didaskalia
gazeta teatralna

From the issue: **Didaskalia 193/194**
Release date: czerwiec – sierpień 2026
DOI: 10.34762/p680-fd45
Source URL:
https://didaskalia.pl/en/article/processes-formation-and-developmental-trends-renaissance-courtly-dance

/ POLITYKI SEKSUALNOŚCI W TAŃCU

Processes of formation and developmental trends in renaissance courtly dance

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Abstract

The article is focused on the analysis of processes for formation and basic trends for the development of Renaissance ballroom dance as a holistic technology for cultural codification of corporeality, social visibility, and affect. On the foundation of the historical and cultural reconstruction and the source-scientific analysis for the Renaissance treatises and annotated collections (1445-1600), it is illustrated that cultural codification within the coordinates of ‘measure and maniera,’ spatial-mnemonic protocols, and etiquette prescriptions creates a latent ‘code of discipline,’ wherein desire is transmuted to a readable public act. Content analysis with a seven-block matrix produced three stable clusters: ‘code of discipline,’ ‘ritual-theatrical order,’ and ‘affect under control.’ The second stage of design included a pilot perceptual evaluation on video reconstructions of basse danse, ballo, and branle (N = 86: untrained adults). It was found that kinematic complexity is perceived as aesthetically more pleasing through ‘protocol readability,’ and that ‘erotic tension under control’ is a significant additional factor. In the SEM model analysis, ‘ceremonial theatricalization’ is understood to essentially mean a sense of social hierarchy and is thus conceived as a movement from the ritualistic ritual of the salon to stage and political allegory. A psychoanalytic approach (sublimation and the Imaginary-Symbolic-Real

triplet) provides terms with which one can articulate ballroom dance as a device for ‘public intimacy,’ wherein norm and pleasure come together in a stable grammatical structure of reciprocal desire.

Keywords: court culture; humanism in art; music-dance synthesis; Renaissance; salon dance

1. Introduction

Ballroom dances of the Renaissance period are generally defined, both in historical accounts and contemporary pedagogies, as the refinements of courtly manners or, respectively, the antecedents of professional ballet. Such definitions are certainly valid. However, they often place secondary the cultural, communicative, and psychophysiological role of salon dances, those techniques of ‘making the body visible, legible, and emotionally regulated’ that paved the way for the construction of the body politic of the Renaissance (Arcangeli, 2000; Greene, 2001). The manuals, ranging from Domenico da Piacenza and Guglielmo Ebreo to Thoinot Arbeau/Tabourot, formulated the ‘language’ of the movement, classifying it by typological concepts like misura and maniera, bestowing upon the body the status of ‘mute rhetoric’ and on movement the status of code of social interaction (The Early Renaissance c1445–c1535, n.d.).

The Humanist idea of sprezzatura expressed the idea of controlled ease, and according to the historiography of the culture of the courts, the gesture of the movement indicated the passage of private affects into the public gesture, legitimized by the authority of ‘the gaze of the court’ (Coblentz, 2018). This way, the branle, the basse danse, and the Italian balli of the courts are not only aesthetic. They are also the technologies of the social communication, the instruments of the bodily control, where the cultural norms are inscribed on the sound of the music (Dorf et al., 2020).

Modern studies on the psychology and neuroaesthetics of dance support the idea that it is a code that can be deciphered: aesthetic pleasure is shown to systematically relate to time, kinetic complexity, and social synchronization, across these dimensions combining movement and meaning together (Foster Vander Elst et al., 2023). Dance participation is shown to enhance the regulation of emotions, the bonding of social connections, and subjective well-being, thus attributing contemporary therapeutic relevance to the codified movement of the past (Chappell et al., 2021; Fong Yan et al., 2024). In terms of cultural psychology, ‘dance as languaget’ can thus be understood as a system of stable social signs, relating rank, gender synchronization, interpersonal distance, and ritual structuration, mapping desire upon norms without linguistic mediation (Rounds, 2016). However, there is not, as yet, a unitary model that integrates the three dimensions of the historical codification of gesture, the place of prestige within social hierarchy, and the affective transformation regulated and performed by the gesture.

Recent empirical studies can help narrow this gap. Dance perception studies demonstrate that aesthetic reactions depend not only on familiarity or category, but also on objectively defined features of movement, such as timing, kinematic complexity, or bodily expressivity; similarly, embodied-aesthetics literature also demonstrates that the perception of human movement is a result of the correlation of perceptual, motor, and reward-related responses (Kirsch et al., 2016; Orlandi et al., 2020). Recent empirical studies reinforce this shift from historical analysis to perceptual study. Research into the role of synchrony and coordinated movement in affiliation and social bonding reveals that work in dance cognition and research in dance aesthetics has shown that aesthetic judgments partially rely on the temporal and kinematic organisation of movement. Meanwhile, the embodying-aesthetics studies indicate that the codified bodily motion can be

both sensuously perceptible and emotionally salient. These results support the incorporation of a modern perceptual element and necessitate a cautious methodological approach to the handling of historical material.

In the current work, the psychoanalytical model, Freudian sublimation, and the Lacanian Imaginary-Symbolic-Real triad serve not only as the object of interpretation but also, at the level of the Courtly Scene, highlight the passage of the libidinal moment into the aesthetically figured figures of the courly code, where jouissance defines the impossible, excessive pleasure that drives the gesture (Zisser, 2021). By definition, the Courtly Scene is the ‘big Other’ that normatively empowers and limits the closeness, the rivalries, and the exhibitions, whereas the dyadic scenes will interface the mirror image of the body, the protocol, and the specific excess of pleasure.

The theater of the late Renaissance, ranging from the masquerades to the ‘ballets de cour’ performances, explains how the ‘language of the salons’ crosses the border of the political allegory, founding the way for the professional stage of the ballet (De Lucas, 2024). It is, within this framework, that the current paper aims to spot the existing gap in the empirically validated, interdisciplinary model that could favourably assess the codification processes that occurred during the fifteenth-sixteenth century, compared to the contemporary perception mechanisms.

The current study offers an interdisciplinary model of the historic development of salon dances of the Renaissance on the theme of ‘from code to stage.’ In the present article, ‘Renaissance courtly dance’ refers specifically to codified elite dance forms documented in Italian, Burgundian-French, and related sixteenth-century court traditions, especially ballo, basse danse, and branle-type materials, which are treated here through historically informed reconstruction. Methodologically, the study does not

presume that contemporary audiences can replicate the horizon of expectation of Renaissance court audiences. Instead, modern perceptual assessment is applied in a more limited sense, namely, to examine the features of codified movement that have been selected and remain readable under current viewing conditions.

It demonstrates how movement is codified at the courts of Italy, Burgundy, and France, how it is a social pedagogy of manners and ‘public intimacy,’ how it increasingly feeds into theatrical and political representation (Pavliuk, 2021). Accordingly, the current study reconstructs how the complexity of movement is systematically entwined with aesthetic pleasure for contemporary witnesses, and how the mechanisms of sublimation and institutionally facilitated ratification ensure the linkage between them (Fink et al., 2021).

Based on this approach, several hypotheses, which guide both the historical reconstruction and the empirical analysis, will follow. First, it will be hypothesized that the origin of the court dance was the attempt to codify the symbolism of desire, because the rhythm, the pace, and the style transform affect into signs that, themselves, need to be readable for protocol functionality. This means that the onlookers not only need to perceive the beauty of the movement but also the correctness of the behavior.

Secondly, we argue that the aesthetic encoding of movement is the basis for sublimation. This is because desire, rivalry, and gendered display can be channelled into regulated figures of movement that provide for catharsis and social integration within the bounds of the normative framework (Scenic Solutions, 2022). This phenomenon can also be seen, using the language of Lacan, as the relationship between the Imaginary images of the body, the figures of etiquette and musical notation, and the Real of jouissance, the

court acting herein as the ‘big Other’ that provides the framework of meaning (Jazani, 2020).

Third, we also expect that the process of professionalization and codification, via treatises, the education of masters, and the definition of hierarchical layers of offices and progressions, will raise the ‘semiotic density’ of dancing and the oppositions of noblesse, which will make the passage into stage dancing easier during the late Renaissance. The gender discourse of conduct, ‘masculine conduct,’ and grace, ‘feminine grace,’ suggests a pedagogie of the body of gender that inscribes desire without desublimation.

Fourth, we will demonstrate that the late Renaissance theatricalization of dance extends the range of communication not merely from the salon to the political arena of allegory, but also extends the range of the political arena itself. Such extension should result in the intensified appraisal of perceptual qualities of the ‘solemn theatricalization’ of stylized fragments that refer to the phase of the ballets de cour and other palace entertainments.

The historical research question of the study is as follows: in what respects were the aspects of Renaissance courtly dance historically codified in the source tradition, and in what respects is the codification of the source to the present-day viewer of a reconstructed performance perceptually legible? Dance-style cluster and stimulus-level kinematic complexity were the main independent variables in the empirical part. The dependent variables were ratings of protocol readability, perceived social hierarchy, grace/sprezzatura, affect under control, ceremonial theatricalization and general aesthetic appreciation. Based on this, we developed three hypotheses. First, greater kinematic complexity will predict greater protocol readability. Second, the protocol’s readability will positively predict aesthetic evaluation and mediate the relationship between kinematic complexity and aesthetic evaluation.

Third, more theatrised courtly forms will be rated higher in terms of social hierarchy and ritual than less theatrised courtly forms.

2. Literature Review

As regards the cultural-historical approach, the Renaissance salon dance is commonly understood within the broader context of the body's rehabilitation and secularization, where the importance of movement was elevated to the level of 'silent rhetoric,' a rhetoric of persuasion by charm and a code of readability (Franko, 2022). According to musicological studies, the growing attention toward meter and rhythmic patterns, along with the structure of dances, during the time of the Renaissance, was accompanied by the increasing complexity of choreography and the creation of treatises on technique and the manner of performing them (Dorf et al., 2020). This suggests that the codification of movement not only had aesthetic but also a social, symbolic, and meaningful 'law' of interpretation, conveying affect into readable language, and a translation of private will in a manner readable by the court.

These processes revolve around a number of institutional and textual markers. The apparition of the so-called masters, Domenico da Piacenza, Guglielmo Ebreo, and Antonio Cornazzano, inaugurates a process of professionalization, whereby the treatise on dance transforms from a listing of steps into an ontology of the art, where 'measure,' 'manner,' memory, awareness, and controlled variability of improvisation (Holly, 1989) take on specific meaning. During the same period, the curriculum of the noble individual, drawn up by Baldassare Castiglione, gives primacy to the role of dance, where the tenet of 'sprezzatura,' or easy grace, renders efforts normative, veiled signs of skill, disciplining affect while making it culturally

productive. It is on the basis of this perspective that the relationship between dance and the mechanisms of socialization of the body, whereby aesthetic norms meet the norms of public communication, along with the code of discipline of the body, can be explored.

Italian and French dances enter the courts of England, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire, and, toward the end of the sixteenth century, the theatricalization of the court spectacles provides the groundwork for the development of early modern masquerade ballet (Pakes, 2020). It is essential, however, that the emergence of stage and salon dances does not wholly abandon their lineage connection with the regional, vulgar, and household traditions, since the codification process preserves the ‘memory’ of the circulation of household movement, even when it transforms this memory into a system of privilege (Krys, 2020).

Being invited to the ball, naturally, is viewed widely as the sign of elite integration, the order of partners’ entry, the privilege of the first dance, and the rules of invitation serve as the markers of status, together with forming a specific form of ‘social therapy,’ where the proximity rules meet the code of etiquette (Kiss & Pribyl, 2019). Modern approaches to the problem of non-verbal communication and the evolutionary interpretation of the problem of dance state that the movement synchronization helps organize the platform of group affiliation and integration (Fink et al., 2021). Recent empirical discoveries can advance this point. Distributed coordination in a group is linked to affiliation and bonding, and the corresponding mechanism cannot be reduced to mere unison: coordinated movement is a stronger predictor of liking, group belonging, and interpersonal alignment than strict simultaneous synchrony, whereas synchrony and exertion are independent predictors of bonding (Tarr et al., 2015; von Zimmermann et al., 2018).

This inevitably opens the way for explorations into the specific psychological processes whereby the ballroom dance becomes the site of this very sublimation. According to the tenets of Freudian thought, the process of art-making allows for the transmutation of the unconscious wish into a socially acceptable form that will not transgress the code. In this light, dancing may be understood as the stylization of interpersonal attraction, rivalry, and gendered display within a normative framework that renders bodily interaction socially legible without transgressing courtly decorum (Scenic Solutions, 2022). In this manner, the 'dialogue' between the leader and the follower becomes the very embodiment of the specific 'aesthetic processing' that transforms the ambivalence of desire into coordinated bodily movement and gaze.

To elaborate, on the one hand, there is the arousal that is provided by the bodily interaction per se, on the other, the appropriation of the 'measure' that allows for the legibility of the movement and the preservation of the rank. Lacanian theory also develops this idea, charting the coordinates of desire as Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. In relevant readings, the Imaginary is the site for idealized images of the body: bodily position, bodily poses, and the reciprocal 'mirroring' between partners, whereby the other becomes a mirror-like reflection of the self. The symbolic is the codification of gesture through rule, text, and music. The Real is the jouissance, the pleasure beyond the norm, not simply incorporated, but which drives the scene (Zisser, 2023).

Sharon-Zisser (2018) also suggests that art, including the art of dance, can be understood also as a subjective choice, whereby form codifies the excess and thus facilitates communal experience. By this logic, the Renaissance court dances can be seen also as a 'stage of the great Other,' the stage on

which the court sits in judgment, ratifying the gesture. The Lacanian object a appears, necessarily, through very small details of time, of touch, of gaze, which instills desire, but is not desire (Vanheule, 2016). This is not attempting a reconstruction of actors' subjective experience, but offers a vocabulary for structuring a connection between codified movement and desire.

On the basis of these foundations, the development paths of Renaissance-era ballroom dances can be systematically charted. Firstly, the achievement of excellence finds codification through treatises, from Domenico da Piacenza and Guglielmo Ebreo, through Arbeau's 'Orchésographie,' whereby the definition of dance encompasses the rhetoric of movement and social communication within the musical metrorhythms (Early Dance Circle, 2025).

Secondly, the building of a noble curriculum where 'dance, together with the art of good manners, the art of fencing, and the language of social conversation,' transforms it into a 'school of good manners and good bodily discipline' (Coblentz, 2018). Thirdly, the differences and dialogue between the regional variants of the regional hubs, Italian, French, and English, contribute to the development of the 'European code,' but retain their native flavor that can be identified in the sets and figure notation systems (Dorf et al., 2020). Fourthly, the salons' growing alignment with the stage culminates in the allegorical 'ballets de cour' and herald the advent of the public art of 'ballet' (Pakes, 2020).

Finally, the current state of psychoanalytic and cultural theory offers a range of secondary interpretations of historical formations. Simultaneously, recent empirical research indicates that the audience's reaction to dance is also moderated by the structure of movement itself, as well as by expressivity, liveness, and the attributes of viewers. It applies to the current research, as

it justifies a sceptical interpretation of perceptual judgments as context-dependent reactions rather than direct equivalents of historical reception (Christensen et al., 2025). Lacanian approaches allow for the critical analysis of gender, identification, and discursive practices within the culture of dance: subjectivity appears as the function of the entry into the order of the Symbolic, where language and code both symbolize and regulate the desire, but always along with the necessity of the supplement of the Real (Kodre, 2025).

In this case, the Renaissance court dance can be seen as a laboratory of the ‘public subjectivity’ that, on the one hand, allows for the management of controlled corporeality, but on the other, also allows for the moment of the object a, a small but intriguing detail, which resists complete subordination within the norm (Gil, 2024). Of course, this interpretation is reconstructive, but it also works precisely because it allows for the connection between the formalization of the gesture codes and the logic of desire, identification, and the social order that centralizes both the early modern courtly culture and the contemporary discussions.

There is a short methodological reservation to be made. It is not the assumption of the study that the modern viewer recreates the horizon of expectation of the Renaissance court audience and that today’s reconstructions offer the viewer a firsthand experience of the original performance. Instead, the reconstructions are heuristic, source-constrained approximations enabling the selected aspects of codified movement to be experimented with to determine modern perceptual legibility.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The sample consists of 86 adult respondents aged 18–65 without professional dance education (N = 86), recruited through university mailings and social network announcements; additionally, the variable ‘dance experience’ (absent/amateur/systematic training) is fixed to further control for its influence. The study proceeded in two stages: first, the historical corpus was coded for recurrent features of codified courtly movement; second, participants viewed randomised video stimuli and rated them on 7-point Likert scales. The constructs under investigation are ‘protocol readability,’ ‘sense of social rank,’ ‘humanistic grace/sprezzatura,’ ‘erotic tension under control,’ ‘celebratory theatricalization,’ and ‘overall aesthetic appreciation,’ which are theoretically linked to the movement's historical code and contemporary psycho-aesthetic models. Based on several statements, subscales are calculated for each construct; their internal consistency is estimated by McDonald’s ω and Cronbach’s α (Appendix B).

3.2. Analysis plan

Lacanian psychoanalytical approach was incorporated for interpretation of empirical variables. Perceptual subscales are mapped onto such Lacanian registers: ‘grace/image’ corresponds to the Imaginary order, ‘protocol/rule’ to the Symbolic order, and indicators of ‘affect under control’ are interpreted as sensitive to the dimension of the Real, i.e. to excess pleasure (jouissance), which is not completely reduced by the norm, but enlivens the scene (Gil, 2024). These mappings of the data onto the Lacanian orders were not estimated statistically through new variables, but simply used for

expository purposes for informing the discussion.

The statistical analysis plan involves first calculating descriptive statistics, reliability indices, and interscale correlations (using polycortical coefficients and robust confidence intervals), and then testing the relationships between the index of kinematic complexity, perceptual constructs, and overall aesthetic evaluation with possible mediating effects of ‘protocol readability’ and ‘ceremonial theatricalization’ (De Lucas, 2024). In the presence of an acceptable structure of correlations and sufficient stability of the parameters, the construction of a simplified SEM model with the latent variables ‘code,’ ‘affect under control’ and ‘social hierarchy’ is provided. The ethical procedure is based on the principle of minimal risk: participants provided informed consent, data is anonymized, video materials are based on publicly available copyrighted reconstructions.

3.3. Materials

The corpus of sources was formed between 1445 and 1600 and is structured according to three regional centers: Italian treatises (the line of Domenico da Piacenza, Guglielmo Ebreo, Antonio Cornazzano), the French-Burgundian basse danse tradition and Tuano Arbo’s ‘Orchésographie,’ as well as Northern European practices of group branles; all of them represent precisely a court rather than a folk context. The unit of content analysis is a completed normative fragment (a paragraph of a treatise, a description of a figure, a court prescription), which contains instructions on movement, space, roles and etiquette. Given previous reconstructions, it is this corpus that allows us to reproduce the network of misura, maniera, memoria, terreno, ayre, and diversità di cose concepts that conceptualize ‘managed corporeality’ (Early Dance Circle, 2025).

The second design component is a pilot perceptual evaluation of the video reconstructions, which aims to match the historical code with contemporary perception. The study uses short fragments of reconstructed basse danse, ballo and branle performed in the style of historically informed Early Dance practice; all videos are standardized in length (30–45 seconds), front camera, neutral background, and musical accompaniment selected according to historical tempos and modes. This level of stimulus standardization is consistent with the broader methodological logic of contemporary full-body movement research, in which controlled recording conditions help separate responses to movement structure from extraneous variation in presentation (Christensen et al., 2024). Each fragment is correlated with a specific group of sources (Italian, Burgundian-French, orchesographic line), which provides a basis for further connections between textual codification and perceptual profiles (Appendices A).

The logic of the analysis of Renaissance ballroom dance involves a two-component design: first, a source-scientific content analysis of treatises and court regulations, and second, a pilot perceptual evaluation of video reconstructions, carried out with the support of interdisciplinary approaches of history, musicology, dance psychology and neuroaesthetics. The purpose of this combined design was to relate historical codification to present-day perceptual readability without collapsing the historical and empirical levels into a single claim.

The operationalisation of the dance code in the current study was a seven-domain matrix that encompassed recurrent source-level characteristics of codified courtly movement, including measure/rhythm, manner/grace, memory/space, gender prescriptions, ceremonial theatricalization, public intimacy, and affect under control. These realms are rhythmic ordering,

gracious performance, spatial-mnemonic organisation, role differentiation, staged or representational framing, regulated partner proximity, and the stylised containment of bodily intensity. All domains were rated on a 0–3 ordinal scale that indicated the amount of explicit presence and conceptual elaboration in a particular fragment of a source. Coding was conducted independently by two experts in dance history and cultural studies following a calibration procedure. Inter-rater agreement reached satisfactory to high levels (κ = .74–.84; ICC = .80–.88).

4. Results

As evidenced by content analysis, the corpus of sources from 1445 to 1600 demonstrates a stable ‘semiotic density’ of the measure/manner/space/memory block (hereinafter referred to as the ‘discipline code’) with distinct regional-temporal dynamics: the maximum average values are observed in late French materials against the background of high, but more balanced values in Italian treatises. Accordingly, the indicator of ‘solemnization/theatricalization’ increases from the Burgundian basse danse to the late Renaissance orchestographic tradition, which is consistent with known accounts of courtly representation and allegorization.

Table 1. Summary profile of content coding by blocks (0–3) and composite code index

Source cluster (example)	Measure/rhythm	Manner/grace	Memory/space	Gender prescriptions	Solemnity/theatricality	‘Public intimacy’	Sublimation/affect control	Composite index
Early Renaissance Italian treatises	3.0	2.8	2.6	2.4	1.8	2.1	2.3	2.43
Burgundian-French basse danse	2.6	2.3	2.2	2.0	2.2	1.6	1.9	2.11
Orchesographic tradition	2.9	2.7	2.4	2.6	2.8	2.2	2.5	2.59
Courtly-etiquette prescriptions	2.5	2.9	2.1	2.9	2.5	2.4	2.7	2.57

The composite index in Table 1 is calculated as the average of seven blocks for each source cluster; all blocks here have the same weight, which allows the indicator to be interpreted as a general ‘code density.’ It is important to note that these values re based on the average profiles of several sources within each cluster, not on individual texts; therefore, they reflect the generalized rather than the idiosyncratic character of the codification.

The collected and analyzed material allows us to state that the inter-coder consistency of the assessments is at least satisfactory and mostly high, which indicates in favor of the operational reliability of the matrix. As mentioned in the methods section, binary indicators were evaluated by Cohen's kappa, ordinal indicators by ICC(2,k). Based on generally accepted criteria, values of κ and ICC ≥ .75 are considered indicators of good agreement, which is important for confidence in subsequent factor decisions (Table 2).

Table 2. Inter-rater agreement indices

Block	Cohen’s κ (0/1)	ICC(2,k) for ordinal score
Measure/rhythm	.84	.88
Manner/grace	.79	.83
Memory/space	.74	.80
Gender prescriptions	.82	.86
Solemnity/theatricality	.81	.85
‘Public intimacy’	.76	.81
Sublimation/affect control	.78	.82

The materials of the conducted examination allow to group the indicators

into three latent domains. Exploratory factor analysis with a polycortical parameter matrix (principal axis extraction with oblique rotation) indicated that the structure of the data was best described by three factors: Code of Discipline (Measure/Manner/Memory-Space), Ritual-Theatrical Order (Ceremony/Gender Precepts), and Affect Under Control (Public Intimate/Sublimation) (Table 3). The choice of a three-factor solution is based on a combination of criteria of eigenvalues .> 1, the shape of the scree graph, and the results of parallel analysis.

It is important to emphasize that the factorization was carried out at the level of ‘source × profiling block’ units, that is, taking into account the entire content matrix, and not just four aggregated clusters. The resulting structure is conceptually consistent with the description of dance as ‘silent rhetoric’ and with psychoanalytic ideas about the mediated design of urges (Franko, 2022).

Table 3. Factor loading matrix (loadings ≥ .40 highlighted in the text)

Indicator	F1: Code of discipline	F2: Ritual-theatrical order	F3: Affect under control
Measure/rhythm	.82	.21	.18
Manner/grace	.77	.24	.20
Memory/space	.69	.18	.17
Gender prescriptions	.28	.75	.26
Solemnity/theatricality	.32	.79	.22
‘Public intimacy’	.21	.29	.73
Sublimation/affect control	.25	.27	.76
Variance explained	38%	24%	17%

Next, we will find out whether these historically coded domains resonate in

modern perception. A perceptual study (N = 86) performed on a sample of adults without professional dance education showed high internal consistency of the subscales ‘readability of the protocol,’ ‘humanistic grace/sprezzatura,’ ‘erotic tension under control,’ ‘solemn theatricalization’ and acceptable consistency of the integral aesthetic assessment (Table 4). The distributions of the scales in most cases are close to normal with a moderate skew towards higher scores, which allows us to use standard correlation-regression approaches with robust intervals. Such results are in good agreement with neuroaesthetic findings on the relationship between timing, movement complexity, and aesthetic judgment (Foster Vander Elst et al., 2023).

Table 4. Perceptual scales: descriptive statistics and reliability

Subscale	M	SD	ω	α
Readability of protocol	5.12	0.86	.88	.86
Grace/sprezzatura	5.34	0.79	.85	.83
Erotic tension under control	4.67	0.91	.82	.80
Ceremonial theatricality	4.95	0.88	.84	.82
Overall aesthetic rating	5.18	0.83	.87	.85

As evidenced by the results of the correlation analysis, the ‘kinematic complexity’ of the stimulus is related to the aesthetic evaluation mainly indirectly through the ‘readability of the protocol.’ To preserve the independence of observations, the mediation model was built at the level of aggregated average scores for each stimulus (averaging across respondents). In this regard, the mediation model with bootstrapped (5,000 permutations, bias-corrected) confidence intervals showed a statistically significant indirect effect while simultaneously reducing the direct path to a

non-significant level (Table 5).

Table 5. Mediation ‘complexity → readability → aesthetics’

Path	β	SE	95% CI	p
Complexity → Readability (a)	.46	.09	[.28; .63]	< .001
Readability → Aesthetics (b)	.65	.08	[.49; .81]	< .001
Complexity → Aesthetics (c)	.42	.10	[.22; .62]	< .001
Complexity → Aesthetics (c’)	.12	.09	[−.05; .29]	.17
Indirect effect (ab)	.30	.07	[.18; .43]	< .001

Accordingly, a generalized SEM model with three latent variables – Code (readability), Controlled Affect, and Social Hierarchy (perceived rank/celebrity) – showed satisfactory fit to the data within the pilot design (CFI = .955; RMSEA = .051, 90% CI [.032, .069]; SRMR = .041) (Table 6). Given the limited sample size (N = 86) and the ratio of the number of parameters to the number of observations, this SEM model should be interpreted as illustrative: it outlines a possible structure of relationships that needs further confirmation in larger samples. Within this model, ‘Code’ statistically significantly mediates the relationship ‘complexity → aesthetics,’ and ‘ceremonial theatricalization’ is found to be a significant predictor of the latent variable ‘Social Hierarchy,’ consistent with the court protocol and representational function of Renaissance dance.

Table 6. Key paths of the SEM model

Latent paths	Standardized β	SE	p
Complexity → Code	.48	.09	< .001
Code → Aesthetics	.62	.08	< .001
Theatricality → Social hierarchy	.53	.10	< .001

Affect under control → Aesthetics	.21	.09	.018

In the same way, the correspondence between historical ‘theatricalization’ and perceptual ‘rank’ is manifested: the correlation of the source profile with the stimulus at the level of aggregated scores showed a positive correlation between the content indicator ‘celebration/theatricalization’ and the perceptual subscale ‘social hierarchy’ ($r = .41$; $p < .001$). This result is based on a limited number of stimuli and should therefore be considered preliminary, but it is consistent with the trend of moving from salon interaction to interludes and ballet forms that integrate allegorical plots and political representation (De Lucas, 2024).

As noted, the psychoanalytic mapping of subscales to Lacanian registers has been supported in a three-factor solution, but requires careful interpretation. ‘Grace/image’ (conditional marker of the Imaginary) coincides with the aestheticized image of the body; ‘readability/rule’ (Symbolic) – with code and norm recognition; ‘excessive pleasure’ within the limits of ‘affect under control’ (Real) – with a small but stable contribution to the overall aesthetic evaluation.

However, follow-up tests reveal that the individual respondents’ ‘dance experience’ has a weak moderation effect on the primary models’ pathways. The addition of the other interaction term ‘complexity × experience’ to the regression models failed to add predictive power for improvements in AIC model fit and that increases in aesthetic judgments for more experienced individuals didn’t impact the model coefficients for ‘readability’ mediation ($\Delta\beta < .05$; p-value $> .10$).

As such, these findings do not rule out the presence of more complex differences within the moderation effect and instead seem to support the idea that the processes linking code and aesthetic appreciation and dance appreciation and dance complexity constitute processes fairly resilient to differences created by the respondents’ dance experience. In effect, this view is consistent with the cultural antecedents within the reading and appreciation community for dance messages being inscribed within a ‘social language,’ and this is widely readable and interpretable regardless of this community having any specialist cultural competence (Rounds, 2016).

The temporal-regional tendency of ‘theatricalization’ is additionally manifested in the comparison of clusters of stimuli stylized as early Italian balli and late French forms. The difference according to the perceptual subscale ‘solemn theatricalization’ is statistically significant (d = 0.58; 95% CI [0.28, 0.88]; p < .001) with close average scores of ‘grace/sprezzatura.’ Ultimately, this supports the historical narrative of the gradual institutionalization of representational, allegorical hierarchies without losing the movement's humanistic aesthetics (Franko, 2022).

In connection with the above, the robustness of the results should also be noted. Linking the index of kinematic complexity to the alternative calculation of ‘micropause/syncope’ does not change the sign and significance of the mediation; omitting one of the subscales in the Code latent block reduces the CFI to only .947 with an RMSEA of .055, which remains within acceptable limits for pilot SEM. One cannot, however, fully agree with the reduction of multidimensional historical reality to a single ‘composite,’ and it is the multi-block structure (code – ritual – affect) that partially prevents such simplification.

Therefore, the obtained results are consistent with our general hypothesis of

two interconnected planes. First, the processes of Renaissance ballroom dance formation – misura/maniera codification, spatial-mnemic protocols, gender prescriptions – have a high semiotic density in the sources and constitute the latent domain of the ‘code of discipline’ (Kiss & Pribyl, 2019). Secondly, the development trends – the growth of ceremonial theatricalization, the transition to allegorical forms, and institutional professionalization – are reflected in the perceptual ‘sense of social hierarchy’ and the increased role of ‘protocol readability’ as a mediator of aesthetic evaluation (Hannay et al., 2024).

The psychoanalytic component – ‘affect under control as sublimation’ – adds a specific depth to the understanding of the ‘public intimacy’ of the court dance, without which its social efficacy and cultural persistence would be less clear (Daykin et al., 2021). However, the pilot nature of the sample, the limited number of stimuli, and the lack of multilevel modeling impose natural limitations on the generalizability of the findings and open up space for further research – in particular, for extended comparisons of regions and genres within the Renaissance and for a more detailed analysis of the neuroaesthetic aspects of ‘controlled corporeality’ in a historical perspective.

Discussion

The current findings indicate that the aesthetic evaluation of reconstructed fragments of Renaissance salon dance is less influenced by the complexity of movement per se and more influenced by the complexity that is apprehended as part of a coherent rule system. This definition is generally congruent with the experimental results, indicating that the aesthetics of dance is not just about the movements executed, but about the temporal structuring and sequencing of movement. In this regard, the current findings point towards a

historically specific form of a more general principle of perception: complexity of movement is a source of aesthetic appreciation if it can be perceived as a structured form (Orlandi et al., 2020).

In the mediation analysis, it is shown that the transmission of the relationship between the complexity of movement, as indicated by the complexity index, and aesthetic judgment is carried out through the 'readability of the protocol,' and the direct path between complexity and aesthetic evaluation ceases to be significant when readability is controlled for (Foster Vander Elst et al., 2023). This highlights that the 'decoding of a code,' which integrates misura, maniera, space, and the logic of group synchronization, is a prerequisite for aesthetic evaluation and not a secondary addendum.

This is consonant with the history of the subject, whereby measure and maniera are formulated contemporaneously, characterized on the one hand by their qualities of technique, and on the other by their qualities of behavior, transmuting gesture into a sign that is visibly meaningful (Franko, 2022). The independence of the relationship between complexity, readability, and aesthetic evaluation for expert and non-expert participants offers testimony for the existence of a meaningful movement grammar that can, on the one hand, survive the passage of time, while, on the other, remaining meaningful for a collectivity sharing the minimal familiarity regarding the 'social language of good measure' (Rounds, 2016). An implication of this is that codified movement can be aesthetically effective not so much because it is perceived, but because it is instantiated as intelligible action. This finding aligns with embodied-neuroaesthetic frameworks, in which the perception of human movement is the product of interactions among perceptual, motor, and affective-reward processes rather

than a visual assessment (Kirsch et al., 2016).

In this regard, the specific perceivable aspect of ‘erotic tension under control’ critically, though persistently, affects embodied assessment. Psychoanalytically speaking, this finding can be interpreted to mean that attraction and tension are not allowed to manifest in an uncontrolled manner, but rather are structured as stylised, normatively bound vectors of movement. Empirically, the evidence indicates that the effect of controlled attraction on perception is most powerful when protocol readability is high and bodily tension is visibly controlled.

This not only maps on to the precise historical accounts of the Renaissance-era ball and the ‘erotic tension’ that it inspired, where the specific phenomenon of public intimacy was typified by the ways in which this intimacy was codified, regulated, and very specifically expressed through the regulated, normative, and stylized contact of bodily surfaces (McGowan, 2019), it also suggests that the current literature on the topic of the relationship between the performing arts and mental well-being suggests that the activity of very specifically structured and very specifically synchronized movement is increasingly seen, recognized, and acknowledged as a normative technology for regulating the affect of the subjects involved, and experiencing it, normatively, as pleasure (McCrary et al., 2021).

The Lacanian lexicon provides the terminology which, through the mapping of empirical data, brings forth the underlying structure. The perception scale of ‘grace/sprezzatura’ can be identified with the Imaginary order, which points to the well-balanced and integrated bodily unity, ‘protocol readability’ with the Symbolic order, where the movement is seen as operating within a normative system of rules and roles, the indicators for ‘affect under control’ pointing toward the existence of jouissance with reference to the Real, that

is, the excessive enjoyment not integrated into the normative system but still potentially empowering the scene (Zisser, 2023). The structure of the threefold model of the empirical analysis, ‘code of discipline,’ ‘ritual–theatrical order,’ and ‘affect under control,’ partially reflects, but does not confirm, this threefold correlation.

According to it, the courtly environment, or the universe of the Florentine salons, appears itself as the ‘big Other’ that carries the code of norms, on the basis of which the onlookers and the dancers align themselves when determining the measure of appropriate behavior, optimal distance, and accepted pleasure. The scale that measures the ‘sense of social rank’ mirrors this aligning, where the parameters that separate the areas of the pleasant and the unpleasant experiences are implicitly regulated (Guo & Xu, 2025; Kaya & Zabcı, 2025). According to this interpretation, psychoanalysis appears not only as the instrument of structuring the data, the manner of their interpretation, and not only, but also the meta-intentionality that, through the study of the empirical structurality, brings forth the underlying reason for the optimum that results when the code of norms and the pleasure restricted by the norm are united.

A second major axis of results pertains to theatricality and the perception of social hierarchy. The content characteristic of ‘solemnization/theatricalization’ follows a developmental path that begins with the early Burgundian basse danse and continues through the late Renaissance orchésographie, and the perceptual subscale of ‘social hierarchy’ correlates positively with this result (Greene, 2001). The results of the analysis show that fragments reconstructed for late French style are rated higher on the ‘solemnly theatrical’ characteristic than fragments for the early Italian balli, although both sets of fragments score comparably high

on grace.

This is consistent with the historical record of how steps for salon dances evolved into the ballets de cour, thus becoming the language of political symbolism and representation of sovereignty (Pakes, 2020). For the current results, theatricalization allies with, rather than challenges, the system, where scenes that come across as more theatrical are judged to be also more strongly connected with social hierarchy. This finds support for the idea of how dance actually provides the means for the construction of prestige and social existence, where form and social order are intertwined (Romanowska, 2021).

By contrast, regional differences for balli, basse danse, and branles can be seen as varying specific ways of ‘pleasure taxation’ imposed by normative systems. For Italian balli, where contrasts of tempo and characterization are typical, the internal drama can be realized on a single scene, and the Burgundian-French tradition of basse danse typically approaches a funereal balance and the representation of status, whereas, for example, in several Northern European traditions, synchronization and group energy become the decisive factors, where group movement is brought into relief (Fedorchenko, 2021).

Differences in ratings for ‘ceremonial theatricality’ and ‘social hierarchy’ for the ‘Italian’ group compared to the ‘French’ group support the contention that the underlying categorization of measure, protocol, and distance varies for each tradition, operating within a specific style of visible power and social relation (Bowman, 2023). Conversely, theatricality is seen here as the last stage of a longer process, where the salon code migrates to the stage, and the code imposes a language of political imagination.

Nevertheless, several restrictions deriving both from methodology and sources must also be recognized. Treatises and judicial protocols are normative sources, inscribing normative ideals, ethical and aesthetic, along with the recording of practical observances. Consequently, the ‘semiotic densities’ of content analysis are, partially, the outcome of the intentionality of the authors and the political economy of judicial systems (Franko, 2022). The reconstruction videos, used in this study, are themselves necessarily driven by choices of contemporary direction, rhythm, and space optics, reflecting, conversely, on the indices of complexity of movement and of protocol readability (Fallows, 2024).

The observer sample is small (N=86), and their cultural familiarity with the culture of the courts of the sixteenth century is also limited. The particular design of the psychometric study, involving cross-sectional mediation analysis and the use of Structural equation modeling, reduces the strength of the causality of the findings (Foster Vander Elst et al., 2023). Lastly, the measure of motor complexity relies on expert judgment, not on data of motion capture, nor is ‘affect under control’ assessed, other than by questionnaire, without parallel analysis of psychophysiological variables (Wu et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the results provide a coherent roadmap for follow-up studies. Regarding the level of source analysis, large-scale analyses comparing the codes of ballo, basse danse, and branle, including their musical mode, notational systems, and social settings of execution, offer interesting avenues (De Lucas, 2024). Moving on to the empirical level of dance psychology, the use of finer-grained kinematic approaches (motion capture), multilevel analyses that model both between-persons and between-stimulus variability, and larger-scale samples including living-history professionals

and representatives of various cultural populations are needed for the consolidation and generalization of the patterns explored here.

Adding the perceptual data analysis with the analysis of psychophysiological processes will allow for the more accurate definition of the sublimated aspect of the ‘controlled affect’ notion, moreover facilitating the consolidation of the relationship between the historically codified practices of dances and the contemporary ‘arts & health’ initiatives using the movement structure as a resource for social integration and affect management (Lewandowska & Węziak-Białowolska, 2023). Lastly, on a meta-historical scale, the following model of code, ritual, and affecttered triangle offers the possibility of a pilot ‘map of the field’ between the reconstruction of the history and culture, psychoanalysis, and the contemporary approach of the dance mechanism, of the psycho-social process.

Therefore, the Renaissance salon dance can be defined by the following complex of processes: the institutionalization of expertise by treatises and authors’ writings, deriving from Domenico da Piacenza and Guglielmo Ebreo, through Arbeau/Tabourot, the control of misura, maniera, memoria, terreno, and spatial-mnemonic practices by the ‘code of discipline,’ whereby the body itself is translated into ‘mute rhetoric,’ the social pedagogy of manners and ‘public intimacy,’ whereby desire is made readable, the synchronization of the various modes of musical, theatrical, and dancing art, providing movement-compositional logic and allegory, and the lineage specific to Italian, or Burgundian-French, and Northern European salon dances.

Nevertheless, the growth of theatricalization, the politico-allegorical manner of the masquerade and the ballet de cour, the increasing standardization of the positions, the steps, and the costumes, the controlled democratization of

access, which safeguards the privilege of gesture for the elite, the readability of gender roles (masculine behavior, feminine grace), together with the maintenance of the humanist ideal of sprezzatura, chart a specific history. The empirical regularities evidenced serve, at the same time, to periodize these historical processes, exemplifying how the complex of code, ritual, and controlled affect continues to organize the beauty and readability of the aesthetic.

Limitations

The number of participants is small, the evaluation of the structure of the model is not concerned with the test of the invariance hypotheses, the analysis premises the use of expert variables not using MOCAP technology, and the structure of the study design, relying on the evaluation of the cross-sectional study structure of the model, together imply that the results do not open upon a causal logic assessment, but consistent with the contemporary view of movement and aesthetics.

An additional weakness concerns the correlation between reconstructed performance and historical reception. These empirical stimuli were not recoverable original performances but historiographically informed reconstructions; the study is concerned with the contemporary perceptual legibility of movement codes derived from sources, rather than historical reception in the strict sense. As contemporary aesthetic responses rely not just on the properties of movement but also on liveness, context, and audience features, the current results cannot be viewed as a straightforward proxy for Renaissance court viewers.

Conclusion

The ballroom dance of the Renaissance, in view of the obtained results, appears not as a collection of spontaneous practices, but as a whole technology of cultural codification of corporeality, social visibility and affect. Codification in the coordinates of misura and maniera, spatial-mnemonic protocols and etiquette prescriptions formed a ‘code of discipline,’ within which rhythm, measure and manner not only normalise gesture, but also make desire legible in public space, transforming bodily impulse into legitimate social action. In this context, the key processes of formation are the intellectualisation of dance through the treatises and pedagogy of the masters, the social pedagogy of manners as a bodily discipline of ‘public intimacy’ and integration with musical and theatrical forms that gave the movement compositional logic and allegorical potential. The corresponding development trends – the growth of theatricalization (from paired figures to ballets de cour), the deepening of professionalization and standardization, and the interregional variability of code regimes (Italian balli, Burgundian-French basse danse, English and Spanish modifications) – demonstrate the expansion of the communicative radius of dance from private ritual to political representation while preserving the humanistic ideal of sprezzatura as controlled ease.

At the same time, a psychoanalytic perspective allows us to see this evolution as a sequential engineering of affect: in the symbolic order of the court, rhythm and manner function as a ‘law’ that translates libidinal energy into an aesthetically codified form, while in the coordinates of Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real interaction of the partners, the mirroring of images, the normativity of protocol, and the inextricable residue of pleasure that keeps the tension of the gesture, not destroying norms. Empirical evidence

suggests that the readability of protocol is a mediator between cinematic complexity and aesthetic appreciation, and affect under control is a consistent plus for appeal within reasonable confines, thus proving the tenets of sublimation as a structural tenet for this particular genre. On this premise, the Renaissance ballroom dance can be termed a stable cultural mechanism for the engineering of affect and prestige spanning across time: it moderates desire, puts it on display and shares this display through visible means while at the same time leaving leeway for pleasure and play. For museums, educational, and art-and-health initiatives, the results provide justification for the use of resource development for learning how to ‘read the code’ of gesture rhetoric and movement etiquette, specifically the patterns of leading and following, and using the implementation of the mechanisms of dance movement therapy for the purposes of emotional management and consolidation for social bonding.

Appendix A

A composite Kinematic Complexity Index (KCI) was computed as a standardised aggregate of these counts (z-standardised and averaged across the four components), providing a proxy for ‘movement entropy’ relevant to aesthetic judgement.

Table 7. Video stimuli and kinematic complexity (illustrative subset)

Stimulus code	Dance type / historical line	Provenance (group / archive)	Duration (s)	Direction changes	Tempo / step changes	Synchronous gestures	Micro-pauses	Kinematic Complexity Index (KCI)
IT_01	Ballo (early Italian)	Early Dance reconstruction set 1	32	14	5	11	6	0.72
IT_02	Ballo (early Italian)	Early Dance reconstruction set 2	38	16	6	13	7	0.85

FR_01	Basse danse(Burgundian–French)	Brussels manuscript – staged reconstruction	40	9	3	8	4	0.48
FR_02	Branle(orchesographic)	Arbeau-inspired reconstruction	35	11	4	10	5	0.61
NE_01	Group branle(Northern Europe)	Earlydance.org recording	37	12	4	14	6	0.77
MIX_01	Mixed-form court dance	Contemporary early-dance ensemble	34	10	4	9	5	0.55

Note. The table reports a subset of the stimuli for illustration; the full stimulus list and exact KCI values used in the analyses are available from the authors on request. Inter-rater agreement for the raw counts was high ($r \geq .80$ for all components), and discrepancies were resolved by discussion.

Appendix B

This appendix reports the wording of the perceptual items used in the pilot study. All items were rated on 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Subscale scores were computed as item means. Internal consistency was evaluated using McDonald's ω and Cronbach's α, which ranged from .80 to .88 across the subscales, indicating satisfactory reliability for correlational and mediation analyses. Participants received the general instruction:

'For each short dance excerpt, please indicate how much you agree with the following statements. There are no right or wrong answers; we are interested in your impressions.'

Construct 1: Readability of protocol ('code')

'I can clearly sense that specific rules or etiquette are guiding this dance.'

‘The movements appear organised according to some social protocol or code.’

Construct 2: Perceived social rank / courtliness

‘This dance looks as if it belongs to a formal court event.’

‘The dance seems associated with a high social status of the participants.’

Construct 3: Humanist grace / sprezzatura

‘The movements appear effortless and relaxed, yet very skilful.’

‘I have the impression of hidden work behind an outwardly easy manner.’

Construct 4: Erotic tension under control (‘affect under control’)

‘I sense a certain tension or attraction between the partners, but kept within rules.’

‘The physical closeness between the dancers seems controlled and regulated.’

Construct 5: Solemn theatricality

‘This dance has a staged, almost theatrical character.’

‘The dance looks like part of a larger spectacle or allegorical performance.’

Construct 6: Overall aesthetic evaluation

‘Overall, I find this dance aesthetically pleasing.’

‘As a whole, I like the way this dance looks.’

How to cite / Wzór cytowania:

Bazela, Dmytro; Batieieva, Nataliia; Vynokurova, Tetiana; Pavliuk, Tetiana; Savchenko, Rostyslav, *Processes of formation and developmental trends in renaissance courtly dance*, „Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna" 2026, nr 193/194, doi: 10.34762/p680-fd45.

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