecomplanet.com/FLMM5719/mycustompage0001.htm>

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnLH--YbKDU&NR>

market. Sammy is filmed in various sections of the flea market/mini-mall. Lyrics that tout “living rooms/ bedrooms/ dinettes/ oh yeah” reveal the appropriate merchandise on cue. But when the video is not busy featuring overstuffed Laz-E-Boys, it presents its *real* treat, the well-padded dancing Sammy, upholstered in his shimmery gold-beige suit. He struts throughout the video, but the dance really picks up speed during the “break.” The rap even urges and instructs viewers to join in the dorky dancing: “Check it out now/ Everybody/ Don’t stop/ Let’s make it a dance/ To the left/ to the right/ Let’s do this dance/ Flea Market Montgomery/ It keeps you jumping.” Sammy is a smooth slider, moving from side to the side, but he also throws in a few surprise moves—lunges in all directions with splayed finger-flashy hand flourishes and incredibly animated, wide-open eyes (a frequent favorite in the commentary) shown in close-up shots that evoke Numa. An overriding ingredient of this video’s dorkiness resides in its unmistakable amateuristic quality, which is wholeheartedly devoid of irony. The self-penned rap lyrics and minimal but effective dance moves are revealed in their full exaltation by the bouncy camera work and completely illogical editing that constantly jumps around, placing Sammy in a scenographic jungle of bargain furniture.

Age also figures prominently in this brand of dorkiness. Although age has not received much critical attention in this research, movement is correctly perceived as inherently more awkward with the physiological effects of aging. Still, this is also undoubtedly a cultural perception. The movement of the elderly (the elders) could be just as easily read as being slowed by experience, shaped by decades of practice and adjusted with finesse—instead, in age we see infirmity. With the popularity of such video dancers as Sammy, online dorky dancing might prove effectual in widening movement aesthetics. Older dorky dancers have not yet fully utilized the web to broadcast their creations, but this will change as older populations become more comfortable navigating the Internet and participating in video-sharing websites. Perhaps Grandpa’s favored retirement activity will soon be wiggling in front of his webcam—what better way, really, to connect with his grandkids at college?

If this cultural borrowing does not yet exchange equally in all directions, just how inclusive is the space of the Internet and the dorky dance phenomenon? In one way, the Internet does provide a liberating space for (mostly) young, (mostly) white, and (mostly)

middle-class males to display their awkward dancing, a group whose aesthetic approach to dance has traditionally been erased, marginalized, disparaged or, at the very least, poked fun at. But when these genuinely humorous and seemingly innocent dorky dancers borrow from populations who contribute online content in a more limited fashion—are these dorky dances so innocent after all? Is this virtual space *really* as fully cooperative as envisioned and idealized by proponents of participatory art?

Jason Middleton and Roger Beebe discuss similar concerns within the music and music video industry that are germane to the discussion of dorky dance in their article, “The Racial Politics of Hybridity and ‘Neo-Eclecticism’ in Contemporary Popular Music.” The authors document a recent phenomenon, beginning in the late 1990s and continuing until today, in which white artists began incorporating more hip hop-influenced music into their own acts. As the decline of grunge-inspired rock music, so in demand in the early to mid-1990s, resulted in a stagnating rock music industry by the end of the decade, Middleton and Beebe argue that white artists were forced to turn to new marketing methods. Artists like Limp Bizkit, Kid Rock, and Korn began amalgamating different forms of rock (pop, metal, and punk) with hip hop—the form long linked to the black community but also consumed voraciously by white audiences at the time—to forge new rock/rap hybrids, thus creating a new space to counteract the dwindling interest in (white) rock. But in order to market these creations, these white artists adopted various methods to validate and authenticate their new personas, namely by replacing and conflating race and class. Middleton and Beebe write, “[t]hese new hybrids consistently re-map racial otherness onto class otherness to secure a place in the market for the white male performers whose position was challenged with the crisis of rock.”¹⁰¹ In this process, black cultural signifiers are expunged. The inner-city ghetto upbringing that has long legitimized the black rap artist is transformed into the trailer-park creation story of the white rock/rap artist.

Similar concerns are clearly evident in the dorky dance world. Many examples, though not all, generate some of their dorkiness through a cultural blending that involves the appropriation or parodying of black culture. In fact, the majority of the videos

¹⁰¹ Middleton, Jason and Roger Beebe, “The Racial Politics of Hybridity and ‘Neo-Eclecticism’ in Contemporary Popular Music,” *Popular Music* 21, no. 2 (2002): 161.

explored here rely on this cultural distortion: Koufey parrots his breakdancing, Napoleon dances to a soul song, and Asian Duke students re-invent the hip hop video. Interestingly these examples correspond to the time-frame addressed in the Middleton-Beebe article (late 1990s to the present). This specific type of cultural amalgamation is increasingly popular in the more recent awkward-dorky creations, although it did not figure prominently in the early film examples cited. Even the more recent Pee Wee (1985) danced to a Latin song, not Michael Jackson or Run-DMC. The most significant difference between what Middleton and Beebe describe and current dorky dancing on the web is that it, and any cultural borrowing it employs, is not intended for commercialistic gain. These artists are less concerned about capitalizing from these cultural trespasses than they are in having fun. Although it is impossible to pinpoint the ethnicity of viewers who post their responses to these videos, by far the overwhelming majority of the responses tend to be positive, so one may assume that the videos are generally perceived as funny rather than offensive.

What all this suggests is that the Internet is indeed creating a space where experimental, tried-on identities, ones that are actually able to deconstruct rigid conceptions of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and class, *can* exist in a less problematized realm. The subtraction of economic incentives forges a less treacherous forum for the adoption and commingling of these embodied characteristics that might be perceived in other, financially-driven venues as dangerously un-PC and un-screenable. Virtually anyone can participate in the minimally-restricted space of the Internet. The addition of video-sharing websites to the online mix now allow users to participate *through* and *with* their bodies, not just with verbal language. As this involvement continues to diversify, fresh challenges will be lodged against narrow, mainstream-media supported identities. A significant percentage of this exchange will, however, continue to come in the form of dorky dance. With its constant investment in amusement and good-naturedness, true dorky dance will always act as a social lubricant, coaxing the wheels of the identity apparatus enough to at least get the contraption going.

CHAPTER SIX

MONEY SPOILS EVERYTHING

The final criterion determining dorky dance involves its relationship to commercialism. Just as the filmic examples discussed in Chapter One were excluded from the narrower rubric of dorky dance because they were produced for financial gain, a similar capacity to co-opt dorky dance exists on the Internet. In fact, the time in which dorky dance on the web was able to operate in a less commercially tethered manner is already closing. Witnessing the immense popularity and viral techniques operating online, marketing firms have adopted these methods and are utilizing them for financial gain. It is still a time of trial and error, but as people become more and more accustomed to viewing video content on computer screens, a transition from video-sharing websites to full-fledged Internet television sites is in process. While many sites are still free, broadcasting stations are experimenting with pay-per-use and subscription services.

In October of 2006, the web conglomerate Google, itself an Internet start-up success story, purchased the video-sharing website YouTube.com for 1.65 billion dollars, by far the largest purchase in the company's history. YouTube has not yet posted a profit, but Google expects this to change as more people migrate from television to the Internet. Google's CEO Eric Schmidt has even asserts that YouTube represents "the next step in the evolution of the Internet."¹⁰²

The relationship between commercialism and dorky dance is complex. On the one hand, there are examples of dorky dances that accidentally become marketable, like the video for the song "A Million Ways" by the band Ok Go. On the other hand, over-marketing of dorky dance distorts what is so endearing, tainting its charm, destroying its genuineness and creating in its place a contrived awkwardness that is obvious and annoying. With the creation of the polished yet utterly unthrilling sequel, the "New

¹⁰² "Google Buys YouTube for 1.65 Billion," available from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15196982/>, Internet, accessed on 18 Feb. 2007.

Numa Dance,” the pursuit of profit succeeded in corrupting one of the most genuine dorky dance displays. Like so much of dorky dance, the distinctions are driven by differences in intentions, which are purposely contrived by crafty media institutions to be subtle discrepancies—but these are discrepancies to which the Internet dance audience are finely attuned.

Astute judges, this audience can excuse dorky dance videos that accidentally become marketable; just as they do not frown upon videos that gain widespread attention unintentionally, they do disfavor any attempt to force viralization of creations by over-posting and spamming techniques. This excusal is made clear when examining the history of the video “A Million Ways” and the resulting popularity and promotion it brought its creators. The American band Ok Go has been together since 1998 and released two EP’s before debuting their first self-titled album in 2002. Touring in alternative and independent venues, the band did not rocket onto the wider music scene until the release of their 2005 album entitled “Oh No,” which contains the tracks of two of their most famous songs, “A Million Ways” and “Here It Goes Again.” But what has made these songs and their creators so celebrated is not so much the music but the *dancing* within the videos--a case of dorky dancing making the band.

The video for “A Million Ways” became a viral Internet phenomenon in the fall of 2005.¹⁰³ It was filmed with a borrowed camera in the backyard of one band member, Damian Kulash. Created for less than \$10, it was never intended to be the official video release for the album, and it was leaked out without the knowledge of the band’s label. On August 30, 2005, National Public Radio’s Robert Siegel of *All Things Considered* interviewed Kulash, and his sister Trish Sie, the video’s choreographer and former ballroom dancer and instructor. Kulash chronicles the history of the project, which began as a dance routine the band might perform at the end of their live shows. He describes that “It wasn’t actually intended to be a video,” Kulash notes. “We just wanted something for our live shows that was...ridiculous enough to be memorable... We wanted something to end our live shows with that would be so off the map of rock shows that

¹⁰³ Ok Go, “A Million Ways,” available from <http://youtube.com/watch?v=bav63MWNUKg>; Internet; accessed 4 March 2007.

people couldn't forget that they had seen it."¹⁰⁴ The band's label, Capitol, had already selected a different single and professionally-produced video to promote the song. Kulash adds: "We actually recorded a very hi-fi video with a famous French director, then we recorded this thing in my backyard...but we were on tour and started giving it out to fans. We gave a few DVDs to fans and within a week it was on 10 or 15 websites and within a month it was everywhere."¹⁰⁵

Siegel aptly summarizes this video: "The four members of Ok Go look a little like four guys from the Genius Bar [repair desk] at the Apple store who're filling in for the Lakers girls, and they're dancing on a backyard brick patio."¹⁰⁶ The video was shot in one take (just like Numa) on a stationary, locked-down camera set up in Kulash's backyard. Brick grill and tropical plants can be seen in the background. It opens with three men standing in a zigzag line, precisely distanced apart from one another and facing front, as the fourth walks away from the camera (which he has just flipped on) and assumes his position to complete the formation.

The dorky dance wardrobe has not been overlooked. This time, it is a take on the hipster-geek look of pieced-together suits and button-up vests, and the one shorter bald man wears the obligatory thick, black-framed glasses. The music begins, with four forceful guitar strums and the men remain stationary. But as soon as the drum kicks in—boom!—the dancers sharply rotate their heads to the right and left. The highly choreographed movement remain razor-sharp and as their arms and legs become engaged, limbs slice through the air in percussive precision. After a few measures, their bodies loosen noticeably, though at least one dancer's shoulders are hunched up throughout the entire video. During this highly intricate routine the dancers maintain a palpable air of determined concentration; on close observation the dancer in the red vest is noticeably counting "one-two-three-four" as he performs his moves. The most relaxed dancer, our glabrous friend, is also the one who lip-synchs the lyrics, though, interestingly, in non-video life he plays the bass and is not the lead singer. If his attitude

¹⁰⁴ Damian Kulash, "Of a 'Million Ways' to be Popular, Ok Go Finds One." National Public Radio. Available from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4824604>; Internet, accessed 27 Feb. 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Siegel in *ibid.*

of repose is any indicator, perhaps he was selected for this role because he is adept at multi-tasking.

This time the choreography employs various styles of movement—the angularity in the beginning looks almost cheerleader-driven, while the later bent-over bodies with snapping fingers seem like an inept Broadway jazz rip-off. In one instance, the dancers clumsily execute ballroom-dance partnering, clasped together as a couple to perform spins and basket-weaving configurations (a refreshingly unfearful display of male partnered dancing). Another section reincarnates the “funky chicken,” and the pointed-finger-hip-thrusts of *Saturday Night Fever*-style disco are also well represented. Of course, as is seen in much male dancing, there is an obligatory dance-fighting scene, often quoted as being many viewers’ favorite scene. Drawing from another movement sequence that has taken on meme status, the dancers perform a slow-motion sequence derived directly from the film *Matrix*, complete with a dramatic and very flexible backbend executed by the bald, bespectacled dancer, who consistently displays the widest technical range. This number concludes with the trio hoisting the lip-synching lead singer into the air, but, since the camera is stationary, his upper body is lost from view and, instead, the viewer is given a fine, leg-splayed crotch shot. This ends the dancing, but the video continues until one dancer walks over to turn off the camera.

When Siegel asks Sie, the choreographer, to identify the challenges in choreographing the dance, she mentions that the band members are untrained dancers, though it helps that “they have rhythm and are able-bodied.”¹⁰⁷ The biggest challenge, however, Sie adds, comes with navigating that precarious zone between ridicule and emulation. The dance is unapologetic, both tongue-in-cheek but also quite sincere. Ok Go are poking fun at the same time they are *having* fun, and obviously, they have logged the hours of practice required to pull off what Siegel calls “the perfect balance of the earnest and the ironic.”¹⁰⁸ Sie expounds:

They needed to look really good. But the problem was we’re making fun to some degree of dance videos and bands that dance, but if you look like you’re making fun of it the whole thing get cankered with irony. We really had to make them look like they took it seriously and the dancing had to be good enough so that it

¹⁰⁷ Trish Sie in *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Sigel in *ibid.*

was more than just silly, it was actually good.¹⁰⁹

Looking back at the success of the video for “A Millions Ways,” Sie accurately fingers its real appeal in her explication that acknowledges our gendered codes and notions of acceptable movement displays. Though perhaps a little zealously universalistic in her sweep, Sie agrees that there is something captivating about watching men dance.

What you guys [Ok Go] tapped into was the fact that, I believe, everybody, universally on the planet likes to watch men dance. Especially men who don’t dance for a living. There’s a sort of buffoon like quality to it, but it’s not completely buffoon. It’s actually pretty good, but there’s just something kind of wrong with it. People love that!¹¹⁰

Viewers also resonate with this video for many of the same reasons. They enjoy watching men dance, especially white guys, and especially when they dance in a manner rarely seen on music-video television stations. It is wholly unlike the polished technique of boy band dance videos and it is also neither the restrained hand gesture or virtuosic dancing displays of masculinity common to hip hop videos. Instead of the normal indie band who would hide behind their instruments, Ok Go unmask themselves in a very public and vulnerable way. One fan raves that the video is “proving white man can dance!”¹¹¹ Several viewers’ comments demonstrate, once again, that the public is forging connections between these various dorky dance superstars. One reviewer finds the “synchronized dancing” makes him reminisce about Spike Jonze’s “Praise You” video.¹¹² Another thinks the band “may’ve taken their inspiration from Napoleon Dynamite.”¹¹³ One humorously insightful comment makes sense of the video in slightly twisted sports terminology. Guarani26 says “I especially like the slow-mo part of the dance. It’s almost like watching a football game with no players and strangely intriguing, hairy,

¹⁰⁹ Sie in *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Posted by smokeeater5912 on

http://youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=bav63MWNUKg&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3Dbav63MWNUKg

¹¹² Posted by ushtenme on *ibid.*

¹¹³ Posted by rugshort on *ibid.*

interestingly dressed cheerleaders.”¹¹⁴ Others even share ideas for potential future projects. A couple of viewers seem entranced by the idea of a Busby Berkeley-Ok Go fusion, as MuzzikLvr asserts that “Busby Berkeley lives!”¹¹⁵ in their video and Buscuitpiece suggest that Ok Go make a “synchronized swimming music video next”¹¹⁶ On a deeper level, however, what these comments demonstrate is the degree to which the common viewer is now participating in a dialogue about dance—adopting the role of dance critic, in a way—all under the sneaky guise of having fun. Furthermore, the discrete powers of discriminating the real from the contrived are also remarkable.

In addition to an aesthetic appreciation, viewers also appreciate the poor-man’s economics of the video. The lack of corporate promotional marketing is what gives Ok Go’s video its ordained dorky dance credibility. Stbd notes “now THIS is amusing viral marketing, in a good way. Whatever gets the kids off their asses and into the disco is fine by me.”¹¹⁷ Hump3 credits the simplicity of the video as its most compelling ingredient. “There’s no ‘editing’ or lighting or any of that bullshit designed to make terrifically ugly guys look like Johnny Depp. It’s fun. It’s not pretentious or self-indulgent. And it probably cost about \$5 to make. Best. Video. Ever.”¹¹⁸ HPgroupie attributes the appeal to the band’s uncanny ability to entertain, employing words that recall the golden age of awkward dance on screen with the likes of Chaplin and O’Connor: “These guys are... geniuses when it comes to entertaining. Music AND dancing?!...No professional dancer in their right mind would think this would entertain us.”¹¹⁹ And though he overestimates the economic payoffs of this idea, HPgroupie admires the “inspiration behind backyard videos that make [the creators] megamillionaires.”¹²⁰

The overnight Internet success of “A Million Ways” prompted Ok Go to create a second video for the album, for the song “Here It Goes Again,” which has even managed to surpass the first in popularity. Posted on July 31, 2006, it has been viewed over 12 millions times and has generated nearly 11 thousand comments. This video maintains

¹¹⁴ Posted by guarani26 on *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Posted by MuzzikLvr on *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Posted by buscuitpiece on *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Posted by stbd on *ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Posted by hump3 on *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Posted by HPgroupie on *ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

many of the same elements from the first: similar costumes though, this time, the palette has been infused with a pink scheme; a camera that remains stationary and is spaced about an equal distance from the dancers; and a familiar movement vocabulary again choreographed by Sie. But this video features one clever addition—inventive props, consisting of eight treadmills, are arranged in two lines with each successive machine facing the opposite direction. The procurement of these props obviously demanded more pre-planning than was necessary for the first video, but their inclusion generates much more quirky humor than questioning of how much the band forked out to use them. What the treadmills add to the choreography is stunning. The dancers can employ varying levels, somersaulting at ground level on the conveyor belts but also climbing on top of the handlebars. The constant and consistently-timed inexorable rolling track of the machines forces a well-timed control on the dancers. While on the treadmill, it is almost impossible not to move smoothly (as long as balance is maintained). But the video as a whole is not so slick that it comes off as smoothly polished to the point of being staid and predictable.

The video begins with one dancer fumbling with the remote control to start the music, succeeding only after multiple futile attempts. At another point in the video (which was again filmed in one take), one dancer stumbles and almost loses his balance. Actually, the balance of these dancers is astounding considering the scope of movement they perform while being in motion on the machines. Another difference in this creation is that all the dancers appear to be more relaxed than in the original. Of course this video required even more practice than the first, so maybe their looseness comes with being secure with the moves. Still, one must wonder if this sense of comfort stems more from these men accepting their own identities as legitimate dancers, a validation that would be impossible to ignore after the widespread adulation of their first video. Another creative element of this second video is the way in which the treadmills literally move the dancers out of the screen. Although the camera does not move and the frame remains rigid, as the dancers are propelled out of the frame by the machines, the video begins to feel more experimental. Ok Go performed this dance live at the 2006 MTV Video Music Awards, exposing them to an even larger, non-virtual audience, and, it recently won the 2007 Grammy award for “Best Short Form Video.”

Ok Go clearly have a bottom line. In November of 2006 they released a DVD containing the album “Oh No” and twelve videos, including the two described above plus a very enlightening documentary of the rehearsal process for the treadmill dance and the official Capitol label-sanctioned, more traditional music videos. But they also gladly make most of these available for free viewing on their website and YouTube. This is what keeps them accepted by the dorky dance-family and keeps their work within acceptable dorky parameters. Kulash was even involved in a struggle with their label advocating against the installation of anti-pirating technology onto their products, an experience he detailed in an article “Buy, Trade, Play, Repeat” for the *The New York Times* on December 6, 2005.¹²¹

They also devised an effectual plan to self-promote *and* invite active artistic collaboration with their fans—an online dance contest for which participants were invited to create their own version of the “A Million Ways” video. There were no big money prizes, but each entrant received their very own Ok Go dance trophy, topped with “bronzed” renditions of the dancing band members frozen in characteristic backyard dorky dance moves. The overall winner was flown in to perform with Ok Go at one of their performances. The contest generated over 200 entrants which can be viewed on the band’s website and YouTube. The “Best Overall Dance Video” looks so astonishingly identical to the first it is remarkable—the background has either been superimposed or painstakingly re-created and the dance moves, costumes, balding hair, and facial expressions are spot on. There is one major difference, which is not even apparent until mid-way through watching the video. These four dancers are all female.¹²²

Ok Go and their innovative videos serve as an example of dorky dance that successfully found a balance between remaining true to its dorky dance core while also functioning in a manner that helps promote and provide exposure for the band, eventually resulting, at least the band hopes, in increased popularity of their music and increased attendance at their live concerts. Even their second video was able to remain

¹²¹ Damien Kulash, “Buy, Play, Trade, Repeat,” available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/06/opinion/06kulash.html?ex=1291525200&en=8f95ed31d4548c37&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>, Internet, accessed 3 March 2007.

¹²² “Best Overall Dance Video,” available from <http://www.okgo.net/dancecontest/>; Internet; accessed March 3, 2007.

unquestionably dork. Despite the incessant difficulty of maintaining the original sense of charm and enthusiasm when quoting themselves, they manage to create a second video even more alluring than the first. It will be fascinating to see how long Ok Go's dorky dance sensibility can persevere.

Unfortunately this delicate balance is rarely achieved and profit concerns can corrupt even our most beloved of dorky dancers. The most notable example of big business sinking its talons into the dorky dance world is the creation of "New Numa." Too much about "New Numa" differs from the original "Numa Numa." It was "released" on September 8, 2006 on its own website, newnuma.com. Even the usage of the corporate word "release" conjures images of Hollywood movies or new X-box games. The original Numa was not released—it was posted for the amusement of a couple of Broolsma's friends and accidentally garnered its immense popularity on its own attractive merits. "New Numa" is also no longer just a video—it has transformed into a brand. On the website one can click on the "gear" link and purchase New Numa shirts, coffee mugs, bumper stickers, a throw pillow and a Numa t-shirt bedecked teddy bear, all with a cartoonish version of Gary's head with arms thrown above his head in dorky dance victory style. Or, purchase Broolsma's style of headphones worn throughout the original Numa video.

The "New Numa" begins back in Broolsma's bedroom, the same set up as the original, with the aquarium and blue curtained-background. He receives a phone call, which he answers "Halo," the signature word from the original video. A female voice on the other end exclaims "Oh my goodness. Is this Gary Broolsma, the Numa Numa guy?" An affirmative response prompts the female to ask "Will you please, please do a new Numa video, please?" Broolsma responds "Hmmm, I wonder" and the video quickly transitions into a fantastical, dream sequence rendering of what the possible New Numa video might look like. Broolsma maintains the swinging arms from side to side and sparkly fingers of the original, but the video shows him in full screen, at times accompanied by a trio of other young, "dorky looking" males. The background changes to various locales, transporting Gary away from his room. Obviously shot in a film studio, the background now switches from a black curtain to a blue screen in which effects of lightning and graffiti-covered brick walls are transposed into the scene. Although it strives to appear as

if it were amateur-produced, it has a polished veneer that unmistakably signifies it is produced by a professional team of filmmaker, editor and choreographer. The New Numa website reveals that the video was produced by Gary Voelker and Andrew Lee of Seattle-based “Experience Studios.”

Perhaps this could conceivably be ignored if the new video were able to stand on its own. But it is composed of elements of a constructed, copycat dorkiness that never manage to register as authentic. The new song is not as catchy as the first. Simply entitled “New Numa,” this version has Russian lyrics and was created specifically for the “New Numa” video by Variety Beats (the band O-Zone, who created the song used by Broolsma for the original video, disbanded in 2005, at the same time that as the Numa Numa dance was exploding on the Internet). Of course this Numa song is available for purchase—as download or as ringtone--through the site. Reviews for the song on iTunes range from a few truly positive appraisals to the more common lukewarm responses like “This song is okay, but not the original Numa Numa that started the whole revolution,”¹²³ and “Twas moderately entertaining. The only thing that can be said for this song is, nothing is ever as good as the original.”¹²⁴ There is also an abundance of downright scathing criticism. Wooden Tree comments:

The original Numa, Dragostea Din Tei, was a great song. This, however, is trash for multiple reasons. Firstly, it is nothing without the video, which isn’t that great itself.. Also, unlike the original Numa, this song is not catchy at all. It has none of the same feel of the original. The only similarity is the use of the word “Numa.” In short, the New Numa is nothing compared to the original Numa.¹²⁵

However, Imdafox best sums up the sentiments of many: “This boy [Broolsma] used to be one of us, an Internet person. Now he’s trying to make a quick buck, what a bastard.”¹²⁶ This reaction should not be surprising. Sequelized movies and television shows often suffer the same fate, but to re-create a dorky dance, which at its core is so fundamentally rooted in spontaneity and originality, is a difficult task to muster.

In the six months since “New Numa” was released it has been viewed over 4.5 million times and has been commented upon over 18 thousand times on YouTube alone.

¹²³ Posted by Freakin’Nuts on iTunes

¹²⁴ Posted by patman216 on ibid.

¹²⁵ Posted by Wooden Tree on ibid.

¹²⁶ Postead by imdafox on ibid.

Like the reviews for the song, there are some positive remarks but more often than not viewers sense the deficits in the sequel. Some commenters are quite articulate. Sockglue writes: “The first Numa video was good, not because you put a lot off effort into it, but because it was almost...innocent. You should have just let it go. You had your time of fame, this video (that wasn’t bad, just disappointing) won’t bring you back up to fame.”¹²⁷ Another reviewer clarifies further that the essential missing component was rooted in the choreography of the video. Jinitron notes, “I like the song but you’re missing what was cool in the first one. Your close-ups, your facial expression. That was great. You [had] facial rhythm and the arm movements were good, too.”¹²⁸ Another reviewer, djkuhl, agrees: “Jinitron is right. The facial expressions [were] priceless” but goes on to pinpoint a common criticism of “New Numa,” its obvious commercial production roots. Djkuhl continues, “I’d like to know how many people were involved beyond Gary. The video feels like something with great potential wrapped in someone else’s finishing touches.”¹²⁹ Others are more vocal in their criticism, like “PRODUCTION TEAMS RUIN EVERYTHING!”¹³⁰ and “he [Brolsma] sold out”¹³¹ One keen cultural pundit, Medianox, recognizes the larger pecuniary consequences of this precedent:

This is the first of many overdone viral marketing campaigns we will see involving Internet memes. It was only a matter of time until the authenticity and innocence of the true viral Internet phenomenon was violated. And here, in the flesh, is one of the beautiful accidents cashing in on his unsolicited fame. Good for Gary—shame on the backer of this project. What’s next? Star Wars Kid on Ice? I’ll pass.¹³²

However, as accurate as these written comments are, the most enlightening *and* entertaining critiques are the response-videos. The original “Numa Numa” spawned

¹²⁷ Sockglue, “New Numa Review,” available from http://www.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=3gg5LOd_Zus&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3D3gg5LOd_Zus; Internet, 18 Feb. 2007.

¹²⁸ Jinitron in *ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ KittyGabyIMEANGOAT on *ibid.*

¹³¹ Mirrorkills on *ibid.*

¹³² In reference to another early Internet celebrity, known as the Start Wars Kid, whose parents sued his classmates for posting video of him using a light saber onto the Internet without his permission; posted by Medianox on *ibid.*

numerous copycats, many of which were critical. But the “New Numa” video has sparked a particularly virulent anti-commercialistic line of critique. One reponse-video favorite is “New Numa: The Animation” by Dustball.¹³³ It loosely follows the plotline of the original “New Numa” video, but in animated form. It differs in the beginning. Instead of a young female begging Gary to make another Numa, the voice on the line belongs to an older male, with the inflection of a showbiz talent scout or a fairground carnival spieler. He draws:

Look kid, we loved your last video, it was phenomenal. But we wanna’ make a New Numa video that is even better than the last one....It’s gonna’ be huge I tell you, huge!... This new video is not gonna’ be on some crappy webcam. We got a full crew this time and it’s gonna’ be totally slick and MTV style. That’s what the kids want these days. We’re flying you out to Hollywood tomorrow and we’ll get started right away. We’re gonna’ put your name in lights kid. You’re gonna’ be a staaaar.¹³⁴

Gary responds with “That sounds terrible. I wonder...” before the animated video proceeds into a re-creation of the actual “New Numa” video—again as if Gary were imaging what the final product might look like. After this dream sequence, animated Gary utters to himself “Holy crap, that was awful.” The phone rings again and show-businessman exclaims, “That was brilliant. Here’s what we’re gonna’ do with your next video. You’re gonna’ dance the Numa Numa while you eat your own poop.”¹³⁵

Animated Gary’s imagined retort seems to summarize what many in the Internet viewing community wish the real Gary had said when approached to undertake “New Numa.” He shouts with an hitherto unheard aggression:

You know what, that video was total crap. Just leave me alone while I still have some shred of dignity. No one wants to see some fat kid dancing around like a fool. It worked the first time but that was a fluke. And it worked because it was genuine and I wasn’t trying to be a hit. It’s impossible to re-create that. Don’t you get it? You’re a slime ball for trying to make money off of me! Screw you!¹³⁶

¹³³ Dutball, “New Numa: The Animation,” available from <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/348166>; Internet; accessed 3 March, 2007.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

Another video entitled “I Will Not Pay for Numa” by Mr. Safety is a direct response to the hawking of the “New Numa” song on their website--where it sells for 99 cents per download.¹³⁷ Mr. Safety, who has created numerous parody videos on YouTube, has his own channel to which viewers can subscribe. He has created his version of the song with unique lyrics that investigate the Numa phenomenon from its inception to its current form. The refrain for this video is “I will not, will not pay. The song’s okay, but I still will not pay.” Simply, this reads as a refusal on the part of Mr. Safety to pay the 99 cents to download the song; he would rather create one himself, and he did. On the most fundamental level, this video also reads as an outright rejection of the entire phenomenon of “New Numa” and the perceived corruption of the Internet’s homemade productions, the inevitable result of the increasing commercialization of virtual space.

Although the strength of Mr. Safety’s video lies more in the creative lyrics of refusal than in its choreographic content (composed of images of Gary spliced with other expository imagery), this critique is intriguing in its analysis of the impact of the Numa Dance, and, it even relates Numa to another pre-Internet dance meme-craze, the immensely popular Macarena. The lyrics chant:

You can see many people do the Numa groove/
Black people, white people, Asian people, too./
You can even watch Numa Numa cartoons.
Just look it up on/ YouTube/
What really makes this kid so hot?
Was it looks? I think not/
Maybe he’s an alien with mind control.?
Make you do the Numa Numa till your 90 years old/
You’ll be moving till your heart stops/
Never stop till the beat drops/
Everybody’s eyes are blood shot/
Cause Numa Numa causes brain rot/
It might be just a one hit wonder/
One quick hit and then it’s just thunder/

¹³⁷ Mr. Safety, ““I Will Not Pay for Numa,” available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLMZdwOc4Ds>; Internet; accessed 3 March 2007.

But you never know/
it could be another, Hey Macarena.¹³⁸

Like Ok Go, the New Numa brand has also created a dance video contest, but their specific approach gives a sour taste to the whole pursuit. The multiple sponsors, listed on the website, are offering a highly enticing \$25,000 prize for the first place winner and other smaller prizes for the runner-ups. Although this award will likely generate many entrants, inspiring many people to create their own dances, this financial-driven participation feels exploitative because it certainly goes against the motivations driving the participatory art world as discussed in Chapter Four. No one would expect a boycott of the entire contest, just as no one can blame Gary for capitalizing on the Numa phenomenon he created.

Yet the New Numa phenomenon, that is, the encroaching commercialization of dorky dance on the Internet, can also not be ignored. As video-sharing capabilities of the Internet continue to expand, commercials and commercialism will also continue to increase. But just as there was an Amy Mueller, a Richard Koufey, and an original Numa Numa, dorky dancers will always find new ways to bust out their dance moves.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

The Internet continues to develop rapidly and online dorky dancing evolves just as hastily. Neither are fixed, determined entities that can be pinned down concretely. As new creations are posted daily, this investigation can only scratch the surface of dorky dance videos. Even during the two years since beginning this research project, the genre has undergone developments both exciting and questionable.

An increasingly diverse population of American and global participants is inviting fresh perspectives and unique responses on video-sharing websites and in dorky dance video-making. According to recently updated statistics, Asia and Europe both account for more Internet users than North America--36% and 29%, respectively, in comparison to North America's 21%-- but in North America, 70% of the total population participates in the Internet, whereas only 10% of the total Asian population does. Further, the last seven years has seen a 638% increase in the number of African Internet users, whereas, in the same period, the increase in North America was only 115%.¹³⁹ With these global shifts in Internet usage, the future will likely bring enhanced cultural crossovers with more dorky dance memes originating in other countries, resulting in spin-offs that blend identities, different ideas and humor with startlingly piquant results. An interesting offshoot of this research would be to identify how "awkward," especially in relation to movement and dance, is constructed differently in other cultures. Starting from this contrastive foundation, it would be intriguing to trace how awkward/dorky dancing has historically been and is currently portrayed in moving pictures, going from film through television and onto the Internet. Is there a Nepalase Napoleon Dynamite? Could a Nigerian Numa even arise from a culture in which male dancing is so respected and valued?

With this increased participation and global popularity, the space of the Internet will also endure greater pressures to commercialize. Cunning Internet commercials will

¹³⁹ <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

adopt viral-video techniques and the amateur, homemade feel of these early video creations will lend them online credibility. Moreover, dorky dance will continue to be utilized in promotional productions until current “dorky” methods become overused and trite. Clearly this happened with New Numa.” Yet this example does not stand in isolation. Another crafty “dorky-awkward-dance-ommercial” is the site showcasing “Pjotro—The Man With the Musical Suit,”¹⁴⁰ who claims he love[s] music, dancing, and engineering” and has combined his passions “to create a suit that allows [him] to become music.” He makes music by moving his body in funny ways in contorted directions. The website is inventive because it allows the user to “choreograph” his own dance by adjusting controls for crazy versus cool, smooth versus sharp, and slow versus fast in varying segments along a circle. Putting all the pieces together the user has just created his very own “dorky” dance as performed by Pjotro. Of course, musical suits are extremely expensive, and the site is underwritten by Nokia, the cell phone company. If the sponsorship is subtle, it does not go unnoticed. This phenomenon of New Numa and Pjotro suggests a developing trend in dorky dance sponsorship that merits further investigation. Will the Nokias of online-website dancing be the new Diaghilev-impresarios of the virtual realm?

As commercial sites co-opt dorky dance, true dorky dancers will, of course, find new opportunities to broadcast their dorky selves. Revitalized approaches to dorky dance-making will appear on any new technologically-advanced media, since computer geeks, nerds and dorks cohabit this same virtual space. Future investigation should look for the impact that virtual dorky dancing has in the spheres of the dance clubs. It seems unlikely that Napoleon can garner standing ovations, and Numa chalk-up millions of hits without some transgression or translation into the non-virtual world. Surely experienced club dancers are incorporating moves from Napoleon or Numa into their dancing. Is the average dancer at the club, who normally spends more time by the bar than dancing, being empowered to dance with less restraint?

Furthermore, how is dorky dancing impacting the more traditional realms of the post-modern dance world, the realms so often perceived as “pretentious” by fans of online dorky dancing? A recent dance choreographed by Alison Bory, an MFA candidate

¹⁴⁰ <http://pjotro.com/>

at U.C Riverside, was made from a more conventionally theatrical dance approach and on the proscenium stage. Entitled “I Was Cooler Then,” it deals with many of these same issues, crafted as a “dance-memoir of the choreographer’s more awkward days... [as] an acne-induced understanding of identity.”¹⁴¹

Dorky dance videos are also finding a home outside the Internet, too, and are being screened in the more traditionally cinematic sphere. Monkeytown, a restaurant-cum- moviehouse in Brooklyn, claiming at least one dancer as a founding member, recently programmed an entire evening consisting of dorky dance video clips culled from the web. Monkeytown has also begun “curating” a series of videos drawn from YouTube that are embedded on their restaurant’s website. Along with the menu, directions and schedule of films, the current video is prominently featured. (Incidentally, Sammy Stephens and his mini-mall dance is among the selections.)

Dorky dance is also impacting the world of performance and video art, an arena outside the scope of this thesis that also warrants analysis. The 2006 DIVA (Digital and Video Art) Fair, held in New York City from March 9 to 12, featured video art from numerous galleries. One installation showed 10 video loops by artists Anna Byrdy and Monika Leitner, both young Polish women, that hinted at how dorky dance might look when performed by females. Shown on individual television screens with attached headphones, the set-up created an intimate, personal viewing experience much like the space of the Internet—this installation would have been even more appropriate screened on computer monitors. The footage shows the two women dancing to various styles of songs in varyingly dorky manners. The program notes explain:

[The] installation is about dance in a general sense. Within the context of contemporary music video clips... clichés of dance and dancers are presented in front of intentionally sporadic, amateuristic backgrounds. The image of dance is parodied to the extreme and becomes banal by means of the atmosphere and caricaturesque movements, creating... moments that disturb or are curious, comical and at times even satirical.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ http://www.dance.ucr.edu/movements/MFA_Dance_Concert.html

¹⁴² Anna Byrdy and Monika Leitner, “Installation Notes,” DIVA 2006, March 9-12, 2006. New York City.

Although the contrived nature of these videos prevent them from truly qualifying as dorky dance, it is fascinating nonetheless to see this style of dance installation permeating the world of high art, particularly in the highly economically-driven realm of the art fair. This might suggest that we are entering another era, like that of the 1960s and 70s, when dance and performance art experienced crossovers and fusion. This time, however, the exchange is occurring on video and through the web.

Obviously, more research needs to be completed to elucidate the ways in which dance and movement, especially of the awkward and dorky varieties, are intersecting with other facets of popular culture and artistic practice as we push pell-mell into the 21st century. The Internet is only one site that enables this interaction, but it currently fosters the most dynamic, widespread, compelling and exuberantly funny examples to be found. And although the dorky dancer may still feel uncomfortable grooving on the dance floor, on the Internet, he reigns supreme.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Despite years of balletic training and turned out feet, Latika Young has always had an innate preference for the maladroit and inverted. She graduated with High Honors from Swarthmore College in 2003 with a Major in Dance and a Minor in Environmental Studies. After completing her Master's degree, she will be directing the FSU in NYC program for Fall of 2007. After that, you will find her in Southeast Europe soaking up the sun on the Adriatic Coast and infusing the Balkans with her particular brand of dancing dorkiness.