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Dancing is a big deal these days. The Swedish television channel TV4 is running a second successful season of *Let's Dance*, a dance contest where celebrities pair up with professional dancers. The format has been adapted by a number of European TV companies as well; the BBC adaptation is called *Strictly Come Dancing*, and the fourth season has just ended. Ballroom Dancing developed into Competitive Ballroom Dancing in the 30s and 40s; today it's called DanceSport. In 1997, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) accepted DanceSport as a sport. However, given the present trend to decrease the number of disciplines in the Medal Programme, DanceSport is not likely to be included; on its website, the DanceSport Federation laconically states that "The IDSF Train to Olympia is no *Expresstrain!*". The development of ballroom dancing into DanceSport is the subject of Caroline Jean S. Picart's *From Ballroom to DanceSport: Aesthetics, Athletics, and Body Culture* (SUNY Press); at times with unnecessarily complicated scientific language, according to our reviewer Sanna Nordin, but throughout reliable, knowledgeable and insightful.

## From Ballroom to DanceSport: There are Many Ways of Knowing

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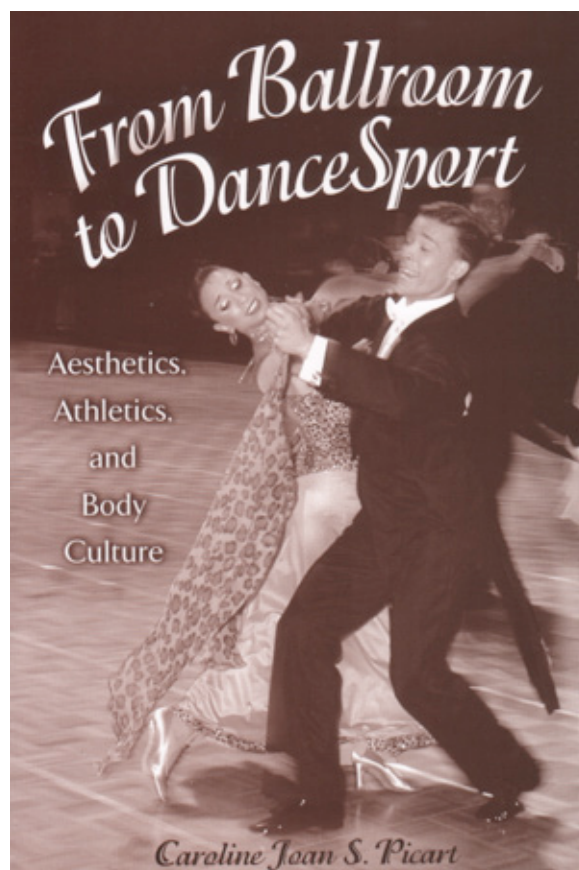
### **From Ballroom to DanceSport: Aesthetics, Athletics, and Body Culture**

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Social Relations)

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When I was sent *From Ballroom to DanceSport: Aesthetics, Athletics, and Body Culture*, I thought that it would be a fairly easy book to review, particularly given it's relatively small size (only 119 pages in the main text). However, the different backgrounds and viewpoints of the author (Picart) and myself meant that it was not as easy as first assumed. In a way, this is interesting in itself, for both Picart and I share an academic as well as a participatory interest in ballroom/DanceSport, and we both have a mixed dance background. Thus, one might assume that we are similar enough to analyse, write and read about dance in reasonably similar ways. On the side of difference, however, is her use of an impressive range of research and analysis methods, as contrasted by my own training that is limited to sport and dance science. Therefore, I want to point out immediately that my review is written from the perspective of someone engaged in dance psychology research; I hope that this does not limit the review too



much, but instead simply illustrates it through a different perspective.

The book aims to ‘? explore ballroom dancing and its more “sporty” equivalent, DanceSport, suggesting that they are reflective of larger social, political, and cultural tensions.’ (Back cover). To do so, Picart draws heavily on her own experience, and combines it with analyses of ballroom/DanceSport in the media, including in films and advertisements. Moreover, she employs not only autobiographical but also phenomenological, autoethnographical, and what to me seems like sociological and philosophical forms of analysis. As such, Picart cleverly integrates multiple sources of information into a coherent picture. How adeptly she taps into each tradition I will leave for people more trained in these than myself to judge, but it is in my view a strength of the book. In particular, it provides an unusual insight into many of the less obvious facets of ballroom/DanceSport. Indeed, while I at times felt that the book lacked ‘harder’ scientific information to back up its claims, it also struck me that the more traditional scientific method lacks this drawing upon information from multiple sources. The phrase ‘there are many ways of knowing’ popped up in my head rather quickly after starting to read the book, and stayed with me throughout my read. Therefore, I would recommend the book to anyone who is interested in ballroom/DanceSport, who is interested in mixing qualitative research traditions, and for those not afraid of delving deeply into ‘heavy qualitative research language’. What I mean by that is that a sometimes unfortunate side effect of the research traditions employed by Picart is the use of really rather difficult language and jargon. For example, she somehow manages to use the word *diegetic* twice in one sentence (I am hoping that I am not the only one who hadn’t ever seen this word before – [Wikipedia informed me that diegesis is](#) “The [fictional] world in which the situations and events narrated occur”. *Similarly, words and phrases like ‘politico-cultural chiaroscuro’, ‘inside-outsideness’, ‘liminal realm’ and ‘metaphorical cyborg’ sometimes threatened to lose me completely.*

Fortunately, the writing style is not quite so mind-boggling throughout the book, and my lasting impression is that I had learned quite a bit about ballroom/DanceSport by the time I had finished (for example, did you know that to gain medal status as a sport in the Olympics, DanceSport will have to demonstrate that participants come from at least 75 countries on 4 continents?). Also, the book opened my eyes to the array of information sources available for study if one truly wants to delve into and understand a topic. Her analysis of ballroom-themed films, for example, is insightful and illustrative. Together with other sources of information, such as advertising, interviews, observation, and her own experiences, she argues that ballroom and its transition into DanceSport is a context that should be questioned and understood from multiple perspectives: this includes the art-sport distinction, and issues relating to gender, politics, sex, race and class. For example, she illustrates how traditional gender roles are very much preserved in the various dances, even though the modern dances (e.g. waltz, foxtrot) are very different from the Latin dances (e.g. cha cha cha, rumba). That is, men are ‘leaders’ and women are ‘followers’, the former typically dressed in ‘hypermasculinized’ black and the latter typically dressed in ‘super-feminine’ ethereal dresses (in ballroom/modern) and similarly ‘super-feminine’ but sexy dresses (in Latin). Moreover, the class and race issues are intricately linked but similarly stereotyped in the aristocratic, white ideals of the modern dances and the contrasting ideals of the Hispanic/Latin dances of lower-class origin. One could probably debate these issues forever, and I do not actually agree with all of her observations; nevertheless, she usefully introduces a number of issues and their interplay, illustrating that they should not be forgotten or ignored.


Of greatest interest to me, coming from a sport and dance science background, was the chapter ‘paving the road to the Olympics’. Here, Picart gives a very interesting account of the various turns and controversies surrounding the long-debated issue of whether DanceSport should be an Olympic medal event. Given her experience in both social ballroom and in competitive DanceSport, she provides authoritative insight into the various advantages and disadvantages of this ‘sportification’, as well as a rich source of information for those searching for arguments to support either side. In fact, it should be noted that another strength of the book is its bibliography as well as filmography.

In conclusion then, *From Ballroom to DanceSport: Aesthetics, Athletics, and Body Culture* is an interesting, thought-provoking read for those interested in the art-sport distinction as well as the complex interaction between more hidden issues such as gender, sex, race and class. In describing these issues, Picart unfortunately at times risks losing readers in philosophical jargon. At the same time, it is precisely this wide-ranging and impressive background of the author and her use of multiple sources of material that makes the book both unique and interesting – because there are many ways of knowing.

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