

Flight of Fantasy - Dance as affective labor

Anu Laukkanen, University of Turku, Finland

“Capitalism intervenes the body and molds it: with pleasure. (---) Now the principal of pleasure and spectacle (---) tells people what is the world they live in, what are its meanings, what a person should seek after in life and what is his reality.”

Sanna Kekäläinen in the programme of Diva Vulva (2015)

How do the principles of pleasure and spectacle relate to the contemporary working life? What kind of role dancing might have in it? The uses of dancing in marketing or in creating pleasurable customer experience have created a new genre of commercial dance which spreads virally in social media. For example, the most popular video of a Finnish airline company Finnair's YouTube channel with 6.7 million views is a Bollywood dance performance, which took place in January 2012 on the Republic Day of India in the aircraft flying from Helsinki to Delhi. It is a perfect example of viral marketing, where the users of social media take care of the distribution of promotional material. In addition to Bollywood dancing, singing karaoke, performance of Finnair Singers and folding origamis have been part of in-flight activities for Finnair. However, in this article, I am not going to talk so much about dance performances as branding and marketing, but I will rather concentrate on three dance performances which can be viewed on Finnair's YouTube channel and discuss them in relation to the concept of affective labor.

Dance, affects and labor

The profession of flight attendant is a classic example of emotional labor, as sociologist Arlie Hochschild showed in her famous book “Managed Heart” in 1983. With emotional labor she means the management of emotions for example in service industries. In emotional labor, the employee is in face-to-face or voice-to-voice-contact with the customers or public, and his or her task is to produce emotional state in another person. The employer may require or control emotional activities of a certain kind of the workers. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri use the concept of affective labor, where the affect refers equally to minds and bodies, and they

emphasize that in late-capitalist societies affective labor as a form of immaterial labor has become the dominant mode of production. Thus, the figure of flight attendant embodies the conscious and unconscious control of appearance and behavior with the attitude of service with a smile. Here, I will use the term affective labor to characterize the importance of body, affectivity and performativity in working life.

Another context for my reading is the relationship between dancing and labor as developed by philosopher Bojana Kunst (2011; see also Franko 2002; Burt 2017). In the early 20th century a new form of western theater dance – modern dance - was introduced, and Kunst connects this with the breaking of the production modes. According to her, dance reforms were introduced at the same point in time as the movement of the working body was being heavily rationalized in the Fordist factory, where the organization of production was based on scientifically researched kinaesthetic experience. The human movements were instrumentalized to increase productivity. The pioneers of modern dance entered the stage in the same time, when all kinds of expressive, slow, false, personal, wrong and imaginative movements were eliminated from the labor. The utopian idea of freedom and the inner potential of the body were expressed and experienced outside the factory door. (Kunst 2011, 49–50)

Kunst continues: “Contemporary dance had to develop new techniques, which could transform this freedom into language, develop the open virtuosity of the moving body rather than that of the instrumentalized product, and unleash spontaneity of movement as an aesthetic language rather than the scientific naturalization of movement. In this sense, the political and aesthetical potential of dance in the 20th century was strongly intertwined with the exit from the factory.” (Kunst 2011, 51.)

However, in the communist societies of the 20th century the division between work and leisure was emphasized, and according to Kunst this lead to the celebration of the “most conservative and disciplinary forms of dancing, such as mass gatherings or the authoritarian institution of ballet.” (Kunst 2011, 54.) Dance scholar Mark Franko (2002) has actually written interestingly on the political uses of dancing in the 1930’s US, where modern dance was actually seen as a

form of class struggle, and chorus line dancing and ballet were seen as dance forms supporting the capitalist ideology.

According to Kunst, in contemporary capitalist societies the erased division of work and leisure with individualized and displaced work and flexible working hours, has brought creative, linguistic and affective labor to the center of production. In post-Fordist era the expressive and inventive human movements which can surprise are brought back to the work. Creative and capable individuals and their constant movements have become the promise of economic value rather than of freedom. (Kunst 2011, 55.) In this paper, I ask what is the role of dancing as a form of affective labor in Finnair. How dancing is used to create affective value in business?

The dance performances

Finnair is a Finnish airline company with an official vision to be the most desired option between Asia and Europe in the year 2020. One of the focus areas in the implementation of Finnair's strategy is customer experience. During the past few years, the airline has launched several marketing campaigns in social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, where one can explore the inventive ways of creating a unique customer experience but also enjoy the team spirit of Finnair cabin crew and get familiar with Finnair's attitude on social responsibility.

In 2011, the female members of Finnair cabin crew organized a flash mob dance performance at the Helsinki-Vantaa airport Crew Center. The idea came from one of the cabin crew members, as Helena Kaartinen, a Finnair flight attendant and blogger tells in her blog. Kaartinen sent invitations to cabin crew member's having a day off on the planned day of event. Kaartinen's daughter created an easy disco choreography for the group to Earth, Wind and Fire Song September. The dance includes some movements of flight attendants works such as serving the meals on showing the exits. This performance emphasized the team spirit of Finnair personnel, the collapse of work and leisure and the performativity of the work of flight attendants. The viral life of the performance brought up interesting views of the bodies of the performers and their appearance in the comment section of the video: "You have given me hope that there are airline that still require appearance, weight, and attractive. U.S. Airlines have forgotten those

requirements. Thank you for the great looking uniforms. Being a “retired” Stewardess I love seeing this unity for fun.”

The second example is the in-flight Bollywood dance performance. According to a blog text written by Kaartinen, this flash choreography was an idea of an Indian crew member who is also a Bollywood dance instructor. This performance brings the surprise element of human movement to the audience in the plane with a multicultural celebration of differences. Dance researcher Jaana Parviainen (2012) writes of on a research blog about Finnair’s Bollywood campaign as an example of compulsory performativity in service economy. Even if the flash choreography might have been employees’ own idea and a sign of good work environment and team spirit, Parviainen points out to the Finnair’s reputation as a company, where employee co-operation negotiations, strikes and laying off employees have taken place. In this kind of situation the line between voluntary and compulsory performativity of work is thin.

Third example of dance performances is a project called *Flight of Fantasy* which started from a visit of a Finnish flight attendant with her colleague Manish Gawde in Mumbai, India. After visiting the poor Saki Nagai Pipeline area, they wanted to do something for the children living there. As the Indian colleague had also background in Bollywood dancing, they decided to teach them a dance and fly them from Mumbai to Delhi to perform in front of the cameras.

The project is framed as charity activity and act of social responsibility in the blog texts and YouTube video, and even though Saki Naka was not “exactly a prime market for business travel”, it turned out “that Finnair’s marketing and communications department is home to a curious, gently beating heart that eagerly adopted the Flight of Fantasy idea.”

The background to the project as told in the blog texts and YouTube videos showed the way it imitated talent competitions as a way to find suitable children for the project, and it created a story line from slums to stars. The children were dressed as miniature flight attendants, and the part of the experience for the kids was to fly for the first time of their lives, where the flight created the fantasy world. One can feel and see the joy of the kids and their parents, and the touching communication between the Finnish flight attendant, children and their families.

The work of the flight attendant seems to demand more and more of emotional and affective investment but I argue that by using this project for marketing purposes, the children and families become also affective laborers. In the case of Flight of Fantasy, the interests of differently positioned subject remains open. The kids could fly for the first time of their lives, but what is their future going to be like? Their parents saw their kids in a new light, as skillful performers and as someone with a possibility to another kind of future, but what kind of futures this project in the enabled?

In this short analysis of three dance performances, I view affective labor involving dancing as social glue bringing differently positioned subjects together and creating an atmosphere of embodied sharing which may enhance well-being at work or solidarity between people from various backgrounds. I argue that work-related dancing is about gendered managing of bodies and affects and creating a creative, playful atmosphere of sharing to customers and employees themselves, but simultaneously dancing may hide conflicts for example between the interests of the employer and the employees precarious working conditions. Empirical studies have shown that employee's emotional commitment to the work may create even more exploitative modes of subjection than the Taylorist way of separating the worker from the work (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007). Affective labor internalizes what is needed to enhance the well-being of the employees, customers and even children living in poor areas of the world and what is useful to the organizations and companies to make better value of their employees.

YouTube-videos

Finnair (17.10.2011) Flashmob – Finnair Crew Lounge
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WyTWA12cuLE>

Finnair (25.1.2012) Surprise Dance on Finnair Flight to Celebrate India's Republic Day.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEsnb3kUDAw>

Finnair (18.6.2013) Story Behind the Flight of Fantasy
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5vS1zC3e0k>

Finnair (20.6.2013) Flight of Fantasy Bollywood Dance

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBe3MYExDVU>

References

Burt, Ramsay (2016) *Ungoverning Dance: Contemporary European Dance and the Commons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Franko, Mark (2002) *The Work of Dance. Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Hardt, Michael (1999) Affective Labor. *boundary 2* 26:2, 89–100.

Hochschild, Arlie (1983) *The Managed Heart. The Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kunst, Bojana (2011) Dance and work: the aesthetic and political potential of dance. In Gabriele Klein & Sandra Noeth (eds.) *Emerging Bodies: The Performance of Worldmaking in Dance and Choreography*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 47–59.

Parviainen, Jaana (2012) Performatiivisuuden pakko palvelutyössä: Tapaus Finnair.
<http://theworkingbody.fi/2012/02/20/performatiivisuuden-pakko-palvelutyossa-tapaus-finnair/>