

The Gurdjieff Movements

Hidden Dances and Archival Discoveries

By Brian Fairley (New York University)

Secret knowledge is always embodied knowledge. Lucian of Samosata, a Syrian writing in Greek during the Roman Empire, asserted that “not a single ancient mystery-cult can be found that is without dancing” (Lucian 1936, 229). As often as not, the idea of a secret dance inspires prurient interest among outsiders, as when King Pentheus hides in a tree to witness the Dionysian rites in *The Bacchae*. Much closer to home, a so-called “Secret Dance File,” written in 1921, claimed to contain the lascivious details of sacred Pueblo Indian dances and was used to spread lies and innuendo about Native American religious practices and ultimately to further restrict their political sovereignty (Wenger 2009, 140–59).

Spiritual movements of the twentieth century, especially those falling generally under the rubric of “New Age,” alternate between a rhetoric of knowledge democratization or dissemination—arguing that once-suppressed pagan rituals should be practiced openly—and one that values secrets for the preservation of old wisdom and group solidarity. One of the forerunners of the New Age was George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866?–1949), whose teachings, called “The Work” by his followers, melded a modern doctrine of self-realization with ideas resembling Sufism and Indian religion (fig. 1). Gurdjieff, too, embraced a dialectic of openness and secrecy, simultaneously making esoteric wisdom “of the East” available to educated, moneyed Europeans, while restricting public access to his group’s practices. Chief among these secret practices were the “Movements,” dances and exercises that, with rare exceptions, could be performed or observed only by initiates. Gurdjieff claimed to have learned them from secret societies who had preserved them for thousands of years. For decades, the Movements have been a source of fascination to outsiders, in large part

due to their inaccessibility. Much existing work on the Movements, indeed, has been carried out by scholars who are also practitioners of the Gurdjieff Work (Azize 2012). A new archive in New York, however, makes publicly available for the first time a wealth of documentation on the Movements, promising secret wisdom, without, one hopes, the risk of King Pentheus’s tragic fate. In this article, then, I outline some of the challenges involved in the critical study of esoteric practices, while demonstrating how such research can add nuance to conventional histories of the New Age appropriation of world religion.

Little is known with certainty about Gurdjieff’s early life before he showed up in St. Petersburg in 1913 (Moore 1991). He presented himself as a man of mystery, entering occultist circles and acquiring a reputation as a formidable hypnotist (see P. D. Ouspensky’s bestseller *In Search of the Miraculous* [1949] for these early years). Escaping the Bolshevik Revolution with his followers, Gurdjieff moved first to Tbilisi, then Istanbul, and finally Paris. Along the way, he met Jeanne de Salzmann, a French-Swiss expatriate who had studied with the famous music educator Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, creator of a system of rhythmic and movement exercises he called Eurhythmics. The first public presentations of the Movements took place at the Tbilisi Opera House in 1919, on a double bill with de Salzmann’s Eurhythmics students. De Salzmann became one of Gurdjieff’s most devoted followers and fiercest defenders, taking over leadership of his group of followers in Paris after Gurdjieff’s death and driving the posthumous publication of his writings. In memoirs, members of the Paris group always recall de Salzmann as a diligent instructor, though she always insisted that it was Gurdjieff who created

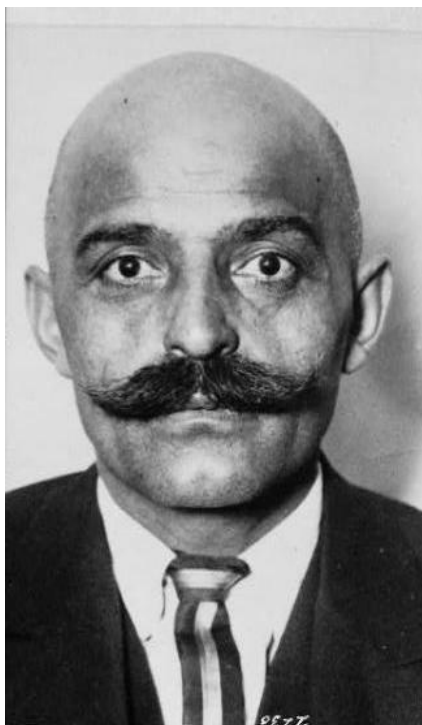


Figure 1. G. I. Gurdjieff, unknown date.

continued on next page . . .

The Gurdjieff Movements

... continued

the dances, without any input from her or ideas from Dalcroze. Nevertheless, scholars have pointed out striking similarities between the specific Dalcroze exercises and the Movements, arguing that Gurdjieff's work should be considered not in relation to ancient rituals but in the modernist context of experiments in kinesthetics that were going on in literature and the performing arts at this time (Sirotkina and Smith 2017) (fig. 2).

The precise meaning and purpose of the Movements within the Gurdjieff work is a matter of endless debate. In several places, Gurdjieff suggests that the physical movements themselves operate as a kind of language, a code containing messages of ancient wisdom. Describing his never completed ballet, *The Struggle of the Magicians*, he explains: "In the strictly defined movements and combinations of the dancers, certain laws are visually reproduced which are intelligible to those who know them" (Ouspensky, 1949, 23). In a scene from the book and film *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, discussed below, members of an ancient monastery are trained in precise bodily positions which are combined in movements that can then be read "like books." As Joseph Azize points out, however, Gurdjieff himself never explained how to "read" these movements, or even "what the

alphabet and its language consisted in" (2012, 312). As a result, much of the emphasis among Gurdjieff practitioners has been on the effect of the dances not on the observer, but on the practitioner herself. To this end, the Movements, with the challenging isolations of different body parts and requirements for precise coordination with fellow dancers, have the goal of interrupting the "mechanical" habits acquired in the course of modern life. The "harmonious development of man," in Gurdjieff's words, demands dance and movement as a way of "combining the mind and the feeling with movements of the body and manifesting them together" (1973, 182).

The archive donated by Dushka and Jessmin Howarth to the New York Public Library offers the possibility of answering many questions about the Movements. Jessmin Howarth was a professionally trained dancer and member of Gurdjieff's Paris followers in the 1920s. Her daughter, Dushka, is frequently referred to as Gurdjieff's child, though it is unclear whether he publicly acknowledged her as such. Mother and daughter saw it as their special duty to transmit and preserve knowledge of the Movements. To this end, they amassed thousands of pages of diagrams, photographs, descriptions, lists, and personal memoirs, attempting to document each



Figure 2. Public presentation of the Movements at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, 1923. Reproduced in Gordon (1978).

continued on next page...

The Gurdjieff Movements

... continued

of the hundreds of Movements created by or attributed to Gurdjieff.¹ In the process, they also indexed the conflicts and disagreements among the different branches of the Gurdjieff Work.

The archival material has already shed light on one of the most interesting pieces of art directly inspired by Gurdjieff: Peter Brook's 1979 film, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*.² An adaptation of Gurdjieff's outlandish, picaresque autobiography of the same title (1964), the film contains the only sanctioned audiovisual presentation of the Movements (Cusack 2011). Brook sets the final ten minutes of the film in a distant monastery, where the young Gurdjieff witnesses five sacred dances, each of which corresponds to one of the Movements. Exactly *which* Movements they are, however, has been a matter of conjecture, since Brook and other insiders have been reticent to go into

too much detail about how these dances came about (Brook 1998, 180). By comparing the dances in Brook's film with diagrams, drawings, and piano scores of Gurdjieff and de Hartmann's music, I have been able to confidently identify three of the five Movements, while further archival work would clarify the rest.

In the film, the Movements are presented like staged folklore, with the dancers dressed either in white linen tunics, Isadora Duncan-style, or wearing a turban or fez, to appear like a Sufi from Afghanistan or Anatolia. One dance, which corresponds to the Movement known in the archive variously as "Trembling Dervish" or "Warrior Dervish," features a semicircle of men bouncing on their toes in rhythm and swiftly changing the position of their head, arms, and gaze every six beats (fig. 3).³ In the middle of the semicircle, a single figure with arms crossed also



Figure 3. "Trembling Dervish" Movement.
Screen shot from *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1979).

¹ Owing to copyright restrictions and the early stage of this research, I am not including any images from the archive.

² Osho, the charismatic and controversial religious leader who started the Rajneesh Movement and was the subject of the 2018 Netflix documentary *Wild Wild Country*, reportedly saw Brook's film and decided to incorporate the Gurdjieff Movements into his followers' practice (<https://www.oshonews.com/2011/01/23/gurdjieff-movements-jivan/>). Many public workshops and performances of the Movements (derided by some Gurdjieffians as degraded versions of the teaching) are led by persons associated with Osho in one way or another.

³ The dance in question may be viewed [here](#), beginning at 2:58.

continued on next page...

The Gurdjieff Movements

... continued

bounces in place, slowly rotating in a full circle over the course of the dance. Partway through, another solo dancer emerges, hopping on one leg and freely flailing his arms and torso as he orbits around the central figure. Material in the Howarth archive not only helped me identify this dance; it also raised two particularly fascinating questions about the dance's origin and meaning and Brook's process of adaptation.

First, the archive suggests that this Movement was not originally all-male, as it appears in the film. In fact, the role of the figure who freely moves among the others was typically danced by women. (Jessmin Howarth, in a note, recalled her aversion to this role, as it made her feel like an "epileptic"). Is the gender exclusion in the film an effort on the part of Brook or de Salzmann—who consulted on the film—to make the dance more "authentic" by appealing to the notion of a Sufi brotherhood? Second, a note in the archive quotes J. G. Bennett, a renegade follower of Gurdjieff, who describes this Movement as being of "Shia origin" and the freely moving figures as representative of women mourning Hussein's death at the Battle of Karbala. Whatever the truth-value of this claim of origin, the idea of lamentation is absent from the filmed dance, as is the direction (present in notes by Bennett and others) to recite "*lā 'ilāha 'illā llāh*," the Muslim testimony of faith, during the Movement. Brook's film thus seems to toe a line between the presentation of cultural specificity and the claim to universal wisdom. Thus, items of dress like turbans or musical arrangements featuring instruments such as the *ney* and *tombak* are helpful for validating Gurdjieff's travels and the authenticity of the cultures he drew from, even

as reciting "There is no God but Allah" is *too* specific, a sectarian distraction from the doctrine that all religions are one.⁴

The Gurdjieff Movements and the Howarth archive pose problems that seem particularly well suited to an ethnomusicology in dialogue with dance and religious studies. On the one hand, the archive offers outsiders ways to better understand a practice that was integral to a major twentieth-century spiritual movement and to evaluate some of the claims of cultural origin made by Gurdjieff practitioners. On the other hand, the Gurdjieff Work as a whole is not an ancient or extinct practice.

The Gurdjieff Movements, then, as a heterogeneous body of corporeal practices, inhabit interstitial zones between dance and ritual, therapy and indoctrination, transmission and invention, and warrant further investigation as a nexus of twentieth-century ideas regarding religion, the body, and the integration of the modern subject.

There are still many groups worldwide for whom the prohibition on sharing the Movements is taken quite seriously, and ethnographic ethics would likely argue for respecting this wish for privacy. And yet, it is also possible to develop an argument in which the Gurdjieff Movements are part of larger historical processes of Orientalism and the mystification or objectification of non-Western cultures. Obfuscation of origin and appeals to underlying

universal principles are classic tools for the erasure of local traditions and the co-opting of these traditions in projects of self-improvement or spiritual awakening for subjects of "modernity" (i.e., middle- and upper-class Europeans and North Americans). The Gurdjieff Movements, then, as a heterogeneous body of corporeal practices, inhabit interstitial zones between dance and ritual, therapy and indoctrination, transmission and invention, and warrant further investigation as a nexus of twentieth-century ideas regarding religion, the body, and the integration of the modern subject.

⁴ The music accompanying the Movements was originally written for piano by Gurdjieff in collaboration with his disciple, the Russian composer Thomas de Hartmann (Mangan 1996; de Hartmann 1964).

continued on next page . . .

The Gurdjieff Movements

... continued

Archival material

Howarth Gurdjieff Archive, (S) *MGZMD 412. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library.

References

- Azize, Joseph. 2012. "Gurdjieff's Sacred Dances and Movements." In *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Development*, edited by Carole Cusack and Alex Norman, 297–330. Leiden: Brill.
- Cusack, Carole M. 2011. "An Enlightened Life in Text and Image: G. I. Gurdjieff's Meetings with Remarkable Men (1963) and Peter Brook's Meetings with Remarkable Men (1979)." *Literature and Aesthetics* 21 (1): 72–97.
- de Hartmann, Thomas. 1964. *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff*. New York: Cooper Square.
- Gordon, Mel. 1978. "Gurdjieff's Movement Demonstrations: The Theatre of the Miraculous." *The Drama Review* 22 (2): 32–44.
- Gurdjieff, George Ivanovich. 1963. *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. New York: Dutton.
- Gurdjieff, George Ivanovich. 1973. *Views from the Real World: Early Talks in Moscow, Essentuki, Tiflis, London, Paris, New York, and Chicago*. New York: Dutton.
- Lucian. 1936. *Lucian, Volume 5*. Edited and translated by A. M. Harmon. Loeb Classical Library 302. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mangan, John. 1996. "Thomas de Hartmann: A Composer's Life." *Notes* 53 (1): 18–29.
- Moore, James. 1991. *Gurdjieff: Anatomy of a Myth*. Longmead, UK: Element.
- Ouspensky, P[etr] D[emianovich]. 1949. *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Sirotkina, Irina, and Roger Smith. 2017. *The Sixth Sense of the Avant-Garde: Dance, Kinaesthesia and the Arts in Revolutionary Russia*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Wenger, Tisa. 2009. *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

SEM Student Union Blog

The SEM Student Union (SU) is composed of the society's student membership and serves as a resource and voice for students in the society. In this blog, we share our experiences of music, education, and life. Please join us and share your musical stories at semstudentunion.wordpress.com, and email us at semsublog@gmail.com.

The *SU Blog* also features a variety of series, including:

- [Ethnomusicology and Parenthood](#)
- [In Discipline: Talks from the European Side](#)
- [From the Field](#)
- [Textbook Review](#)
- [Ethnomusicology Student Groups](#)