

Ballet and Modern Dance as Catalysts for Socio-Political Activism

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Research Question: How have performing arts, particularly ballet and modern dance, served as catalysts for social and political activism across historical and contemporary contexts?

Abstract

This paper examines how the performing arts, specifically ballet and modern dance, have served as instruments of social and political activism across historical and contemporary contexts. Through case studies of Soviet ballet under Stalin, Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*, and modern movements such as Black Lives Matter and One Billion Rising, the study highlights the evolving strategies artists employ to challenge power structures and advocate for marginalized communities. Historical examples demonstrate how ballet in the Soviet era navigated censorship, metaphor, and coded resistance to subtly contest ideological dominance. Contemporary examples illustrate a shift toward overt activism, leveraging site-specific performances, digital platforms, and participatory choreography to amplify messages of racial, gender, and social justice. The paper employs theoretical frameworks from Performance Studies and Judith Butler's notion of performativity to analyze how performance constructs identity, disrupts norms, and fosters collective engagement. Overall, the study underscores the enduring power of performance to shape public consciousness and mobilize social change.

Keywords: performing arts, ballet, modern dance, activism, Soviet era, social justice, performance studies, racial equity

Introduction

A plié as provocative as chants during a protest or a leap more defiant than a slogan – ballet and other performing arts are a cornerstone of human expression, fusing movement, emotion, and narrative into a powerful communicative form. Whether through the stylised elegance of ballet or the innovations of modern dance, these art forms transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, offering a visceral language through which stories, values, and identities are conveyed (Shrestha, 2015). Performing arts, therefore, are not merely aesthetic expressions or entertainment but also cultural artifacts that shape the social realities of the communities from which they emerge.

Throughout the years, the performing arts have been seen as a means of communication and connection, not only for one's identity but also as something that reflects tradition and societal values. According to Tulio (2022), dance has played a crucial role in social events across multiple cultures and is performed during rituals, celebrations, and even court proceedings. The performing arts' ability to transform and communicate through various barriers, whether social, political, or generational, represents it as a tool to preserve and act as a catalyst within the historic context. Thus, the performing arts are regarded as influential voices in socio-political debates, considered as tools for critical engagement with power structures. Additionally, they play a crucial role in celebrating and preserving heritage due to their ability to convey complex, emotionally charged messages.

Art forms are dichotomous in both reinforcing dominant ideologies and challenging them. A lot has been written and studied about them serving as instruments of conformity; often used by states and institutions to project unity, authority, or cultural supremacy. While the arts have provided a powerful platform for resistance and advocating for social change, their function as a form of activism and resistance remains comparatively underexplored in scholarly discourse. This duality – art as both compliance and defiance – lies at the heart of this paper's inquiry. This paper seeks to address that gap by asking: **How have performing arts, particularly ballet and modern dance, served as catalysts for social and political activism across historical and contemporary contexts?**

By examining how these forms have interacted with politics, this study aims to reveal the nuanced ways in which the performing arts, particularly ballet and modern dance, have evolved from instruments of state-sanctioned cultural expression into dynamic mediums of political activism, shaped by the sociopolitical contexts in which they operate. While historical examples such as Soviet ballet often relied on metaphor and symbolism to navigate restrictive regimes, contemporary works like choreographic responses to the Black Lives Matter movement embrace more explicit narratives of resistance, illustrating a shift toward direct engagement with social and political realities.

Theoretical Background

The Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of cultural hegemony to describe a process of “intellectual and moral leadership” that embedded the ruling class across society (Martin, 2023). His work echoed the Italian sentiment of finding a model to integrate citizens culturally. Gramsci posits that dominant groups maintain power not solely through political or economic control, but through the subtle imposition of cultural norms and values that come to be seen as natural or universally accepted; they are thus exercising authority using the peaceful means of ideology and culture (Lears, 1985). As sociologist Nicki Lisa Cole explains, cultural hegemony refers to "domination or rule maintained through ideological or cultural means," achieved through social institutions that influence society's values, norms, and behaviours (Cole, 2024).

Cultural ideology has been expressed through art in China, for instance, particularly since the Chinese Communist Party came into power in 1949, where art became both a tool for ideological reinforcement and a medium for dissent.. Subversive art challenges the power dynamics of cultural hegemony by exposing the contradictions, injustices, and exclusions inherent in underlying narratives. It empowers marginalised groups to share their stories, pushing back against cultural homogenisation. Historically, minority groups have also used dance to express non-hegemonic values. Beyond being expressive, art forms challenge viewers' preconceptions, compelling them to confront their potential complicity in sustaining dominant cultural narratives (Taylor, 2025).

To further theorise the political and social function of performance, Judith Butler's concept of performativity proves useful. A gentle male gesture or a strong feminine leap, for instance, may discreetly defy expectations in ballet and society, where gender roles are strictly prescribed. These embodied acts are both political and artistic in nature. Similarly, Richard Schechner's performance theory suggests that performance does not merely reflect society – it actively shapes it. Each enactment creates new meanings, challenges conventions, and opens spaces for reconsidering identity and power (Yang, 2025). In this way, dance becomes a quiet, powerful space where bodies are resisted, identities shifted, and futures are rehearsed.

Together, these theories position performing arts as dynamic instruments of cultural negotiation: they communicate values, resist normative pressures, and create shared spaces where society's moral, political, and aesthetic frameworks can be questioned, reimaged, and reshaped.

Case Study: Historical Perspectives

The Soviet era was associated with significant political, economic, and cultural change. While cultural production (art, writing, music, dance, etc.) in the Soviet Union was not regarded as the expression of an individual subjective experience, it was frequently instrumentalized as a state weapon to promote propaganda (Haughey, 2025). Cultural work was expected to align with socialist realism - exalting the workers, glorifying the Soviet product, and suppressing anything that was considered bourgeois or independent. Artists who strayed beyond these lines of acceptance faced tactics of censorship, exile, or even execution (Yaffa, 2025).

Ballet, regarded as a high art form in Russia, also came under strict state jurisdiction. Soviet authorities carefully controlled ballet tours, which were used as tools of soft power diplomacy abroad. Dancers and choreographers were required to stage ideologically approved stories, and those who deviated faced censorship, career stagnation, exile, or worse (Waxman, 2025).

The contrast between artistic freedom and state jurisdiction was clearly articulated in the reactions and reception of Dmitri Shostakovich's ballet *The Bright Stream* (1935). The ballet was initially well received but eventually denounced in *Pravda* in early 1946 as frivolous and accusatory of parodies of collective farm life (Baxter, 2020). The satirical indignation of Shostakovich's ballet was deemed not innocent play, but a political threat, the consequences of which were the suppression of the ballet and the compounding of Shostakovich's dispassion toward the state (Levene, 2019). Shostakovich never composed another ballet.

Choreographers like Leonid Yakobson similarly pushed against Soviet conformity. In Yakobson's choreography, self-expression as an individual and an identity from a marginalized community was celebrated as a contrast and opposition to the imposed, authoritarian collectivism and the abstracted body that state-directed ballet created (Johnson, 2015). Overlooking the dangers, Yakobson continued to create in ways that challenged the bounds of Soviet ballet (Dickason et al., 2013). Eventually, however, Yakobson faced censorship and professional penalties for presenting "avant-garde" and Jewish nondramatic themes in his ballets. George Balanchine, another choreographer and graduate of the Imperial Ballet School, left the Soviet Union in the 1920s and co-founded the New York City Ballet in 1948. Although Balanchine's ballet works were not particularly political, they addressed notions of freedom and individuality, which served as opposition to the Soviet cultural project that was aimed at performance as propaganda. While Balanchine's 1963 Soviet tour was a cultural triumph for exposing Soviet citizens to a radically different understanding of art, it took a significant emotional toll on Balanchine, who was traumatized by revolution and repression. As a diplomatic success, Balanchine admitted it crushed him as a human being, even as his art profoundly moved the Soviet populace (Condé Nast, 2022).

Gramsci's notion of counter-hegemony, defined as the cultural struggle to undermine or decode dominant ideological narratives, can help explain how artistic performances under Soviet rule functioned as acts of subtle resistance to state propaganda. Gramsci argued that hegemony is sustained not only through coercion, but through consent, cultivated in civil society and reinforced by artists and "organic intellectuals," who could also challenge that dominance by producing alternative meanings. In the Soviet Union, this tension surfaced not only in state-sanctioned ballet and music but also in the rise of samizdat (self-published literature) and underground cultural practices that offered counter-narratives to the regime's ideological monopoly. While ballet itself was tightly controlled, underground theatre, unofficial poetry readings, and private concerts became legitimate forms of subversion. These gatherings, often held in private apartments or unofficial spaces, communicated dissent through metaphor, irony, and coded symbolism, thereby enacting what Gramsci termed a "war of position." Such performances may not have been overtly political, but by engaging audiences with themes of individuality, freedom, and critique of the state, they gradually constructed a cultural space of opposition that the Soviet state sought to suppress or erase.

In summary, the history of Soviet ballet suggests a complex relationship between formal controls and acts of resistance. While the Soviet regime sought to gain cultural capital through an ideological ballet framework, artists found ways to resist government influence by employing innovative style, altered structure, and symbolic meaning. The historical footprint of these performances demonstrates both the challenges posed to the Soviet state and the persistence of artistry in the face of oppression, reflecting the resilience of human creativity. Recognizing these artists as political and cultural dissidents is critical to preserving the contexts of repression and to recounting their journeys of purposeful agency rather than erasure.

Case Study: Modern Perspectives

The legacy of the performing arts as a platform for socio-political commentary and resistance continues strongly today. Contemporary artists boldly address systemic racism, gender injustice, and political oppression, building on historical precedents such as Alvin Ailey's work during the Civil Rights Movement. Ailey's *Revelations* (1960), which portrays the Black experience through modern dance, gospel, and spirituals, provides a historical foundation for understanding how performance can embody resilience and community (Nelson, 2022). While rooted in a previous era, its continued performance today highlights the enduring relevance of activist dance.

Modern choreographers and companies have taken these foundations further. Under Artistic Director Robert Battle, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater commissions works that merge post-modern ballet with cultural and political meaning. For example, Kyle Abraham's *Untitled America* centers on the devastating effects of mass incarceration on African American families, while Hope Boykin's *r-Evolution, Dream* engages with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy. These performances reclaim aesthetic space for Black artists and confront ongoing racial injustice in contemporary society (Herald, 2017).

With regard to more modern dance forms, they have also found a voice in movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and One Billion Rising, which have utilized choreography and performance as forms of protest. For instance, director Kemar Jewel created the film *Vogue 4 #BlackLivesMatter* (2020), which features Black queer and trans dancers from NYC's ballroom scene voguing in the face of police presence (Kenny, 2020). Flash mobs have also been used to convey similar messages. Throughout Italy, flash mobs took place in front of American embassies and consulates (Rolling Stone, 2020) and in front of the municipalities of small towns. Many signs and banners expressing the fight against racism and the need for equality and unity among people were displayed. Likewise, One Billion Rising has used dance protests since 2012 to call for an end to violence against women. The movement gained further traction during the #MeToo era, with its universal choreography *Break the Chain* symbolizing women's empowerment, solidarity, and bodily autonomy (Ensler, 2019). According to Greene et al.

(2019), a key connection between BLM and #MeToo is that Black women initiated both movements to challenge historical and contemporary structures of white patriarchy.

In recent times, the increasing place of social media has amplified the capacity for activism. Using platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter allows artists to mobilize audiences, raise awareness, and create collective action around pressing social issues (Yellowbrick, 2023). Ballet companies and modern dance troupes, for instance, have also started to integrate digital platforms into activism. Ballet Austin uses social media aggregators and livestreamed rehearsals to engage audiences, foster participation, and increase visibility for both artistic and social messages (Gagliano, 2020).

Theoretical frameworks illuminate how these practices function as activism. Performance Studies, as developed by Richard Schechner, treats dance protests and activist performances as “staged events” with symbolic and communicative power. “Twice-behaved behavior” emphasizes repetition and ritual in activism (Deriu, 2013), seen in BLM flash mobs or One Billion Rising choreography. Judith Butler’s concept of performativity similarly clarifies how gender norms can be subverted through performance. Ballroom voguing, queer dance, and feminist choreography disrupt the “heterosexual matrix,” demonstrating how performance can challenge and reconfigure identity, power, and social norms (Allen, 2023).

Contemporary dance protest performances are thus immediate and visible in ways sharply contrasting with the subtle, coded strategies of historical Soviet resistance. Activists today utilize digital tools, such as smartphones, WhatsApp, livestreams, hashtags, and digital art, to mobilize communities and amplify dissent (Treré & Kaun, 2021). Dance activism for movements like #BlackLivesMatter, climate strikes, and pro-democracy protests gains traction through viral distribution, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and enabling broad, low-barrier participation. That being said, while digital technologies increase accessibility and participation, they also introduce surveillance and control, highlighting both the opportunities and vulnerabilities of modern performance activism.

Conclusion

The performing arts have always been much more than something people saw or experienced. They have been used as expressions of what people mean, who people are, and about socio-political issues. Across cultures and generations, the performing arts have the capacity to both represent societal values and challenge ideological structures. At times, art has been co-opted by political institutions to promote unity or cultural superiority; at other times, it has provided a means of resistance, particularly through dance, in both recorded and live forms. This

tension frames the central inquiry of this study, examining how ballet and modern dance act as catalysts for activism in both historical and contemporary contexts. From the obscured symbolism of Soviet-era performances to the overt political choreography of Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*, and to recent municipal and national protests inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, the performing arts have created spaces for critical engagement, protest, and celebration of cultural identities.

Historically, performing arts served as both subtle and overt forms of resistance and political commentary. Under conditions of censorship or dictatorship, as in the Soviet Union or colonial contexts, artists encoded dissent through metaphor, gesture, and form. Artistic production was often constrained by patronage from the state or religious institutions, limiting direct expression but fostering creativity in subversive ways. The modern performing arts landscape allows for more direct, participatory, and multimodal activism. Contemporary artists engage with issues such as racial and social justice, gender identity, climate change, and decolonization, frequently through site-specific, immersive, or digitally mediated work. Social media and the internet have amplified the reach of these performances, allowing practitioners to collaborate with communities and activist groups. Many contemporary artists blur the boundary between performer and audience, transforming spectators into participants and encouraging dialogue rather than passive observation.

In conclusion, while historical performance often relied on coded strategies to navigate power structures, today's performing arts frequently assume an overtly activist role, directly addressing social and political issues while maintaining a lineage of resistance and critical engagement that connects past and present practices.

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