



Reconsidering Originality in Dance: Innovation as Repetition and Positioning

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ABSTRACT

This article critically reexamines the concept of "originality" in dance creation by applying the theoretical frameworks of Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Bourdieu. Challenging the conventional notion of originality as absolute novelty, the study argues that originality should be understood as a process of differentiation within repetition and as a positional strategy within the socio-institutional field of art. Through analysis of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's choreographic work and the development of contemporary Chinese dance, the paper illustrates how innovation is context-dependent and institutionally mediated. The findings call for a reconceptualization of artistic creativity, emphasizing process, cultural continuity, and the politics of recognition over the myth of isolated genius.

1. Introduction

"Originality" holds an almost sacred status within contemporary art discourse. Whether in the praise of critics, the evaluation criteria of funding bodies, or the pedagogical goals of educational institutions, "innovation" and "originality" are often regarded as core measures of artistic value. However, this seemingly self-evident concept is in fact embedded in complex historical constructions and ideological assumptions. As art theorists have pointed out, originality as a standard of artistic value was a central theme in the intense theoretical debates from the early eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century.

In the field of dance, the expectation for "innovation" is particularly pronounced. Contemporary dance is often defined by its fluidity, innovativeness, and boundary-pushing nature, with choreographers expected to continuously experiment with non-traditional techniques and concepts. Yet, does this pursuit of absolute novelty truly reflect the underlying logic of choreographic creation? A closer examination of works celebrated as "original" often reveals intricate connections to existing traditions and familiar forms.

This article seeks to reconsider the concept of "originality" in dance creation through the theoretical lenses of Gilles Deleuze's theory of difference and repetition and Pierre Bourdieu's field theory. The central research question is: In what sense does "originality" no longer imply creation ex nihilo, but rather a process of reconfiguring difference within existing structures? Through this theoretical inquiry, we aim to uncover the dialectical tension between innovation and reproduction, and to offer new perspectives for both choreographic practice and dance education.

2. Theoretical Background and Conceptual Overview

2.1. Traditional Notions of "Originality"

The concept of originality in Western art history has undergone significant transformation. During the Renaissance, originality did not imply creation ex nihilo but rather the intelligent transformation of inherited forms. The poet Petrarch had already established this principle: true creativity lies in breathing new life into old texts. Michelangelo's muscular bodies echoed ancient Greek sculpture; Raphael's harmonious compositions were deeply

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influenced by Leonardo da Vinci's studies in the Renaissance worldview, imitation was not depreciated but rather expected.

However, the Romantic movement of the 18th and 19th centuries radically altered this framework. Originality was elevated to the highest artistic virtue. The "cult of genius" shifted emphasis from tradition to self-expression. Beethoven is revered not for borrowing from Mozart and Haydn though he clearly did but for seemingly breaking their conventions and forging new paths in a singular way. This era consolidated the "myth of originality": the artist, in isolation, becomes possessed by a vision, untainted by imitation.

Kant's discourse on genius further reinforced this notion. For Kant, genius is the "talent for giving the rule to art," and its primary attribute must be originality. Genius constitutes an unpredictable intervention in art history, redirecting its course; a fortunate few, by virtue of their gift, disrupt and reconfigure culture. Yet Kant also acknowledged that genius might exist secondarily through the imitation of original breakthroughs. Most art is derivative; fine derivative art reflects the genius of others.

This discourse of genius is deeply entrenched in the field of dance as well. Martha Graham is revered as a "revolutionary," and Merce Cunningham challenged conventional choreographic paradigms through his avant-garde methods. Dance criticism, long central to the recording and validation of dance performances, shapes which dances are defined and valued, and which artists and forms are taken seriously. Critics such as John Martin and Yvonne Rainer, as cultural gatekeepers, have profoundly influenced expectations of what counts as "innovation."

2.2. Deleuze's Difference and Repetition

In *Difference and Repetition* (1968), Deleuze develops a critique of representation, introducing the concepts of "difference in itself" and "repetition for itself" categories that precede identity in logic and metaphysics. This theoretical framework offers a powerful tool for rethinking originality.

Deleuze outlines a philosophical history in which difference has long been subordinated to four pillars of reason: identity, opposition, analogy, and resemblance. He argues that difference has traditionally been treated as a secondary attribute, only appearing in the comparison of pre-existing entities. Yet this direct network of identity masks a subtler, more complex network of real differences gradations, intensities, overlaps.

For Deleuze, repetition is not mere duplication or the return of the same. He defines repetition as "difference without a concept." The story of Pierre Menard rewriting Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, as told by Borges, is a paradigmatic case of repetition: Menard's act of repetition, by being situated in a different temporal and spatial context, acquires new meaning. Art is often a source of repetition, for any artistic use of an element is never equivalent to another.

Deleuze invokes Nietzsche's eternal return to clarify this. Contrary to the common reading as the eternal return of the same, Deleuze interprets it as the affirmation of difference over identity, becoming over being. What returns is not the same, but the different; not similarity, but dissimilarity; not unity, but multiplicity. This implies that true creation is not the production of absolute novelty, but the generation of difference through repetition.

Another key concept for understanding Deleuze is the distinction between the "virtual" and the "actual." The virtual is not a possibility but a domain of problems; the actual is a solution to a virtual problem. Crucially, there is no resemblance between the two, meaning that actualization is inherently creative: "The

virtual exists in such a way that it actualizes itself by being differentiated, forced to differentiate itself, creating lines of differentiation in order to become actual." Every actualization is a unique response to a virtual problem, not a copy of a pre-existing prototype.

"Intensity" is the crucial mediator between the virtual and the actual. Deleuze writes, "Individuation is essentially intensive... Intensity determines how difference is actualized." As a pure expression of difference, intensity drives the movement from virtual ideas to actual objects. In the context of art, this suggests that each act of creation is a process of actualizing difference within an intensive field, rather than reproducing a prior model.

This framework has profound implications for dance creation. What appears as a choreographer "copying" a certain motif is in fact a recombination of elements, often from disparate sources. Repetition is not an obstacle to creation but its very condition. As Deleuze notes: "I fabricate, refabricate, and defabricate my concepts along a mobile horizon, from a center always displaced, from a margin always in motion, repeating and differentiating them." This decentered creativity challenges the linear myth of originality.

2.3. Bourdieu's Field and Habitus

From another angle, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural production reveals the social constructedness of "originality." His central claim is that the producer of a work's value is not the artist alone, but the "field of production as a universe of belief," which produces faith in the artist's creative power and thereby generates value. This directly challenges the "charismatic ideology" that focuses on the visible producer and deflects inquiry into who produces the "producer."

The concept of field is essential for understanding the social conditions of innovation. Bourdieu uses the metaphor of the field to highlight a specific relational space governed by struggles for power, inclusion, and recognition. The field determines actors' positions, their practices, the scope of the field, and the degree of artistic autonomy. Internal to each field is a structural antagonism especially between the young and the old, the established and the new, or in Bourdieu's terms, the "orthodox" and the "heterodox" positions.

Habitus is the key that links objective structures with subjective dispositions. It is defined as "a system of durable, transposable dispositions" "structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures." Artists create works that are recognized and valued within the field according to their habitus and position. The concept of homology suggests a correspondence between an individual's objective position in the field and the form their expression takes.

Position-taking (*prise de position*) is central to innovation. It arises from the encounter between a particular disposition (habitus, shaped by social trajectory) and a position within the field. This means so-called "original" works are often strategic actions within a shifting field structure. When artists achieve consecration, they begin to dominate their field and gradually become more accepted, normalized, and commonplace.

Consecration and legitimation are key mechanisms in field operations. Bourdieu identifies three types of cultural legitimacy: public acclaim (popular legitimacy), peer-based professional recognition, and legitimacy based on specific principles. When evaluation criteria are tightly controlled by a peer-based academy, the result is often a bias toward traditional artistic classics. Critics, journalists, publishers, and other cultural intermediaries exercise

"consecratory power" the ability to bestow value on cultural producers and their products.

The tension between autonomy and heteronomy within the field also shapes the possibility space for innovation. Highly autonomous "small-scale production subfields" are characterized by high levels of symbolic (artistic) capital and low economic capital. A structural principle of such fields is the explicit rejection of economic interests in favor of pure artistic production. Artists' aversion to profit may also be a strategic act of self-marketing or a tool for advancing symbolic distinction within the literary field.

Finally, the concept of *illusio* captures the foundational condition for field participation: belief in the sacred value of the game and its stakes. This belief is both a precondition for the field's functioning and its product. It is not theoretical but practical, constituted and reaffirmed through countless acts of credit among all participants within the artistic field.

3. The Logic of Originality in Dance: Theoretical Applications

3.1. *Innovation ≠ Origin: Pathways for the Generation of Difference*

Applying Deleuze's theory to dance practice reveals the concrete mechanisms of "generating difference through repetition." The choreographic work of Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker provides a paradigmatic example.

De Keersmaecker's *Fase* (1982) and *Rosas danst Rosas* (1983) are centered around repetition as a core method. In *Rosas danst Rosas*, repetition is not only crucial to the group's movement vocabulary but is explicitly inscribed in the title. The work combines everyday gestures with formalized, abstract repetitive movements, and surprising, unpredictable transitions between stillness and bursts of violent, often rotationally derived repetition.

Her choreography is deeply influenced by American minimalist composer Steve Reich. Regarding Reich's *Violin Phase*, De Keersmaecker stated: "There is a clear process... a system unfolding through accumulation and layering. This music gave me the tools to develop my own vocabulary and choreographic structures." Variations on mundane gestures become sequences and accumulations choreographic devices directly inspired by Reich's music. De-functionalized activities such as sleeping, working, going to the beach, partying, or staying up late also served as material, from which dancers extracted highly distilled movement trajectories.

Notably, this repetition-centered approach was considered innovative at the time. As one critic noted: "The precise, clean, and exact repetition of movement in form and rhythm is a defining feature... it is this repetition that is central. Today, the work seems retro, not particularly novel or innovative in its choreography, but

3.2. *The Dance Field and the Visibility of Originality*

Bourdieu's field theory helps explain why some acts of repetition are recognized as "innovative" while others are dismissed as "imitative." The answer lies in the social structure of the field and its legitimization mechanisms.

Dance criticism plays a crucial role in shaping the standards of "originality." Kate Mattingly likens dance writing to a flashlight that "illuminates certain aesthetics while sacrificing others." Through generations of writers, and through dance history curricula, textbooks, and course designs, criticism preserves and reproduces dominant standards of high art. Critics like John Martin

as a historical artifact it testifies to what was new in the early 1980s when these ideas were fresh, creative, even pioneering." This assessment affirms Deleuze's insight: repetition itself can be a generative mechanism of difference, not the opposite of creation.

From a theoretical standpoint, De Keersmaecker's repetition is not the literal copying exemplified by Borges' Menard, but a process of generating difference through embodied practice. Dancers repeat themselves as themselves the principle of repetition is internal to the group's movement vocabulary. Controlled, rotational pathways, rhythmic pauses on chairs, and the vertical application of movement generate a new language that is at once personal and conceptual, clear-headed and embodied. Each repetition is an actualization of difference; each performance generates new variants within an intensive field.

Postmodern dance further confirms this logic. Postmodern choreographers often focus more on the ideas and methods explored in a work than on fixed expression. In many postmodern pieces, different performances even by the same company are expected, even encouraged, to look different. Re-staging a work requires the same inquiry with different dancers, each with their own bodies and histories. As seen in Trisha Brown's *Roof Piece*, the piece "challenges the definition of choreography as a set of fixed movements to be memorized and repeated."

Chinese contemporary dance offers an alternative trajectory. Unlike the Western modernist gesture of "breaking with tradition," Chinese choreographers do not treat rebellion as the only principle. Instead, they seek to maintain continuity between tradition and modernity. One dominant trend in Chinese ethnic and folk dance choreography is transformation. Chinese dance practitioners "strive to break through traditional choreographic patterns and methods... the concept of critical inheritance has come to dominate both theoretical explanation and creative reflection."

This dialectic of "inheritance and development" presents another path of difference-generation. "Modern" in this context means innovating Chinese traditional dance with a modern aesthetic. Chinese dance culture absorbs external, "foreign" influences and reworks them as catalysts for developing indigenous culture. As in Xie Xin Dance Theater's works, which "integrate Chinese tradition into an almost post-human perfection," choreographers demonstrate how repetition of traditional elements can produce contemporary difference.

These examples collectively demonstrate that innovation does not arise from a blank slate, but rather through the generation of difference within repetition. What Deleuze called "differentiated repetition" finds concrete, embodied expression in dance practice. Every invocation of traditional movement vocabulary, every return to a choreographic method, becomes a site for the actualization of difference not depending on whether it is "new," but on how difference is opened within repetition.

and Yvonne Rainer, as gatekeepers, have determined which works are regarded as "original" and which artists are taken seriously.

Educational institutions serve as another major site of legitimation. Since 1995, De Keersmaecker's P.A.R.T.S. (Performing Arts Research and Training Studios) has trained numerous dancers, influencing the landscape of Western contemporary dance. Its curriculum includes not only De Keersmaecker's own work but also that of Trisha Brown and William Forsythe, with students collaborating with artists and theorists such as Jonathan Burrows, Matteo Fargion, and Boris Charmatz. In this way, specific choreographic methods are

institutionalized, canonized, and their status as “original” solidified.

The funding system also constitutes a structural condition of the field. The UK’s Dance and Drama Awards (DaDA) evaluation noted that the program “helps talented but economically disadvantaged young people receive high-quality training in dance, drama, and musical theatre.” In the US, the National Dance Project (NDP) has, over twenty years, supported 342 artists/companies, 787 presenters, and 619 dance works with over \$33 million in grants. These grants “enable artists to pursue more ambitious and/or higher-quality projects... artists said NDP contributed to the evolution of their projects and their development as artists.”

These data underscore a crucial fact: recognized “originality” depends heavily on institutional support. Without the attention of critics, the cultivation of education, and the backing of funding systems, even the most differentiated practices struggle to acquire symbolic capital as “original.” As Bourdieu notes, symbolic capital artistic prestige is what ultimately matters. Collectors (broadly including funders and curators) must understand the symbolic value of a work, not merely its price tag.

Legitimation itself is a site of ongoing struggle. Research on cultural legitimation emphasizes that “legitimation” is not a final status but a continuous process; field-level disputes “struggles over legitimacy” are ongoing. For a field to gain legitimacy, its social structure, historical context, and cultural narratives must align (or be strategically manipulated to align), creating a favorable environment for new aesthetic claims. Individuals must act as “aesthetic entrepreneurs” in cultivating these claims, which may result in consensus, conflict, or a combination of both.

This perspective reveals why standards of “originality” are fluid and context-dependent. In 1980s Brussels, De Keersmaeker’s aesthetics of repetition were seen as “fresh, creative, even pioneering”; today, the same approach may appear “retro.” This shift in evaluation is not due to changes in the work itself, but to a reconfiguration of the field: new actors emerge, new aesthetic values are promoted, and new legitimation mechanisms are instituted.

The field of contemporary Chinese dance follows a similar logic. In the first “Lotus Awards” in 1998, the category of “New Dance” was introduced alongside ethnic and folk dance, classical dance, ballet, and modern dance. By the third competition in 2002, “New Dance” was replaced with “Contemporary Dance.” This change in categorization reflects a field-level struggle debates over what constitutes Chinese classical dance, what is contemporary Chinese dance, and how modern and contemporary dance should be distinguished.

Field theory also reveals how “innovation” becomes “socially permitted.” Highly autonomous “small-scale production subfields” emphasize pure artistic production and reject economic interests not only as a structural principle but also as a potential strategy of self-marketing. Since the 1990s, the Belgian government has heavily invested in dance development and infrastructure, enabling the operation of De Keersmaeker’s Rosas company. Between 1992 and 2007, Rosas had a permanent rehearsal residency at La Monnaie/De Munt opera house and a home stage at the Kaaithheater. These institutional conditions made specific types of “innovation” possible while also delimiting the forms innovation could take.

4. A Critical Reconstruction of Originality

Based on the above theoretical analysis and case studies, we may attempt a critical reconstruction of the notion of “originality” in dance creation.

First, originality should be understood as a *differential strategy*. From Deleuze’s perspective, innovation is not about creating entirely new things out of nothing, but about generating difference through the repetition of existing elements. Artists may “appear to replicate ornamental patterns, while in fact recombining elements” a recombination that itself constitutes an act of differentiation. T.S. Eliot expressed a similar insight in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*: great art stems from a “historical sense” a deep awareness of what has come before. A new work enters into dialogue with tradition, reshaping it rather than destroying it. Harold Bloom’s concept of the “anxiety of influence” the fear that one’s originality is compromised by predecessors precisely reveals how *creative misreading* can become a source of artistic power.

Deleuze’s virtual/actual framework provides a deeper ontological grounding for this understanding. The virtual is “a system of differential relations between genetic elements,” a multiplicity that can be actualized across different domains. Each act of actualization is unique, as it must “create lines of differentiation in order to be actualized.” This means that even when addressing the “same” problem space, every act of creation is a process of difference-generation.

Second, originality should be understood as *field repositioning*. From Bourdieu’s perspective, recognition of a work as “original” depends on the structural conditions of the field and its legitimation mechanisms. “Originality” is not an inherent attribute of the work itself, but the outcome of its relation to field position, critical discourse, and institutional support. The artist’s *position-taking* the encounter between their habitus and field location determines the social construction of their “originality.”

This understanding challenges traditional discourses that attribute originality to individual “genius.” Bourdieu urges us to ask: “Who produces the producer?” The answer lies not in mystical talent, but in specific social trajectories, accumulations of capital, institutional positioning, and strategic actions within the field. As Virginia Woolf and Linda Nochlin once suggested: once adequate training infrastructure is in place, it becomes unclear whether appeals to “genius” meaningfully explain artistic creation at all.

Third, we must reject the myth of isolated genius and emphasize synchronicity and positionality. The myth of originality persists partly for economic reasons (art markets depend on the notion of unique, unrepeatable genius) and partly for psychological ones (audiences desire the romantic thrill of discovery, of encountering something unprecedented). However, this myth obscures the true logic of artistic production and may mislead pedagogical approaches.

Research identifies several pervasive myths about artistic creativity: the *myth of talent* and the necessity of mastery; the *myth of originality* and the need for focus; the *myth of suffering* and the necessity of self-knowledge; the *myth of madness* and the need for integration; the *myth of alienation* and the need for connection. These myths hinder not only creative development but also holistic growth and can misdirect educational priorities.

Creativity is not the exclusive domain of geniuses, nor is it limited to the arts. It involves building upon existing ideas, combining disparate elements, and reimagining concepts in novel ways. Drawing inspiration from others and adapting existing ideas are both common and necessary aspects of creative practice. By

embracing existing frameworks and adding one's unique inflection, individuals can produce work that is both innovative and meaningful.

Fourth, difference-through-repetition constitutes a logic of creation. Synthesizing the insights of Deleuze and Bourdieu, we can understand choreographic creation as a process of "differentiation through repetition." Every act of choreography involves repetition of movement vocabularies, technical traditions, aesthetic paradigms but this repetition is precisely where difference emerges. The key lies in how the choreographer positions themselves within the field and how they use specific strategies of repetition to generate recognized forms of difference.

The logic of postmodern dance exemplifies this process. Postmodern dance critiques traditional concepts of technique, aesthetics, and narrative, emphasizing process over product, rejecting virtuosity, and focusing on everyday movement. It "reminds us that dance is not only about technical skill or aesthetic beauty, but about human expression, connection, and the joy of moving together." This refusal of "pure novelty" creates fertile conditions for the emergence of difference.

5. Conclusion

This article has critically reconstructed the concept of "originality" in dance creation through the theoretical frameworks of Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Bourdieu. The central argument is that originality should not be understood as absolute innovation arising ex nihilo, but rather as a process of *differentiation through repetition* and a *positional strategy* within the field.

Deleuze's theory of difference and repetition reveals the generative logic of innovation: repetition is not the opposite of creation but its condition of possibility. Each repetition of an existing form can serve as an opportunity for the actualization of difference; the key lies in how new lines of differentiation are opened within an intensive field. Bourdieu's field theory, in turn, demonstrates the social construction of "originality": recognized innovation depends on legitimization mechanisms such as critical discourse, educational institutions, and funding structures. "Originality" is thus the product of field positions, relations, and struggles not the mystical gift of individual genius.

The choreographic practice of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker exemplifies how systematic repetition can generate innovation recognized within the field. The development of contemporary Chinese dance, on the other hand, presents an alternative path of opening space for difference through a dialectic of "inheritance and development." Together, these cases illustrate the multiplicity of innovation and the variability of originality standards across cultural contexts.

This theoretical inquiry offers several important implications for practice:

For arts education, it invites a reconsideration of the traditional goal of "cultivating originality." Rather than pursuing the elusive training of "genius," emphasis should be placed on discovering differential possibilities within existing traditions, developing students' capacity for strategic positioning within the field, and dismantling myths surrounding creativity.

For cross-cultural creation, it provides a perspective that transcends the binary of "Western vs. Indigenous." The "critical inheritance" model of Chinese dance suggests that maintaining continuity between tradition and modernity may be more generative than outright rebellion. The incorporation of cross-

cultural elements can enrich the content and form of dance teaching and choreography: "The integration of traditional culture and intercultural elements when aligned with authenticity and stylistic coherence should actively explore innovative possibilities."

For dance criticism and scholarship, it calls for attention to the historical and power-laden dimensions of originality discourse. Who has the authority to define "innovation"? Which differences are recognized, and which are ignored? These questions demand critical engagement rather than the uncritical acceptance of established norms.

Ultimately, redefining originality in dance creation means understanding it as a *dynamic process of differentiation within repetition*. This is not a devaluation of creativity, but a more precise articulation of its logic. As Deleuze argues, affirming difference as the principle of becoming and being opens up "the possibility for the new to exist." The vitality of dance creation lies not in the fantasy of a rupture with the past, but in the continual capacity to discover and actualize difference within existing structures perhaps the most productive understanding of "originality" we can offer.

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Bing Yan and Chengwen Song jointly contributed to the conceptualization, theoretical framework development, literature analysis, and manuscript writing of this study.

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