

Relocating and Personalising Salsa in Slovenia: To Dance is to Communicate

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Abstract

In this paper, we shall investigate dance in modern societies as a cultural practice and as a symbolic ritual, which is closely related to processes of both social communication and global popular culture. With an ethnographic, in-depth analysis of the salsa dance-music culture in Slovenia, we shall explore how salsa can function as a form of interpersonal communication between people and as a global cultural phenomenon in the local contexts of the Slovenian society. Special focus will be put on the specific social functions that salsa as a dance can perform in contemporary society. Salsa classes, dancers, instructors, choreographers, dance groups and performances, salsa deejays, dance parties and night-clubs will be examined to identify salsa dance as a specific type of body language and as a cultural practice. The authors shall examine the diverse uses and relocations of salsa in Slovenia, but also the diverse gratifications that salsa offers to individuals. In this respect, we shall pay special attention to different patterns of salsa dance as communication, such as the physical component of salsa dancing and disciplining of bodies, local interest in the 'exotic' Latin-Caribbean culture, the politics of emotions and passions on the salsa dance floor, self-expression and the building of one's identity, etc.

KEYWORDS: dance, salsa, communication, music, popular culture, identity

Introduction: *Mi amor por la salsa* – dancing salsa for subjectivity

Dance always conveys specific meanings through the various forms of social communication in which it is embodied, e.g. in the form of contemporary dance installation on stage or in the form of salsa dance party. Dance is a form of human communication through gestures, body, body decoration and music with other people and within the wider social setting. In a narrower sense, dance can be understood as a type of body language that

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consists of signs (body moves, steps etc.) and is governed by rules (rhythm, the sequence of dance moves, the style of dancing, etc.). In the broader sense, dance can be defined as a cultural practice that also consists of other cultural artefacts and practices associated with physical movement (music, clothing and shoes, dance parties, performances etc.).

In this perspective, we undertake research of dance as communication and focus on the case of salsa dance and music in Slovenia. The analysis of salsa runs along two lines: salsa is examined as a body language at the level of interpersonal communication, but also as a cultural practice that is integrated into the global flows of mass, popular communication. The decision to study salsa among all other popular, modern dances is based on the specific situation of this dance in contemporary society. There are a few reasons for this: 1) salsa as a cultural phenomenon links dance and music in a complete unit, which allows us to speak of a global cultural industry of salsa; 2) salsa represents one of the fastest expanding dance-music practices in the world, as Rondon (2008) maintains, and it is one of the most popular, globalised types of dance music; 3) salsa is a part of the rise of a broader Latino pop culture, that began in the 1960s and 1970s (Boggs 1992); 4) besides tango (Savigliano 1995) and swing (Doane 2006), salsa represents a dance social forum that is not limited by generation, class or subculture, but covers a very heterogeneous mass of people who share the desire to dance and, for that reason, salsa can be classified as a typical modern social dance; 5) salsa has a very diverse system of dancing in close connection to social life, which includes dancing and learning to dance in salsa schools, but its distinct characteristic is that dancing is not confined only to dance classrooms, which is often typical for most other social dances but is very also widespread in other public spaces (salsa parties, salsa conferences and festivals, salsa holidays etc.).

The leitmotiv of this analysis is based on the premise that salsa dance should be observed as a communication tool in human relations and as a socio-cultural apparatus in societies. In other words, people use salsa to satisfy certain needs, and societies implement salsa to produce and maintain their structures, rules and values. There are a few central research questions, such as what salsa means for humans in modern globalised culture, what the local means of the global salsa dance-music phenomenon in Slovenia are, and what social functions salsa culture can play in post-industrial societies. The main characteristics of these societies are uncertainty and risk, possessive competition and individualistic orientation, identity and emotional crisis, commodification of society and loose interpersonal relationships, alienation from other people and pseudo-communicative community, based on mediated communication, modern media and communication technologies. Salsa as a broader cultural phenomenon has, therefore, wider consequences for people and Slovenian society.

The basic assumption of this paper is that salsa currently represents an important space for socialisation with other people and for cultivating physical contacts. Since traditional gathering public spaces of face-to-face contact are disappearing in modern societies (such as churches, pubs, public celebrations and gatherings, working places etc.) due to the changed manners and the accelerated tempo of life, which is growingly dependent on technology, socialising through salsa can fill the gaps created by the disappearance of these spaces. Although new socialising spaces such as social networks on the internet or

shopping malls, where people spend a large part of their free time, are rapidly growing, they are completely depriving us of face-to-face communication and of deeper personal and physical contact. People see and pass by many people everyday day, but no social interaction between them occurs. Being lonely in a crowded space is becoming a main characteristic of modern societies. However, salsa as a physical activity can represent a significant form of interpersonal communication in such alienated circumstances, since it can consolidate and promote interpersonal relationships, although the specifics of these processes are complex. We examine the global phenomenon of salsa in the local space of Ljubljana, where the culture of salsa in Slovenia is largest and has the longest tradition. We take a closer look at salsa dancers of different ages, different educational and class affiliation – from beginners to advanced dancers. Since both authors have experience with dancing salsa – one is a salsa teacher and has considerable experience in teaching salsa, performing and in organising various salsa events, while the other danced salsa as a hobby – our research is based on fieldwork study. Participant observation and unstructured interviews were used to systematically observe salsa dancers in a dance classroom, at salsa parties, festivals and workshops and to examine specific social and cultural trends associated with salsa. A method of thick description (Geertz 1973) of salsa practice and the salsa scene in Slovenia is employed, whereby dancers of salsa, *salseros* and *salseras*, and their relationship to dance are studied to explore human behaviours and reactions in the space of salsa, but also to understand the broader context of this dance-music practice in the Slovenian society.

Viva la salsamania: Salsa as fashion and global popular culture

Salsa has been gaining great popularity as a dance-music communication code among audiences all over the world since the 1990s. Although dance and music are always closely tied to a specific cultural context, in the contemporary media culture and, due to the cultural imperialism of the West that greatly influences global cultural production, they should be analysed in the perspective of global flows. Cultural practices can be nowadays very quickly transported from one socio-cultural environment to another. The phenomenon of salsa culture should be thus considered in terms of cultural as well as of economic globalisation, since the global flows that contain the salsa dance-music industry, are highly multilateral, to borrow Appadurai's term (1996). Salsa is not created and developed only in its original setting anymore (Caribbean and Latino culture), but worldwide.

Similar is also the story about an emergence and spread of salsa music and dance that has evolved into a worldwide phenomenon in three waves. The first period is related to its emergence in the 1960s. Several theorists (Waxer 2002; Rondon 2008, Boggs 1992) point out that salsa music, which is closely connected to the Latino music culture, was a hybrid from its beginning. Salsa is a sort of music-dance socio-political concept which began to develop in El Barrio, the Latino neighbourhoods of New York. According to Rondon (2008), salsa started to emerge in the 1960s as distinctive, subcultural music movement in the Caribbean diaspora in New York, especially in the Cuban and Puerto Rican com-

munities. Especially the latter was quite large at that time in New York and had powerful influences on the development of salsa. Salsa has evolved from the traditional Caribbean regional dance-music genres, such as Cuban *son*, *guajira* and *guaracha*, Puerto Rican *plena* and *bomba*, and was later enriched by Dominican *merengue*, Colombian *cumbia* and *vallenatos*, and Venezuelan *gaita*. Many authors agree (Duany 1984; Calvo Ospina 1997; Waxer 2002) that salsa is a fusion of African and European elements in its roots, which had been blended together through several centuries in Cuba and Puerto Rico. In salsa, this can be seen in the African elements such as the use of diverse drums, extensive polyrhythm and syncopated rhythms, and in the European elements, such as the melodic and harmonic structure of the French court dances. These elements were implemented by the Caribbean elements, such as the use of different percussion instruments. In the Caribbean migration community in New York all these elements and music traditions met with Americanised Latino styles such as rumba, mambo, charanga and boogaloo, and with Afro-American jazz, rock, soul, which flourished in those years (Rondon 2008). The result of this mixing was the emergence of salsa.¹ Boggs (1992) maintains that salsa evolved in the same manner as most of the dance-music styles that have emerged as subcultures (e.g. hip-hop in the American ghetto). First, it appeared in Latino communities, and later with the help of contemporary music industry it has achieved a global boom and became a brand and a commodity for sale.² Despite its later commercialisation, in its earliest stage salsa was explicitly political in its nature, carrying a specific class character. The product of this was the emergence of *salsa dura* (hard salsa) with harsh and provocative texts that were indicative of a difficult social situation of the Latin American working class and of hard life in *El Barrio*. It was the playful rhythm and strong social note of early salsa that inspired the Latin American leftist intellectual movement, whose adherents found shelter and identification in salsa, as Waxer (2002: 4) writes.

In its second period in the 1970s, salsa began its march over Latin America and by then the term 'salsa' had already settled as a standard term for this type of dance-music. Especially to Venezuela, Colombia and Panama, the sailors brought the latest salsa hits from Cuba, Puerto Rico and New York, and they sold and played them in bars and brothels in Caracas, Barranquilla and Cali, which became centres from which salsa later continued to expand. Local Latin American traditional music groups started 'to salsify' their music and gave salsa new shades, which had a strong influence on its future development.

The third period began in the 1980s and 1990s, when salsa started to conquer the world, to internationalise and to transform into a transnational dance-music genre. In

¹ In Spanish, 'salsa' is the name of a sauce: a mixture of different ingredients into a new, indefinite ingredient. Naming the dance 'salsa' thus symbolically indicates the mixing.

² This began in the 1970s, when the New York music publishing house Fania produced and promoted salsa music performed by Cuban (Celia Cruz), Puerto Rican (Willie Colon, Hector Lavoe, Ismael Rivera, Cheo Feliciano) and Dominican (Johnny Pacheco) musicians who lived in New York. According to Duany (1984: 187), salsa became commercial achievement with the help of Fania. Steward (1999: 8) adds that Fania set standards to salsa and turned it into the recognisable dance-music genre, because at that time it began to compete with soul and rock 'n' roll in U.S. cities.

that period, it became highly commercialised and a part of the mainstream culture. Puerto Rican musicians especially have credit for this because they invented the ballad component in salsa and from this a special style sprang: *salsa erotica*, which later evolved into *salsa romantica*, in which texts deal primarily with love, romance and the pleasures of life. Calvo Ospina (1997) argues that this music was more fluid and not only experimental, as was early salsa. Its sudden success can be attributed to the fact that it was a distinctly dance music for lovers. In the late 1980s, the development of salsa was affected by socio-economic changes such as the mass migration of Dominicans to New York. They brought their own dance-music style (*merengue*) and significantly changed the dance-music agenda of New York, which also influenced salsa (Steward 1999, 68). The mid-1990s were the golden years of salsa in the U.S., with salsa becoming a global fashion. Sudden changes in the globalisation of media culture and the great interest of the biggest multinational music production companies for Latino pop culture (Sony/CBS, EMI, Polygram, BMG and Warner/WEA) were, according to Negus (1999: 142–145), the factors that played a crucial role in the global march of Latin popular culture and also of salsa. These companies transformed salsa into big business and from then on the capitalist corporate music industry has significantly shaped salsa culture.

This was also the time when salsa began conquering Europe, which in the 1990s showed a strong political motivation for the Cuban culture and music. This was also partially due to the elimination of the U.S. blockade of Cuba and of Cuban opening to mass tourism, and mainly due to the world success of the Cuban Buena Vista Social Club's CD. In Europe, salsa first and most forcefully reached London, which was also the result of a high rate of migration of Latin Americans to England in the 1980s, who brought salsa culture with them. In subsequent years, salsa progressively reached the whole Europe and the late 1990s were the times when salsa came to eastern Europe; Slovenia was no exception. Among the first to bring Latin dance-music styles to Slovenia was radio and TV presenter and music organiser Brane Rončel. He popularised salsa rhythms and domesticated them among Slovenians with the help of the Slovenian public broadcasting service in the early 1990s, both on national public TV as well as on radio. Undoubtedly, the major influence in popularising Latin rhythms was his music programming of the central Slovenian national radio station Val 202 through which salsa music entered most Slovenian homes. In the mid-1990s, salsa dance styles were already being taught in some Slovenian dance schools (e.g. Plesna šola Urška) as a part of their program of Latin American dances. However, it was not until 1997 that Slovenians could systematically familiarise with salsa dance, when Columbian Elder Sanchez came from London as one of the first and most influential dancers and salsa teachers in London. He took the initiative to found the first salsa dance school in Slovenia, Salsoteca Dance School Ljubljana, which was a branch of his London school. At that time, the first monthly salsa parties at the clubs in Ljubljana started to be organised; after the year 2000, even more salsa schools appeared. Since the late 1990s, Slovenian dance schools have produced thousands of salsa dancers, and the salsa scene has become quite extensive and is still growing. Moreover, regular weekly salsa parties at different clubs, cafes and restaurants have become everyday practice, as well as intense

salsa workshops, festivals and conferences with prominent teachers, deejays and musicians from abroad, amateur salsa dance competitions appeared, salsa summer holidays on the Adriatic or salsa cruises along the Slovenian coast are regularly organised. Although salsa began its journey in a specific socio-cultural context (NY-Cuba-Puerto Rico), it was then transferred to other cultural settings where it was adopted and modified. According to Santos Febres (1997), the spread of salsa around the world can be described as a translocation of salsa, which means that salsa does not have the same meanings throughout the world. That is why it is necessary to understand salsa in its dichotomy between tradition and modern global popular culture.³

According to its historical development, there are several basic transnational styles of salsa music and dancing, from New York, Puerto Rican, Cuban to Colombian. Washburn (2008) adds *timba* or Cuban salsa, which has been developing recently in Cuba. Salsa quickly became very successful and there are a few reasons for this, including the global music industry, the structure and dynamics of the dance itself, the diversity and abundance of dance moves and characters, the fluidity of dance and, above all, the difficulty of this dance. Most of our dancers-informants declared that learning salsa takes quite a lot of time. Salsa is a complex dance; Wieschiolek (2003: 123) asserts that the complexity of this dance is one of the major causes for its success and there are a few factors for this. The structure of salsa music has a highly polyrhythmic character due to its African roots, which means that different instruments can play different rhythms; it is not easy for a dancer to determine which rhythms are actually relevant for dance. Furthermore, the basic salsa step is unusual; the dancer needs to release two beats (1-2-3-pause-5-6-7-pause) what is completely atypical for many European dances. A particular challenge in dancing salsa are also its moves, since they do not coincide with the traditional European standard dance moves, which have been historically consistent with the space, systematically prescribed, highly codified and strictly organised, as Klein (1992) writes. A typical feature of African dances and all dances that emerge from them – in contrast to the European ones – are also isolated moves, where different body parts are used separately, independently and in accordance with the music's polyrhythm. This is accompanied by trembling and sudden moves and many hip moves, which is quite strange for European culture, based on a conservative Christian ethos of corporeality. Moreover, salsa combines features of traditional social dances (dancing in pairs) and modern dances (no strictly prescribed sequence of steps and moves – like in twist, rock'n'roll, disco, hip-hop, rave etc.). By combining these features, salsa overcomes the difference between these two groups of dances; these are also the reasons for its success.

³ Roman-Velazquez (2002) argues that in conjunction with the rise of salsa clubs in London, Latino identity in the British area has also been strengthened. Urquia (2005) illustrates this with a detailed study of 31 London salsa clubs, deejays, dancers and salsa teachers and states that there are distinctly local ethnic interpretations of salsa in London which results also in the 'battles' between different ethnic styles of salsa.

Locked in the embrace of salsa: Dance and interpersonal communication

Salsa is a space of many social interactions, including physical, close contacts and other forms of nonverbal communication. Salsa as an interpersonal relationship between two dancers, who communicate through their bodies and non-verbal sensory organs (senses of touch, sight, hearing, smell), can be defined as an interaction ritual, if we borrow from Goffman (1982: 5). The ceremonial or ritual function of salsa says much about the non-verbal interaction acts, by which two dancers express their views on the specific dance situation through their bodies, represent themselves through bodily gestures and moves, establish relationships and also estimate their attitudes against each other.

With the help of music, dancers also communicate through their bodies with their dance partners and the surroundings. Berrios-Miranda (2002: 44) argues that the most powerful way to experience salsa music is to dance to this music. This might explain the frequent behaviour of *salseros* and *salseras* on the dance floor, when they leave the floor if a salsa song with atypical rhythm is played. Venezuelan salsa music performer Miguel Urbina (in Berrios-Miranda 2002: 44) notes that people like the salsa music that is good for dancing. On a practical level, this also means that salsa as interpersonal communication mainly puts two functions at the forefront, which Jakobson (1996) defines as the emotional or expressive function and the poetic function. The first refers to the dancer as a communicator, who expresses his/her personal attitude through his/her body language when dancing. Salsa is a dance full of emotions, which is to some extent true for every dance, but this play with emotions is especially characteristic for Latin American dances; Savigliano (1995) also maintains and shows this for tango. Therefore, salsa is also a disclosure of emotions, passions, moods and feelings that dancers express through their body movement and communicate through dance. The second, poetic function refers to the dancing itself and the focus is put on the aesthetic experience of dance communication between two dancers. It is about the pleasures that dancers find in rhythmic aesthetic dance expression and which they discover in the dancing contact and the moving of their bodies; actually, in the ways how they use these pleasures in dance.

In salsa, all aspects of interpersonal communication appear, although the emphasis is not on the verbal aspect; dance is one of the most typical forms of nonverbal communication. According to Dumbleby and Burton (1998: 44), nonverbal communication is the primary code of communication, it tells much about our feelings and our relationships to others. Various forms of nonverbal communication, which are part of dance, say much about sensations, beliefs, values, intentions, moods and characters of dancers; they do not only express the rhythmic and choreographic body gestures.

In salsa, all three basic forms of nonverbal communication exist, i.e. body language, paralanguage and dress or other material artefacts. Dance is always a body language, while the movement of body has communication value and speaks of the flexibility, rhythmic coordination, relaxation, openness or shyness of dancers. Many *salseros* and *salseras* told us that they do not need to say a word when dancing with others in order to find out with whom they can dance better and with whom worse, since most of this communication is

done by their bodies when dancing. They reported that with some people, the dance step runs smoothly and easily, and with others they have to make every effort to achieve at least minimal compliance.

Body language includes five basic elements. Gestures and body moves are the core of each dance; the sequence of dance moves and dance choreography establish and maintain a contact between two dancers so they can dance the same dance and carry out coordinated moves. Every gesture and move communicates something in dance. For instance, if a male dancer raises his dancer's hand with his hand, this may indicate that he wishes that she turn around under his arm or that she goes to the other side under his arm.

Facial expressions are often used in dance; they express mood, emotions and attitude towards other dancers. In particular, the eyes and lips are important communication channels through which we make contact with others. There are numerous examples when dancers reported that dancing with somebody who has cheerful expression on his/her face might be easier and smoother than with someone who expresses displeasure and frustration on the face. Similar stories were told about eye contact; it is more difficult to achieve a harmony of the bodies if a dancer does not look the other dancer into his/her eyes. Furthermore, the wide variety of facial expressions that show moods, feelings, affection and pleasures during dance also have another function: they can serve as a code through which dancers communicate about the course of their dance. Raising eyebrows, squeezing lips, closing eyes, smiling, winking, even glaring might be signs that help carrying out a dance in a particular situation and through which dancers can communicate about moves that should be avoided, moves that come next, about slowing down or accelerating the dance, finishing or continuing dance etc. In dance, therefore, a large part of what we would have done through speech in normal everyday situations is done by nonverbal communication.

The third important element of body language in salsa is body posture, i.e. how we hold our bodies, whether we are upright and with a raised head, or we are hunched and with a bent head, whether we open our body and move our hands apart or are in a closed body posture with hands detached closely to the body. All these features signal different things: whether we accept our dancer, whether we are inclined to him/her, whether we are relaxed or tense etc. The *salseros* and *salseras* argued that they easily dance with somebody who is upright, while a stooped and limp dancer gives them a feeling that they are pulling somebody around the dance floor. A dancer's posture says a lot about the quality and way of dancing.

Another important element is physical space and body proximity: how close to ourselves we let others. In dancing salsa, dancers are not close to each other in the upper parts of their bodies, as is the case with tango, or in the lower parts of their bodies, as is the case with standard dances. Salsa is a dance based on an open posture of dancers and allows for more manoeuvring of bodies. Furthermore, the last element of body language is a touch. It signifies the contact and the relation that is established between dancers in a particular dance situation. Touch serves as an important communicative means by which a male dancer leads a female dancer – he touches her shoulder, holds her hand, grabs her

back if he wants her to do a specific move; also, his strong handshake or a gentle grip of her hand tells her what the dancer expects. However, physical space and proximity as well as touching are highly culturally conditioned and learned things. In Western European culture, touching is not something common or highly desirable; on the contrary, it is largely regulated by unwritten rules and strict silent agreements. However, the cultures from which salsa originates, like Latin America and Africa, are much more open. Close physical proximity, touching and hugs are there an everyday thing. This cultural divide can be seen also in the Slovenian dance classrooms, where dancers are constantly changing their partners when practicing salsa and are often touching each other only so much as it is necessary. At the moment when the music stops during training and the teacher starts to explain something, the touch between dance partners is usually interrupted, the dance partners dropping each other's hands. When we asked the dancers about touching, they almost all answered they would release dancers' hands when the teacher would talk. They expressed feelings of discomfort if they need to hold strangers' hands at salsa classes for a long time. In Western cultures, touching can be interpreted as too intrusive and inappropriate, but in another culture this would be completely normal and, on the contrary, it could be totally disrespectful and rude if a dancer would release the other dancers' hand. As shown by many studies (Dimbleby & Burton 1998: 46), more touching is an important communication activity that could help us to develop better contacts with others. In the moment we are touched or hugged, we can feel more open to others, we can more easily accept them and are more confident. In broader cultural terms, salsa sets touches and hugs for a norm and dancing salsa is becoming a space where touching and hugging are highly permissible, desirable, socially legitimate and even necessary for establishing contact between two people.

Paralanguage as a second fundamental form of nonverbal communication also appears in salsa, although to a lesser extent. It includes different non-linguistic signs, which usually accompany speech, but in dance they can regulate the interaction between dancers. They point to the immediate reactions and feelings of the dancers, such as sighs, louder breathing, whistles, which may reflect the enthusiasm or the disappointment of a specific move, boredom etc. Or dancers simply use them to communicate about certain moves and gestures. Furthermore, clothing and other material objects as a third form of nonverbal communication are also important in salsa. In modern societies this would include dance shoes, clothes, jewellery, makeup and hairstyles, and all other ornaments with which dancers decorate their bodies. Dancers express their identity through these objects, build their image, establish contacts, attract attention and gain sympathy, but they are rarely used for direct communication between dancers. Their effects are rather on an indirect and often unconscious level. Our *salseros* and *salseras* reported that it is very important for them to be well dressed and nicely 'put together' for salsa, so they can feel attractive when they dance. This communication is also very culturally and situationally specific. For example, in the ritual dances of African or Aboriginal peoples, naked bodies painted with vivid colours are the norm, but in a classical gala dance more traditional dresses are desired: for women elegant evening dresses, for men tuxedos and ties; moreover, the dress

code for summer salsa party recommends that girls should be dressed in light gaudy and provocative dresses, and boys in elegant sport clothing. The dance itself and the concrete situation are the factors that set rules about the appropriate dress.

The nonverbal nature of dance as communication can tell more about a specific society than its verbal media (Hanna 1987; Klein 1992; Archetti 1999), because ideas and emotions are difficult to articulate in spoken language but can be better expressed through dance on a collective or individual level.

'May I ask for a salsa?': Social functions of salsa

In comparison to other dances, salsa can be easily studied as a modern social forum because the community of salsa dancers is extremely heterogeneous, flexible and mobile. On the basis of our observation of the Slovenian salsa scene, it can be said that the average salsa dancer in Slovenia is economically quite well situated and highly educated; most of the dancers have college or university education. On average, most of them are between 20 and 40 years, although in the classes as well as at the parties, there are many of those over 40, the oldest active dancers are more than 60, while there are significantly fewer teenagers. Salsa culture is a space where slightly older generations meet, especially people in their late youth, middle age and in early mature years. Salsa is thus not a youth dance-music form; on average, *salseros* and *salseras* do not represent socially marginalised or subcultural groups, but constitute the core of Slovenian society – middle class, quite well-educated urban dwellers.

According to the communicative aspects of salsa, the main social determinants and functions performed by the salsa culture in Slovenia might be summarised in a few categories. Although it is commonly believed that the most important feature of dancing is physical exercise or physical training, this is only partly true for salsa. Dancers did not state this function among the three top reasons why they came to salsa. In the contemporary culture of fitness, in which it is socially desirable to be fit, and where there is a social imperative of trained, lean and healthy bodies, salsa is also being used among dancers for training, maintaining and cultivating their bodies. In this regard, the statements of dancers that salsa gives them vitality and energy are eloquent. Salsa is extremely energetic dance; many dancers stated that it has the ability to stretch the entire body and all muscles. Salsa is not being perceived solely as a sport movement and most dancers do not perceive salsa in the same way as they perceive other sports. Certainly, the movement component is important when dancing salsa; many also argued that salsa is good recreation, but at the same time they require and expect much more from it.

The decision to dance salsa is in many cases related to the popularity of Cuban and Latino culture, which have been intensively propagated by global music industry. Salsa is in this sense seen as very trendy, as a dance fashion. Among the interviewed dancers, the great majority stated this as an important reason for their decision to start dancing salsa. For many dancers, salsa also represents a platform to the cultural other since they are fascinated by exotic worlds, such as Cuba or Latin America, where they can find new cultural patterns. *Salseros* and *salseras* reported that they like salsa because it requires a

lot of moving around, which releases them from strict rules imposed by Western society. Moreover, we noticed that dancers more enthusiastically accept salsa teachers with African or Hispanic roots than white teachers from Europe. As Waxer (2002: 3) says, salsa is offering a kind of liberation in the cultural sense, because when dancing salsa one is no longer limited with the cultural rules of Western society; this is closely related to the perception of salsa for building image and identity. Dancers constantly construct their own image through salsa, because when we dance, we interact with the environment, and we creatively express our own imagination and present ourselves to others.

In the eyes of most of the dancers, salsa is perceived as a meeting and socialising place, as a social space. Salsa is a kind of evening sociability where one can meet new people and get to know them. Fraser Delgado and Muñoz (1997) notice that this is the most typical and developed feature of salsa, because in the ordinary nightlife of salsa party one can hang out with others and forget about daily problems. A dance teacher Janja Frank (Bulc 2009) observed the same social pattern for the tango scene in Slovenia: most people also come to dance tango primarily for socialising. In modern societies, where traditional socialising spaces are increasingly disappearing or moving into virtual worlds with no physical and emotional capital, dance can compensate for this shortage of physical and emotional contact in human relations. Illouz (2008) draws attention to the consequences of such social trends, arguing that computer-mediated communication and the capitalist social system promote specific ways of living, identifying, feeling, thinking and doing physical activity. Capitalism increasingly mixes emotional relations with the economic ones (Illouz 2008: 5). In other words, emotions are becoming more commodified, and close, intimate relationships are also increasingly defined in the categories of economic models of trade and exchange. According to Illouz (2008: 37), this leads to cold, planned and non-spontaneous interpersonal relations, to 'cold intimacy'. We increasingly judge other people through a market logic; such a relationship to others and to ourselves produces split and insecure selves, individualistic and lonely beings. In such a structural social atmosphere, the sociability aspect of salsa can play an important role. Dancers often stated that they dance salsa because they simply want to be in the company of other people. This can be illustrated by the statement of the dancer who says that she loves to deal with different sports activities, but salsa takes precedence over other sports because salsa allows for hanging out with people, which is not a common practice in fitness halls, swimming pools and related sporting facilities.

This feature of salsa is closely related to the following – salsa is a space of relaxation. We learned that this is one of the most important reasons people dance salsa, according to their statements. However, it is significant that a slightly greater importance is attributed to this feature of salsa by women than by men. We can speculate that this might indicate that women are much more burdened with daily life than men, because in addition to their jobs or studies the greater part of the management of family life and caring for others is on their shoulders (children, housekeeping). Therefore, they perceive salsa as a valve for releasing tensions that have accumulated during the stressful day. Relaxation is one of the most important factors that may be offered by salsa or dancing in general. In

this regard, it is not surprising that *salseros* and *salseras* often stated they dance salsa in order to relax in the physical as well as in mental sense, since music and dance can calm them down. A male dancer with much experience argued that salsa is the best recharge after draining his batteries during the day. Even if dance physically exhausts him so much that after the party he immediately falls asleep, salsa spiritually recharges him and makes him ready for the next day, he told us. Many dancers also regularly attend salsa parties; those who are the most eager go to a party at least once a week or even more, all others at least once or twice a month. On average, the second most important reason why they decided to dance salsa is pure fun. In this respect, it is not unusual that many dancers (after a busy work schedule) regularly attend evening salsa parties, where they dance for several hours. Statements such as 'At seven in the morning I am already at my workplace, but I still regularly visit salsa parties,' or, 'Since I dance salsa, I sleep on average only five hours per night, but I have more energy and pleasure at my job than ever before' are very common in salsa circles. Many dancers testified that salsa has changed their lives in a positive way; it changed their emotional world as well as a whole attitude to life. Wieschiolek (2003: 128) learned the same for the German area and she maintains that salsa has an escapism function, i.e. it helps people to relax and forget about the daily routine.

Among the dancers, considerable importance was also attributed to salsa as a place of networking and meeting new people. Many *salseros* and *salseras* reported that they met good acquaintances or friends at salsa. This phenomenon indicates a trend of creating specific salsa circles, where dancing serves as a platform to perform a number of social contacts; these people are often in contact and their relationships are even transferred outside the dance sphere to other spheres of life (friendship, partnership, sexual relations, business associations etc.). As the dancers declared, salsa also helps them when they want to know a particular person; they just simply invite him/her to dance. In this way, they can come in contact with other people, build and maintain relationships. One of the inherent characteristics of salsa dancing is the specific organisation of salsa courses, which are based on the premise that dance partners should be regularly changed. At salsa classes, dancers do not dance solely with their dance partners with whom they come to salsa (a typical characteristic of other social dances), but both dancers constantly circulate and change dance partners. This substantially increases the chances of meeting new people, since everybody is forced to dance with other people. Many dancers remembered how they initially thought that this was very strange, but eventually they got used to it and they no longer see this as unusual thing. In many cases, salsa can help people to overcome loneliness, because even if they do not want to or are by nature more shy, at salsa they simply cannot avoid meeting new people. Dancing salsa also does not oblige dancers to enter into verbal communication contact with others, since they might be in contact with other people while dancing but not even speak a word. Therefore, salsa is a ritualised way of meeting new people, where there is no need to involve a lot of oneself into a relationship, but one can still get an answer from the other and get to know him/her, although in a nonverbal way. Wieschiolek (2003: 131) says that it is easier to get to know people at salsa, because one can easily approach even completely unknown people and go dancing with them, as one could not do in everyday life.

This characteristic of salsa is closely related to the perception of salsa as a space for touching and hugs. Dancers can satisfy their need for physical contact when touching others. This is one of the basic human needs, but it is ignored in cold, western, post-industrial societies. In this regard, salsa can help meet human needs, physical as well as psychological, which means feeling secure, having a good opinion of oneself, obtaining self affirmation, feeling welcome and appreciated by others. During the life course we always turn to others for confirmation, and physical contacts have an important role in our feeling desired. In salsa, we let another human being very close to ourselves, into our intimate, personal space, and as the experiences show this might be very disturbing for many dancers at the beginning. At salsa classes many dancers are often very shocked when they realise that they will need to change their partners and that they will need to touch or even hug more people in one evening than they had previously done in half of their life. We discovered that many dancers feel uncomfortable and embarrassed when they need to touch others – strangers; they hold their hands but many of them are unable to establish eye contact. The transfer of salsa from an open, hot Latino culture, where touching, hugs and generous displaying of emotions are something entirely common, to a closed, cold Slovenian culture surely encounters some obstacles, but also brings advantages to the Slovenian culture. Many *salseros* and *salseras* told us that they let their fantasies out when dancing salsa, because in salsa touches and hugs are mandatory, they are perfectly socially legitimate, and even a female *salsera* dances in front of her spouse in a close embrace with a complete stranger, this is not a surprise between spouses. With tango the situation is similar, as Frank (Bulc 2009) says, exactly the feeling of safety in these hugs and touches is very important and even if an older gentleman dances with a young girl, and this is not seen as harassment. According to Matsinhe (2009), social dances and the dance floors of nightlife represent a microcosm of the emotional life, because the dance floor is emotionally very exciting and enjoyable. It is governed by specific emotional standards, which cannot be found to such a great measure in everyday life. Dancers admitted to us that salsa is a specific challenge for their imagination when they change dance partners, for instance, without being seen as promiscuous. This kind of usage of music and dance can help dancers to escape the rigid social prohibitions. On the street, it would be totally inappropriate to touch or hug strangers, but on the dance floor, this is something completely normal and even legal. Salsa can thus facilitate the processes of emotional stimulation and arousal. When people dance, they can communicate on the most basic and spontaneous levels. However, because of all these features, it is also possible to find all normal everyday human reactions, such as jealousy, envy or hostility, when e.g. certain pairs of dancers cannot adapt to the changing of the dance partners. When we presented a hypothetical situation of a newly in love couple with a male *salsero* who prohibits his female dancer to dance with other dancers, the vast majority of the dancers with whom we spoke condemned his actions. In the majority of the Slovenian salsa community, therefore, a silent agreement and approval of alternating dance partners as a highly desirable activity rules. Salsa is a dance, in which much less formality and self-control exists than in other social dances or in everyday life. Sensuality, emotion and eroticism are essential elements of salsa, as Wieschiolek (2003: 130) maintains, and all of these are encouraged by physical contacts when dancing.

Salsa is also an important space for searching and meeting of partners, either for serious relations or merely sexual partners. Although *salseros* and *salseras* did not speak explicitly about this as an important reason for them coming to salsa, we discovered that in small talks and jokes they usually expose this as a very important reason. Moreover, when we asked them explicitly about the searching for partners at salsa classes or parties, none of our interviewees-dancers condemned this reason. Moreover, they even approve of the search for one-night relationship since salsa can be extremely erotic. Matsinhe (2009: 125) shows this for the Canadian case and argues that the modern dance floor is nowadays an arena for one-night relationships and for satisfying sexual needs more than any other social space. Similarly, dancers jokingly told us that at salsa dance floor one can almost ‘smell’ the testosterone or oestrogen, which makes them even more aroused when dancing. There is also a well known story in salsa circles about how exciting it is for boys when they watch girls dancing salsa with other girls. According to Matsinhe (2009: 128), a social dance has a mimetic ability, which is the excellent ability of imitating the erotic games. Through touching, caressing one another, putting of different parts of bodies closer together when dancing, dancers can mimic a sexual relationship or other forms of sexual stimulation. Salsa has a highly developed structural organisation of emotion, what can also be seen in the dance movement itself. Therefore, it is not surprising that salsa has broken or built many partnership relations. The long-term observation of the salsa scene confirms that many dancers who came as singles to salsa found either their life companions with whom they married, had children etc., or at least sexual partners for a short time. In many cases, it is also true that those who found their partners at salsa stopped dancing after a while when their partnership stabilised. This also confirms one of the basic assumptions that salsa plays an important social role in contemporary societies and most people do not come to salsa for the sake of the dance itself but because they search other gratifications in salsa. In this regard, it is very illustrative a statement of bachelor *salsero*, who was very disappointed as a beginner at his first salsa party when he realised that women prefer dancing with the men who are already on advanced levels: ‘So, at the end of the party I only paid drinks to those girls with whom I came to the party, but I danced very little or almost nothing.’

Finally, there is another important social function of salsa, the therapeutic function in terms of overcoming personal hardships or stresses: salsa as recovery or salsa for recovery. To paraphrase Illouz (2008: 6), we can say that salsa is a kind of therapeutic emotional style because dance can help to regulate the chaotic structure of social relations in late modernity. We also noticed that salsa is very attractive for people who seek solace in dance to forget the failures and shocks of everyday life or to overcome a crisis. Some dancers reported on how salsa helped them after divorce or a break up with a partner. Others even emotionally opened to us and told us that they came to salsa on the advice of the therapists who advised them to go among the people after their partners left them and to occupy with leisure activities and thus better organise their lives. It is not rare for dancers to say that they use salsa as a balm for their souls since something bad or unpleasant have happened to them, and they wanted to help themselves with dancing. A *salsera* even explicitly stated that she came to salsa to overcome a personal crisis after her partner cheated on her. In this respect, dance can have

the role of the therapist, because simple physical contact with another human being might be very comforting to such people. Common identity crises, depression, anxieties, uncertainty, questions about the meaning of life and unstable emotional states, which are nowadays a common thing and are a reflection of broader social situation, can be in many cases effectively ‘treated and healed’ with dancing, for instance, rather than with the approaches of modern medicine and the pharmaceutical industry. It is because salsa can ‘heal’ the causes and not only the consequences of such states, which are the result of deeper systemic problems and are produced by the conditions of the modern societies. To a certain extent, dancing can provide the answer to the lack of human relations, to cold relationships, dissatisfactions with oneself or feelings of insecurity. Theorists as well as practitioners of dance speak of the healing method of dance movement therapy (Karkou & Sanderson 2001). Kreutz (2008) shows this for tango with a concrete case study in which he illustrates how dance and music can promote mental and physical health. It is a therapy with dance, whereby physical exercise is accompanied also by social interaction and an emotional reward, which we can rarely see in any other sport or physical activity. Many *salseros* and *salseras* told us how salsa helped them to improve their opinion of themselves. Even the comparative studies of dance (Osgood, Smith & Meyers Orchowosky 1990) show that there exists a high correlation between life satisfaction of adults and dancing. Dance can help create a feeling of secure and manageable environment, it can alleviate the stress or even reduce aggression, as Wieschiolek (2003: 128) adds, because salsa can function as a safety valve.

Conclusion: *La vida es salsa* – dancing micropolitics of interpersonal relationships

The rise of Latino culture and the spread of its influences throughout the world helped to build the popularity of salsa in Western societies and turned this dance into a commodity for sale. Improved transport and communication links, mass media and global economic flows have allowed salsa to become a global popular phenomenon and transformed it from a local subversive music-dance practice into a mainstream pop culture. The dissemination of salsa around the world can serve as a textbook example of what is going on with the dance-music cultures of the 20th and 21st century, when various local, regional cultural phenomena are becoming transnationally visible and popular through the mechanisms of hybridisation and globalisation.

The case study of this salsa dance-music scene in Slovenia illustrated how dance can function as communication, both in terms of a communication code as well as a communication channel. In contemporary analysis, dance is too often reduced to an either and aesthetic movement or to something trivial, unworthy of serious academic research. Such simplified functionalist interpretations of dance do not withstand serious consideration, because the above-mentioned examples also showed that the internal logic of salsa is so complex and has many different social and cultural aspects. Dance is not a sacred activity in the symbolic sense, nor does it bear some higher truth; it is simply a reflection of a specific society and the mentality in which it occurs (Wieschiolek 2003: 118). In this regard, we approached the analysis of salsa as a meaningful practice, because people do something with this dance-music culture. To offer an example: when we see two people dancing, we do not think about what they want to tell

us with this dance move, but at least we think that this move is a misguided choice if they are not skilful dancers, or that they danced this move very hot and probably some sympathies are appearing between them. Precisely such a deconstruction of the perception of salsa among dancers allowed us to disclose the functions and meanings that salsa has in a specific society. Despite the Latino American character of salsa, we can conclude that salsa in Slovenia has been adapted to the specific context and culture of life in this territory.

Dance is therefore a communicative phenomenon, because people constantly communicate with others when they dance. At the level of interpersonal communication, dance can be defined as a game of bodies, while at the level of mass communication, it can be defined as a game of cultures. The study of salsa in Slovenia is thus also a study that opens a different perspective on dance, but also on modern Slovenian culture, its relationship to dance and on the ways dancers perceive the contemporary conditions of life. The dominant patterns of communication that are manifested in salsa dancing, such as the perception of salsa as exotic dance, interest in the culture of the other, eroticism and management of emotions and passions, seeking and building of an identity or a desire for building human relations, can teach us about the wider social dilemmas which appear in contemporary societies. They can also tell us much about the deficiencies in the lives of contemporary people for which they can compensate by dancing in a unique way.

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POVZETEK

Avtorici ples v modernih družbah obravnavata kot kulturno prakso in kot specifični simbolni ritual, ki je tesno povezan s procesi družbenega komuniciranja in z globalno popularno kulturo. S poglobljeno etnografsko analizo salsa plesno-glasbene kulture na Slovenskem proučujeta, kako lahko salsa deluje kot oblika medosebnega komuniciranja med ljudmi in kot globalni kulturni pojav v lokalnem kontekstu slovenske družbe. Posebna pozornost je namenjena raziskovanju specifičnih družbenih funkcij, ki jih salsa kot ples lahko opravlja v sodobnih družbah. Tečaji salse, plesalci, plesni učitelji, koreografi, plesne skupine in salsa nastopi, salsa dj-ji, zabave in nočni klubi so vključeni v raziskavo z namenom, da bi identificirali salsa ples kot specifično vrsto telesnega jezika in kot kulturno prakso. Avtorici tako proučujeta raznotere rabe in premestitve salse na Slovenskem, pa tudi različna zadovoljstva, ki jih salsa nudi posameznikom. V tem oziru je posebna pozornost namenjena različnim vzorcem salsa plesa kot komuniciranja, v ospredju so namreč gibalna komponenta plesanja in discipliniranje teles prek plesa, lokalni interesi za 'eksotično' latino-karibsko kulturo, upravljanje s čustvi in strastmi na plesišču, samoizražanje in izgrajevanje posameznikove identitete itd.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: ples, salsa, komuniciranje, glasba, popularna kultura, identiteta

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