

Two-step, Nerve-tap, Tanglefoot: Tapdance Typologies in Cinema

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A talk given at the [Screen Media Research Seminar](#), CRASSH, Cambridge, 6 November 2012.

Light Fantastic

Historians of dance are agreed that tap originates in a confluence of North European rural dance traditions instanced in the Irish and Scottish jig and Northern English clog-dance with African styles of dance retained and developed by slaves in American plantations. Tap retains from both currents the gravitational pull of the ground. Eleanor Powell recounts that, when she first began to learn tap dance, her coach, Jack Donahue, told her ‘ “You’re...very aerial; in tap you’ve got to get down to the floor” ’ (Ames and Spiegelman 1977, x). Donahue came up with a surprisingly direct way of discouraging her balletic levitations:

he had a war surplus belt, the kind that you put bullets in. There weren’t any bullets, but on each side of the belt there were two sandbags – the kind they use to weigh down the curtains in a theater. I want you to know that with that belt on I couldn’t move off the floor and I haven’t moved off the floor since’ (Ames and Spiegelman 1977, x)

T.S. Eliot captures the clumpingly chthonic quality of the contact of foot and ground in country and traditional dances in ‘East Coker’:

Round and round the fire
Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles,
Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter
Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes,
Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth
Mirth of those long since under earth
Nourishing the corn. Keeping time ...
Feet rising and falling.
Eating and drinking. Dung and death. (Eliot 1969, 178)

Of course the evolution of tap, of which cinema really shows only the most perfected forms, is away from this kind of mortal shuffling. In becoming urban and sophisticated, tap had to minimise its contact with the ground. The values of lightness and flight had to prevail over the clinging cyclicities of country dances. As the dancer Paul Draper remarked, ‘A heavy-footed tap dancer is a contradiction in

terms, since “tap” means to strike lightly’ (Draper 1978, 12). At the same time, the strongly vertical or pile-drivingly perpendicular orientations of country dances (recapitulated in primitivist reflexes like punk pogo-ing), in which all the energy may be driven down towards the ground and recoil in the same column away from it, is varied by lateral and radial movements. Most importantly, and definingly, for tap, the upper body, head and arms, are recruited to the dance. Where, in the earlier style known as ‘buck and wing’, the stamp is primary, and the little flutters and kicks (named after the flutter of the pigeon-wing) are snatched ornamentations, in fully-fledged tap, the aim is to suggest an airborne dancer, who grazes and pecks at the ground only in passing. Tap is tact. W.C. Fields said of the performer Pat Rooney, who introduced a softer, more delicate style of tap dance, ‘If you didn’t hear the Taps, you would think he was floating over the stage’ (quoted Slide 1981, 128). Cinema assists in the elevation of tap through a kind of pun, whereby the light fantastic toe merges with the evanescence of the flickering light that is the matter of cinema.

The recoil from the ground also has drearily predictable class and race analogies. As tap dance dwelt less and less on the earth, so it was also lifted up in the social scale. As the shifty clodhoppings of the rural folk dance gave way to the sophisticated struts and high kicks of urban dance, the clumping clown became the prancing toff, kitted out in spats, top hat and tails. In large part, this movement also meant a move from black dancers to white, though purist historians of dance will still often prefer the loose-limbed downward focus of a Bill Robinson to the exorbitant soarings and scissorings of an Astaire, O’Connor or Kelly. However, we might note that the air-walking associated with the aristocrat appears not second in the history of tap, but first, in the farcical high-stepping of the cakewalk, in which white slave-owners saw – or perhaps failed to see – their own dance-movements mimicked and mocked by their slaves. Fred Astaire’s aerial mode is therefore not so much a simple sublimation of the primitive buck and wing as a recapitulation of the modes of the ‘class act’ that emerged at the turn of the century, formalising and urbanising the plantation cakewalk, which was then itself taken over by white dancers. The aerial dancer both depends upon and is imperilled by the tug of the ground.

Adorno predictably saw the cakewalk and tap dancing as the survivals of the original ‘lament of unfreedom’ which jazz never managed to transfigure, for

everything unruly in it was from the very beginning integrated into a strict scheme ... its rebellious gestures are accompanied by the tendency to blind obeisance, much like the sadomasochistic type described by analytic psychology, the person who chafes against the father-figure while secretly admiring him, who seeks to emulate him and in turn derives enjoyment from the subordination he overtly detests. (Adorno 1983, 14)

This seems to be redoubled for Adorno in the adoption of jazz by the white lumpenproletariat, who ‘participated in its prehistory during the period preceding its thrust into the spotlight of a society which seemed to be waiting for it and which had long been familiar with its impulses through the cakewalk and tap-dancing’ (Adorno 1983, 122). Clement Greenberg saw tap dance as one of the elements of kitsch, that assembly of ‘chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fictions, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood music, etc, etc.’ (Greenberg 2000, 51) that entertained the recent peasants who swarmed into cities to make up the proletariat and petit bourgeoisie, who had been educated to the point of being able to read and write, but had not the leisure to develop any really cultivated sensibility. Tapdance is a kind of crippled transcendence.

But this, in a different sense from that meant by the austere kind of anti-modern modernism of Adorno and Greenberg, is precisely the point of tap. Tap dance reminds cinema of its origins in the turn-of-the-century vernacular of vaudeville, circus, carnival and other diffuse kinds of attractions and spectacles. In fact one can make out in the difference between the smooth aerial flights of a Fred Astaire and the earthier moves of a Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson. a rhyme with the struggle between the technical sophistication of the cinema in its developed form, and its lowlier, more vulgarly corporeal origins and appetites. The contrast between the clog-dancing rustic (black or Irish) and the sophisticated man-about-town testifies to a class ambivalence that is never quite resolved in tapdance, which always retains the traces of its ostentatiously corporeal origins, a kind of comic awkwardness that resists being lifted up into the condition of high art. Eleanor Powell relates how she had to say to a stiffly over-polite Astaire ‘ “Now listen. Fundamentally we’re hoofers, right? We are the act that opens first with the flea circus. You may be the great Mr. Astaire and all that, but we are still hoofers, so can we get down to “Ellie” and “Fred?” ’ (Ames and Siegleman, 1977, xii). For all the air of sophistication of cinema’s headline exponents of tap dance, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers and Gene Kelly, tap dance reminds cinema of its origin in the display of novelties and curiosities – the ‘cinema of attractions’, as, following Tom Gunning, it has come to be called (Gunning 1986; Strauven 2006). Cutting athwart its slick syncopations, tap dance always acts like a kind decomposition of cinema to its elements of sound and movement, most importantly in its play with the mechanisation of human bodies. Tap dance therefore provides an elementary form of cinema’s transaction between body and image, gravity and light.

Tap dance has another legacy from slavery, in the intense focus that it retains on labour. The gratuitous exhilaration of tap is always earned by toil and fatigue. Julian Marsh, the director in *Forty-Second Street*, famously barks at his cast: ‘We’re gonna rehearse for five weeks and we’re gonna open on scheduled time. – And I mean scheduled time. You’re gonna work and sweat and work some more. You’re gonna work days and you’re gonna work nights. And you’re gonna work between time

when I think you need it. You're gonna dance until your feet fall off and you're not able to stand up any longer. But five weeks from now, we're going to have a show!' Adorno is certainly right to see the leisure of tap dance grimly twinned with labour. And this labour is of an industrial kind, consisting of hours of regimented rehearsal – *Forty-Second Street* is built around the chorus-line, which emerged during the First World War, and reflects the simultaneous industrialisation of war and the militarisation of work. But this irony is not an accidental analogy, apparent only to the irony-attuned eye of the cultural theorist, for it is part of the *mythos* of tap, and is time and again explicitly thematised within it. The defining dichotomy of tap dance history, between Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly, the one willowy and elegantly effortless, with wrists as loose and flappy as his trousers, the other squat, thick-necked and athletically straining against his t-shirts, is really the separation of this pairing of the *sprezzatura* and the blue-collar work ethic. Cyd Charisse, who paired with both of them, summed up the difference when she said 'My husband always knew who I was rehearsing with when I came home at the end of a day at the studio. If I didn't have a mark, it was Astaire; if I was black and blue, it was Gene Kelly' (quoted Hill 2010, 155).

I remember being struck by hearing a veteran saying the reason she enjoyed tap-dancing was because it had more 'attack' than other forms of dance. I was impressed by this term, because, though it flaunted a certain kind of technicality, it also named something almost embarrassingly basic about tap-dance, namely the large amounts of aggression it displays and enables through its effecting of impacts and concussions. Though there are many dances in which formalised combats are acted out, there is no more immediate way of suggesting aggression than in bodily movements that mime actions of striking and impact. Much early tap dancing took the form of competitions, and the tap challenge gives tone to the sexual sparring between Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers that provides the unvarying template for the films they made together in the 1930s.

Tap and Matter

But this aggression is also visible in the relation between the dancer and the world of objects, and tap is more ambivalently entangled with matter than any other form of dance. Tap dancers repeatedly duet and duel with objects – Astaire's cane in *Top Hat*, Astaire's dance with shadows, those most cinematic of quasi-objects, in his homage to Mr Bojangles in *Swing Time* (1936), or Gene Kelly's dance with newspaper and a squeaky board in *Summer Stock* (1950). Where ballet aims to shrink and immaterialise the shoe, in the process metonymically disavowing the baseness of the foot, tap glorifies it, and the metal prostheses that, from around the end of the 1920s, began to be added to it. In fact, shoes themselves were not always needed. The tradition of tapdance rollerskating is perhaps initiated by the rollerskating sequence in Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), on which Fred Astaire and a rather wobbly Ginger Rogers elaborated in their version of George and Ira

Gershwin's 'Let's Call The Whole Thing Off' from *Shall We Dance* (1937), and Gene Kelly superbly topped in *It's Always Fair Weather* (1955).

Perhaps tap is the first dance form to transform clumsiness into artifice without wholly purging that clumsiness. Tap is full of bumbles and perilous flirtations with comically corporeal catastrophe. No matter how refined its techniques (and its discourse) may become, it can never entirely expunge its associations with the freakish, the decrepit, or the ridiculous. This is sometimes encoded in the contrast between the cretinously slurred shuffle, that fails to break with the surly bonds of earth, and the cleanly starched *pizzicati* of tap proper. The comedy of Wilson Keppel and Betty's sand dance depends a great deal upon this contrast between the shuffle and the tap. The OED rather sniffily defines 'tap-dancing' as 'a form of exhibition dancing characterized by rhythmical tapping of the toes and heels'. All forms of dancing involve some kind of exhibition, one might reasonably think, but it is certainly the case that tapdance is much more exhibitionist than other forms of dance. 'Tap dancing is nothing if not virtuosic', remarks Joseph Epstein, 'by which ugly and awkward word is meant, not to put too fine a point on it, showing off' (Epstein 2008, 63). And the exhibition involved often suggests a kind of mild monstrosity, the word monster being related to demonstration, as suggested by the scene from Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein* in which the education of the monster is proved by his capacity to perform a song-and-dance routine. There can be few dance forms in which disability or bodily anomaly can have been so prominent, marking the risible Bergsonian collision of the organic and the inorganic. In a publicity poster of 1892, T.F. Grant was described 'the champion one-legged clog dancer of the world' (Knowles 2002, 138). You could be forgiven for thinking that there would be limited competition for such a title, but you would be mistaken. One Robert Stickney danced on stilts, the Purcella Brothers appeared as convicts with their legs chained together, and Harper and Stencil performed a one-legged double act, their amputations, one of them missing a left leg, the other a right, being complementary (Knowles 2002, 140). The extra limb represented by the dancer's cane, and the recruitment to the dance of other parts of the body, such as hands and fingers (one performer won a tap dance contest by flipping into a handstand and patting out the finale with his palms) reflect a certain Sphinx-like uncertainty about the exact complement of limbs required to perform tap. The most astonishing exemplification of the link between impediment and tap is the career of Clayton 'Peg Leg' Bates. At the age of twelve, in 1919, he caught and injured his leg in a conveyor belt in the gin mill in which he was working; his leg was amputated on his own kitchen table. Bates, who was already a dancer, set about relearning how to dance with one leg, and built a career on Broadway in the 1930s, and subsequently on TV, making more than 20 appearances on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, which culminated in an astonishing tap challenge with Conrad Buckner in August 1965. Bates's opening number on TV would announce 'Folks my name is Clayton,/Peg Leg Bates to you/I'm always syncopating/And doing something new' (Hill 2010, 186), and he is said to have capitalised on the musical

possibilities of the ‘rhythmic combination of his deep-toned left-leg peg and the high-pitched metallic right-foot tap’ (Hill 2010, 186-7).

Tap dance is both closer to mechanism than any other mainstream dance and also, for what is in fact a closely related reason, highly individualistic. Tap seems designed to amplify the idiosyncrasies of individual physiologies, which not only resist the formalising disciplines of the dance, but are amplified by them. Many tap performers acted as their own choreographers, and there is an enormous premium in tap placed on the production of new and original steps. And yet, at the same time, there is no dance which has been so caught up in popular pedagogy, or so systematically taught and learned, as tap. We may say that tap involves a paradoxically simultaneous intensification both of the individual idiom and the stereotype, there being no form of dance to which the idea of the ‘routine’ seems to be more appropriate. The tapping part of tap is anonymous, abstract and impersonal. Bill Robinson used to challenge the judges in tap dance competitions to sit underneath the stage and try to distinguish the sounds made by his left and right feet. Tap aims for atomic exactitude and equivalence. Rather than from drawing on a spectrum of expressive moves, the versatility of tap is combinative, with moves being genetically modified by the addition or subtraction of molecular elements. Tap is automatic not just because it mimics mechanical procedures, but also because it isolates and amplifies those individualising automatisms, the subliminal twitches that distinguish individual bodies. Even Astaire’s canonical blending of ballroom, ballet and tap styles has been characterised as a kind of ‘outlaw’ style (Stearns 1979, 226). Tap dance is regulated eccentricity.

The matter and mechanisms with which tap traffics are, like tap itself, noisy. Jerry Ames and Jim Siegelman note the relation of adversary mimicry between tap and the increasingly cacophonous material world of the twentieth century. Tap dancers, they say, ‘want to blast out and express themselves in a blatant racket, They want to fight back against the roar of jets, the boom of factories, the whirr of air conditioners, the slamming of doors, the battering of jackhammers, the car horns, doorbells, telephones, stereos, barking dogs, alarm clocks, screaming babies, ambulance sirens, whistling teakettles, banging garbage can lids ... and dripping faucets in the night’ (Ames and Siegelman 1977, 20). Joel Dinerstein has placed the relation between the tap dancer and the mechanical world at the heart of his reading of popular dance in the interwar years. For Dinerstein, the tap dancer does not merely fight back with noise against noise; rather, he transforms noise, and in the process, himself: ‘the tap dancer was a vision of the industrial body retooled for a rootless, mobile future ... the tap dancer took the speeded-up machine-driven tempo of life and the metallic crunch of cities and factories and spun it all into a dazzling pyrotechnical display of speed, precision, rhythmic noise, continuity, grace, and power’ (Dinerstein 2003, 221-2). So, if in one sense, tap represents the iron entering the soul, with tap dancers ‘taking the industrial soundscape into their bodies’ (Dinerstein 2003, 228), this landscape is at once sublimated and humanised;

'tap's primary message is one of *industrial power under individual control*' (Dinerstein 2003, 223). Dinerstein's primary exhibit is the 'Slap That Bass' routine from *Follow the Fleet*, set in the engine room of an ocean liner, in which Fred Astaire is travelling to Europe in pursuit of Ginger Rogers. The point of the dance, for Dinerstein, is to show that '[a] human being is more *expressively* energetic than a machine. Unlike a machine, a human body can display grace, elegance, humor, surprise, spontaneity, and rhythmic control' (Dinerstein 2003, 243). But I think there may be more reciprocity than Dinerstein allows between the human and the inhuman engines. I think we can say that, if tap spiritualises matter, it may be with the cost, or profit, of a materialisation of spirit.

Tap Sounds

Tap dance of course involves a kind of self-accompaniment. A tap-dancer busking in a doorway does not need a boombox to draw the attention of passers-by, because the dance provides its own soundtrack. This is one of the most striking ways in which tap dance seems to recall the world of novelties, stunts and exploits rather than the arts of dance; providing your own soundtrack resembles the art of the one-man band. But if tap turns the body into an instrument, it is an acoustically very limited one, much more limited in fact than most percussion instruments, despite the claims sometimes made by jazz percussionists to have listened to tap dance for new ideas. Indeed, there was a movement in tap away from styles that emphasised the variety of percussive sounds – scrapes, slides and shuffles participating with stamps and tinging raps – towards a style in which the tap is reduced to ripples of dry, homogenous clicks. Cinema participates in this, in that early sound recording techniques were in any case inadequate to pick up and reproduce much timbre or resonance. The only forms of variation that tap really permits are in amplitude and speed: you can tap louder, or you can tap faster, and these two parameters seem to have an inverse ratio to one another – a loud stamp will usually slow the sound, or halt it altogether, while fast passages diminish the volume.

Ordinarily, to make any sound at all in dance is a kind of accident or transgression. Those who, like me, prefer to sit near the front to watch ballet, in order to catch the wafts of heat, and even the occasional whiff of animal effort, from all that whirling and leaping, are indulging a somewhat perverse desire to restore the density of the body to the weightless image, to apprehend the grossness of mass and matter in line and form. The grunts and pants, and the thump of the ballerina on the boards, are corporeal sound becoming the sound of corporeality itself, which the dance-image must strive to sublimate. Of course almost all dance is accompanied by sound, in the form of music, but the point of that sound is precisely to drown or displace the actual sounds of the moving body, thereby replacing accident with intention.

As Michel Chion has observed, there was almost no accidental or incidental sound in early cinema, the attention of sound engineers being focussed almost exclusively on the sound of speech and, in the case of musicals, of song and music. When trouble was taken to capture incidental sound, it almost always had a diegetic purpose, to focus the attention of the audience on some narrative element of the scene – a train pulling in to a station, the blare of a siren, the clink of a glass, or the creak of a door. Sound tends to act as a kind of acoustic captioning of significance, or, as we may as well say, it captions itself, as ‘the sound *of* (a door, a train, a busy street). By folding hearing exactly over seeing, sound doubles seeing, instructing the viewer to look at what they can see.

In one sense, tap conforms docilely to this economy, for it gives us the sound of dance, as though dance were being accorded some kind of authentically self-designating voice. Tapping says, tautologically, this is dance you’re seeing here, look at all this dancing you can see, just as the creaking door says, look here at this door you can see opening. But the sound of tap is also an anomaly within this economy, precisely because the only sound that dance is supposed to have is not endogenously made by it, but produced alongside it in the form of song or music. The sound that dance itself produces, as opposed to a sound which it accompanies, or to which it responds, is, in every other case than tap dance, the sound of accident or excess – the clatter of a fall, the growl or giggle at a mistake. In formalising these contingencies, tap dance is the essentialising or apotheosis of accident.

Synchronicities

The form of apparatus with which tap has its most insistent affinity is the semi-immaterial apparatus of cinema itself. This is most apparent in the play that tap, like cinema, effects between the divisible and the indivisible. These two principles are made to collude in the person of Astaire, who developed a highly distinctive blending of ballroom, with its long, sweeping, skating curves, and tap, with its sharp angularities, which chop up those contours into their elements. Astaire aims to bring the viewer to the tipping point between these two orders, as the divisible and individually audible forms of the tap come close to being indiscernible. The important factor here is speed. Astaire recalled that when he was a radio tap-dancer for *The Packard Hour* in 1935 the limitations of the microphone, meant that he had to perform on a mat four-feet square, which encouraged density and speed of taps rather than graceful and expressive movement (Dinerstein 2003, 224). Since it was not possible to hear leaps Astaire had to provide the show’s listener’s ‘a lot of taps close together – a string of ricky-ticky-ticky-tacky-tacky steps’ (quoted Stearns 1979, 224). Speed is correlated here not with movement, but with the simultaneous condensation and agitation of place. Speed becomes a principle of introversion, of an energy that turns in on and regenerates from itself. Speed both thickens matter,

and also pushes it towards immaterialisation – the blur of the propeller, or the illusion of matter in movement produced by the moving matter of cinema itself.

For the most important feature of tap is that, for all its demonstrative extravagance, it is designed to elude or outdo the eye. This kind of deception has been at the heart of tap dance; one early tap dancer was found to have hollowed out her heels and inserted bullets in the metal-lined cavities, to double up the taps. And many choreographed tap dances escape the eye of the camera in a more literal way, since the sound of the tapping is dubbed on after the performance. Ginger Rogers's tap steps were overdubbed by Hermes Pan (Panagiotopoulos), Fred Astaire's long-term choreographing partner. Eleanor Powell, who choreographed her own dances, also overdubbed them herself, not just to ensure her signature crispness of sound but also to allow her to wear more attractive shoes than she could otherwise have done. There were three stages in the recording process. After the dance had been developed in rehearsal, Powell would dance it silently on a mattress in the sound room while the orchestra recorded the music, to ensure that they had the right tempo. The dance would then be filmed, with the recording being played, but again only for synchronisation purposes, since no sound was recorded. Finally, Powell performed the dance again in a sound studio, on a wooden mat, so the tap steps could be added to the recording, and the three laminations, of dance, music and tap-sound at last locked together (Hill 2010, 129).

The question of integration is always to the fore in speaking and writing about dance numbers. Jerome Delamater argues that the song-and-dance number is an 'integration of the entire cinematic process' (Delamater 1981, 98). Yet the song always marks a more-or-less violent break of continuity in terms of plot, which many musicals attempt to overcome by making the characters dancers, or setting the story in a theatre in which lots of dancing is going on. Fred Astaire spoke in 1937 of the challenge of smoothing out this discontinuity:

I think the audience always slumps – even more in the movies than on the stage – when they hear an obvious dance cue, and both the picture and the dance seem to lose some of their continuity. Each dance ought to spring somehow out of character or situation. otherwise it is simply a vaudeville act (Eustis 1937, 381).

Astaire also reacted against the tendency for the camera to dance along with the dancer – 'Either the camera will dance, or I will', he said (Mueller 1986, 26) – and rehearsed his dances so intensively that they were able to be shot in one take:

In the old days...they used to cut up all the dances on the screen. In the middle of a sequence they would show you a close-up of the actor's face, or of his feet, insert trick angles taken from the floor, the ceiling, through lattice work or a maze of fancy shadows. The result

was that the dance had no continuity. The audience was far more conscious of the camera than the dance...I have always tried to run a dance straight through in the movies, keeping the full figure of the dancer, or dancers, in view and retaining the flow of the movement intact. In every kind of dancing, even tap, the movement of the upper part of the body is as important as that of the legs. (Eustis 1937, 378-9).

And yet, tap always cuts into this smooth suture, asserting the order of the discontinuous over that of the continuous. Discontinuity is never overcome, if only because, the more thoroughly the big dance number may integrate all the elements of cinema, the more discontinuous it will then seem with the rest of the movie which does not exhibit the same saturation of elements. Within cinema, we suddenly break into pure and integrated, but for that very reason, also abstract, 'cinema' *en-soi*. Michel Chion points to tap-dance numbers in 1930s monaural cinema as displays of sonic fusion or 'a continuum among words, music and noises', suggesting that nowadays, by contrast, 'everything tends to separate sounds from each other: their distribution on several tracks, their precision, the contrastive gaps and the silent holes between them, etc. In any case, we no longer believe in a rhythmic unity of the world. We live in a world where the rhythms are superimposed without dissolving' (Chion n.d.). In fact, Chion here seems to be describing very aptly the tendency of tap, which is to produce a sort of superfluous, or unintegrated sound which is always a sort of sonic surplus to the audio-visual composite, and right from the very beginning.

Tap is concerned, not just with the world of matter, but also with the kind of materialised temporality that Bergson found exemplified in the cinematographic apparatus. For Bergson, this materialisation took the form of discontinuity introduced distortingly into the 'suppleness and variety of life' and the 'inner becoming of things' (Bergson 1911, 305, 306). Tap dance provides such a striking exemplification of this materialising discontinuity because it is a matter of *numbers*. All dance involves counting, and the greater the number of dancers, in the hugely expanded chorus-lines of the 1930s, for example, and the greater the intricacies of synchronisation required, the more exacting considerations of number and quantity became. Given the way in which tap seems to produce its own accompanying sound-track, as it were auto-synchronising its own movements with finite numbers of divisible beats, tap might be said to be the apotheosis of corporeal number. Itself reducible to number, it can be seen as a way of reducing contour, flow and quality to pure quantity or enumeration. More than other kinds of dance, tap is full of counting. Biographical accounts of tap dancers like Fred Astaire and Eleanor Powell emphasise the fanatical austerity of their work ethic, usually rendered in time-and-motion terms of the number of hours put in each day. It is apt that the most basic step in tap is known as the 'time-step'. The pursuit of dizzying speed in tap-dance produced an obsession with counting the number of taps that

performers could produce in a given time, as though it were an athletic event rather than an art form. Ann Miller took on the expert typist Ruth Myers in a radio speed contest in 1946, and out-tapped her at 627 taps a minute as against Myers's 584 (Frank 1990, 246), while the world record for tap-speed (Hill 2010, 143), established in 1973 by Roy Castle, at over 1400 taps a minute, works out intriguingly at around 24 taps a second, the same as the standard frame-rate of cinema. There is no dance which corresponds as closely as tap to Walter Benjamin's characterisation of cinema as detonating 'the dynamite of the tenth of a second' (Benjamin 1969, 236).

Clickety-click

The sound of the click became ubiquitous in the early twentieth century. It marked the possibility of the abrupt and absolute alternation from an off state to an on, a new experience made possible by the switch, and transferred quickly to psychological states: William James evokes in 1880 a 'state of *consent* [in which] the passage from the former state to it..is..characterized by the mental 'click' of resolve'. But the click exhibited and effected the many forms of synchronicity that modern coordinated life required. The synchronised sound of the cinema comes late in a process whereby the things and processes of the world were increasingly required to be got, and kept 'in step', as we say, with each other. But synchronicity was allied to, perhaps in a certain sense produced, its apparent opposite, namely syncopation. Synchronicity and syncopation, the on- and the off-beat, were themselves synchronised, as Adorno's snarls about the ersatz pseudo-surprises of jazz syncopation seem to make clear. Not only were devices and mechanisms subject to temporal regulation, they became, so to speak, timepieces. Everything told the time, and kept the beat, in a literalisation of Bertrand Russell's explanation in his *ABC of Relativity* (1925), that

[t]here is no longer a universal time which can be applied without ambiguity to any part of the universe; there are only the various 'proper' times of the various bodies in the universe, which agree approximately for two bodies which are not in rapid motion, but never agree exactly except for two bodies which are at rest relatively to each other.(Russell 2005, 39).

It was the century, not just of time, but, more specifically, of *timing*. Tap dance required tight synchronisation, but might also be seen (and heard), as a kind of auto-synchronisation of film. Indeed, the 1930s marked the development of two devices for synchronising sound and music that seem to have a family resemblance to tap dance: the clapperboard, whose sharp spike of sound was easily detectible in the sound-track, and what became known as a 'click track', in which holes would be punched in the optical soundtrack at specified intervals (once every 24 frames

would give 60 bpm), which, when light shone through it, produced a sharply audible click on the soundtrack.

For all its fierce energy, tap aligns itself with the electronic mechanisms of the second industrial revolution rather than the thumping shafts and pistons of the first. Even the engine room in which Astaire dances in *Follow the Fleet* seems more like an art-deco office than the sooty Satanic mill we might expect. Tap dance is a magical transfiguration of the phenomenology of the click that became so ubiquitous in the early twentieth century. It plays variations on the clicking of typewriters, of telegraphic morse code, telephone receivers and exchanges, sewing machines, cash registers, calculators, tickertape, and the ticking of the time bomb (a word that is first recorded in print in 1893). It evokes the rattle of railway tracks, the clicking of switches and operating devices of all kinds, most notably the clicking of the camera shutter, and anticipates the eras of Geiger counters and mouseclicks. Its speed reminds us of the many forms of rotary motion that accelerate the click into the whirr or rattle, the pleasantly rasping dials of telephones, or in fans, propellers, or cinema projectors. The increasing commonness of precisely-engineered artefacts, like buttons and boxes, and locks and catches that snapped open or shut, and materials like plastic that clicked easily together, made the click stand for the sense of rightness or exactness of fit: Yeats wrote in 1935 that '[t]he correction of prose, because it has no fixed laws, is endless, a poem comes right with a click like a closing box'. But clicking also suggests accident, maladjustment or damage, whether in the clicks of radio interference, usually caused by the sparking of electrical equipment like the connectors of trams, or lightning' or in the click of the damaged record or broken gramophone; the shufflings of tap are perhaps allotropes of the 'chuff chuff chuff' of the idling gramophone in Woolf's *Between the Acts* (Woolf 1980, 110).

The confluence of music, timing and number is registered in an oblique way in Joyce's novel written at the dawn of the jazz age, *Ulysses*, which features Tom Rochford's mechanical gadget for automatically displaying the number of a turn at the music hall for late-comers, literalising the idea of a musical 'number'.

Tom Rochford took the top disk from the pile he clasped against his claret waistcoat.

– See? he said. Say it's turn six. In here, see. 'Turn Now On.

He slid it into the left slot for them. It shot down the groove, wobbled a while, ceased, ogling them: six ...

– See? he said. See now the last one I put in is over here: 'Turns Over. The impact. Leverage, see?

He showed them the rising column of disks on the right.

– Smart idea, Nosey Flynn said, snuffling. So a fellow coming in late can see what turn is on and what turns are over. (Joyce 2008, 222-3)

This scene occurs in the episode known as ‘Wandering Rocks’, in which Joyce coordinates the movements across Dublin of a number of characters. Famously, he asked friends to pace out certain routes through Dublin to time them, and is said to have written the chapter with a stopwatch at his side. In fact, the whole of *Ulysses* might be regarded not just as ‘manipulating ‘a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity’, as Eliot famously said (Eliot 1975, 177), but as an exercise in orchestrating complex synchronicities – centred on the newspaper, that great synchronising device beloved of kidnappers. *Ulysses* parallels the odysseys of its two characters with the irregular passage out to sea of a flyer advertising the arrival of an evangelical preacher that Bloom tosses into the river Liffey, but it plays similar games of pooh-sticks with the different itineraries of persons and objects through the day. What is more, *Ulysses* might be said to feature its own version of the click-track, in the regular tippings and tappings that seem to mark off the passage of time through the novel. Some of them are associated with the ‘blind stripling’ whose cane is heard and imagined tapping his way through the streets of Dublin: ‘Queer idea of Dublin he must have, tapping his way round by the stones’ (Joyce 2008, 173), thinks Bloom when he first sees him. He, or rather the sound of his progress, is used to synchronise the music in the ‘Sirens’ episode of the novel, in which Bloom sits in the Ormond Bar listening to music – ‘Tap blind walked tapping by the tap the curbstone tapping, tap by tap’. In fact, 44 of the 100 or so appearances of the word ‘tap’ in *Ulysses* occur in these rhythmic punctuations of the ‘Sirens’ episode, culminating in a Lear-like sequence of 8 of them in a paragraph of its own – ‘Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap’ (Joyce 2008, 277). These sounds also modulate in the ‘Sirens’ episode into the sexually predatory rat-a-tat of Blazes Boylan on the door of Eccles Street – ‘One rapped on a door, one tapped with a knock, did he knock Paul de Kock with a loud proud knocker with a cock carracarracarra cock. Cockcock’ (Joyce 1008, 271) – as well as into Bloom’s conjugations of erotic tipping and tugging – ‘Tipping her tepping her tapping her topping her. Tup’ (Joyce 2008, 273) There is a great deal of tapping elsewhere in the novel, including tapping with a fan and rolled up newspaper, as well as the heeltaps of Bella dancing in the brothel. Bloom has a fondness for this elementary sound-particle, using the expression ‘tiptop’ for example, repeatedly through the novel. It is a fondness which Joyce seems to have shared, for he punctuates the text of *Finnegans Wake* with the word ‘tip’, which often seems to indicate the mechanical pecking of a hen, for example in the jaunty, jiggerpokery rhythms of a passage describing the unearthing of a document or photograph (as it might be, the *Wake* itself) from a midden:

Well, almost any photoist worth his chemicots will tip anyone asking him the teaser that if a negative of a horse happens to melt enough while drying, well, what you do get is, well, a positively grotesquely distorted macromass of all sorts of horsehappy values and masses of meltwhile horse. Tip. Well, this freely is what must have occurred to our missive (there's a sod of a turb for you! please wisp off the grass!)

unfiltered from the boucher by the sagacity of a lookmelittle likemelong hen. Heated residence in the heart of the orangeflavoured mudmound had partly obliterated the negative to start with, causing some features palpably nearer your pecker to be swollen up most grossly while the farther back we manage to wiggle the more we need the loan of a lens to see as much as the hen saw. Tip. (Joyce 1971, 111-12)

If tap dance may perhaps be regarded as another of the forms of automatism that so fascinated psychologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it may also be associated with the more spasmodic kinds of click involved in the Touretter's tic. The association of dance and mania is, of course, strongly established, for example in the epidemic of tarantella that swept across Europe in the 16th century, and the forms of dyskinesia, or uncontrolled but rhythmic movement, characteristic of different forms of what is medically known as chorea, such as Sydenham's Chorea, or St Vitus Dance. The style of grotesque dancing, as practised by performers such as Henry 'Rubberlegs' Williams which involved unpredictable movements of legs, and evolved into forms like the Charleston, was often called 'legomania' (and, oddly, came to be associated with Russian and Hungarian dancing). Though behavioural automatisms like humming, clapping and twitching of limbs have frequently been observed in epileptic seizures, it is perhaps surprising that no explicit association between tapping and epilepsy has been made until a paper of 2011 by a group of physicians at the Royal Hallamshire Hospital. The authors report that a 60-year-old right-handed woman with a history of temporal lobe epilepsy developed a pattern of behaviour during seizures that included 'stereotyped and extremely complex musical automatisms in the form of tap dancing. Interestingly, there was no social history of learned dancing; dance had never been a hobby or pastime to any significant degree in earlier life'. There is no suggestion of elaborate routines being danced, and the tap dancing really seems to have consisted in nothing more developed than 'rhythmic leg and foot tapping' (Barker et. al. 2011, 151).

Tap dance is possessed of an energy and a joyous vitality that few dances can match. The underlying principle of tap, says Joseph Epstein 'was solely joie de vivre, simple happy bloody joy in living...The physical delight in dance was the thing, and to hell with the conscience of the king' (Epstein 2008, 175). But the infectiousness of this energy is a sign also of its strange rootlessness, the fact that it circulates so ceaselessly between bodies, objects, mechanisms, sounds and images, coming to rest nowhere. The energy of which tap is possessed possesses and dispossesses it. Tap is an image and enactment of our manifold forms of entanglement with modern machineries of ardour, labour and delight.

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