

What Happened to Dance?

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Abstract

Dance is the art of movement. Contemporary choreography is concerned with dance making in an ever-expanding field: shifting environments, circumstances, and perspectives. As the traditional understanding of dance is questioned by new concerns and innovative practices, the new artistic strategies challenge the very specificities of dance (how we know it or how it is perceived by general audience) and affect, in return, the body, the dance, the practice of choreography and the experience of the viewers. In the present article I explore the transformations that occurred in the understanding of the body-movement bond with echoes in making, performing and reception of dance. I will refer only to the Western contemporary dance (Europe and USA), from beginning of the 20th century to the present day.

Keywords: body, movement, dance, kinaesthesia, modern and post-modern dance, contemporary choreography.

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Introduction

Author Andre Lepecki reports, in the introduction of his book *Exhausting Dance. Performance and the politics of movement*, a rather interesting situation: in the summer of 2004 the International Dance Festival Dublin was sued by a civil party, let's call him Mr M, for displaying nudity in a performance and because "there was nothing in the performance (he) would describe as dance, which he defined as people moving rhythmically, jumping up and down, usually to music (but not

always) and conveying some emotion” (2006, p. 2).

Then, in the same Introduction Andre Lepecki talks about an article from *New York Times* published in 2000 by the Senior Dance Editor Anna Kisseloff that expressed her concern regarding the future of dance. To her perception, the general state of dance is characterised by *stop and go* practices, in which the flow or the continuum of movement are constantly menaced by permanent *hiccups* in choreographies.

What happened to dance or where is the dance are two of the most frequent questions that I have encountered from an audience attending a contemporary dance performance in the last 20 years. The situations presented above state a sort of *betrayal* of dance and choreography by its practitioners, a valid assumption if we were to exclude the shifts dance underwent in the last century. These transformations are to be taken into consideration within the inquiry of what dance is or might become. And the main aspect to be addressed refers to transformations of the body-movement bind.

Rethinking the relations between body and movement

In the 20th century the body became a catalyst of attention and a site of investigations for sociologists, anthropologists and philosophers. The discourses around the body multiplied and doubled by the increasing discussions in academic and cultural areas opened the pathway for the “emergence of the body project” (Thomas, 2003, p. 15) at the begging of the 20th century, a project that will be developed even more extensively in the late modernity. The body as a topic for social and cultural analyses started to gain a privileged position with the realisation that “the ontological centrality of human embodiment is a site of universality” (Turner, 1991, as cited in Thomas, 2003, p. 16), that is to say all human beings are and have bodies, and “the ways in which the body is viewed and treated reflects the rules and values inscribed in the social order” (Thomas, 2003, p. 19).

As the body project started to gain traction, different authors developed *body models* to account for the emerging aspects of the body in relation to the world. Nancy Scheper Hughes and Margaret Lock, in the article *The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology* written in 1987, proposed a *three bodies typology*: the individual, the social and the political. The individual body refers to the lived subjective experience of the body, the social refers to the way in

which the body is used in systems of representation as a symbol of nature, culture, and society, while the political body (echoing Michel Foucault) refers to the regulation and control of bodies. John O'Neill in the book *Five Bodies: The Human Shape of Modern Society* in 1985 proposes a *five bodies model* consisting of the world's body, the medical body, the consumer body, added to the social and the political bodies. The world's body refers to the human tendency to anthropomorphise the cosmos, the consumerist body refers to the commodification of bodily needs, while the medical body refers to the fact that, with the development of new technologies, the body becomes an object of medical scrutiny.

Conceptualized as a natural object, the body has registered psychic and social forces, it has conveyed unknown realms of experience. As a mechanism, the body has constituted a topic of research insofar as it houses diseases, aberrations and frailties, it demonstrates reflexive and instinctual responses, or it reflects the results of programs of training that transform it into athlete, actor, soldier or dancer. As a metaphor for the unknown and mysterious forces, the body has stood for the unconscious, desire, libidinal impulses or irrational actions. As a bearer of cultural symbols, the body has been aligned with the feminine, the decorative, the pleasurable or the fashionable. In each of these capacities, the body is constructed as an index of forces that act upon and through it. (Foster, 1995, p. 201)

Parallel to these theories, studies conducted in the analysis of non-verbal communication shifted the idea that body movement follow or punctuate speech patterns. Birdwhistell, using Rudolf Laban notational system¹ demonstrates that "body motion is a separate channel of communication, that stands in a structural relation to the other channels" (2010, as cited in Thomas, 2003, p. 26) that is to say one could no longer neglect the expressive resources of the body.

To the bodies models referred above, the expressive body in dance is an

¹ Labanotation is a system of movement notation developed by the choreographer and movement theorist Rudolf Laban in 1928. The analysis of human movement is focused on the positions of the body parts, the temporal qualities of movement and the body's paths through space. Laban's work generated two distinct notation systems – one that recorded the body's changes in position and the timing of those changes and the other that stressed upon the effort and flow of movement. Labanotation uses abstract symbols to define the direction and level of the movement, the body parts doing the movement, duration and the dynamic quality of the movement.

absolute add on. For the act of dancing, for both performers and viewers, is not simply the product of personal preferences, but “is constituted in and through our lived experiences in a variety of contexts and events – social and theatrical” (Cohen Bull, 1997, p. 267). An artistic event is a web of meanings created through expressive movements, and it can undergo both an “external” and an “internal” analysis: dance can be both an occasion for commenting on external factors (social, cultural, political) and an internal, sensual, experiential experience. The expressive body in dance explores the relations between what we feel (the sensible) and what we think or know (the intelligible). For the dancer the physical sensations of the body in movement are an essential part of the experience of dance, and this may also be the case for the audience. The kinaesthetic sense of the audience, depending on how near they are to the performers, means that they are able to sense the lived presence of the performer. It is here where the first situation described in the beginning of this paper falls into consideration. *Moving rhythmically and conveying some emotion* is to be understood through the concept of metakinesis, introduced by the author John Martin in his book *The Modern Dance*. For Martin the substance of dance is movement, as movement is a medium “for the transference of an aesthetic and emotional concept from the consciousness of one individual to that of the other” (Martin, 2002, p. 298).

The physical movement of the body and the psychic accompaniment of it - metakinesis - are the denominations of a single underlying reality: the authentic experience of the dancer and of the audience, that points towards a personal, individualized narrative in dance.

I feel that the dance is a language which is inherent but slumbering in every one of us. It is possible for every human to experience the dance as an expression in his own body and in his own way. (...) Dance is one of the many human experiences which cannot be suppressed. (...) The same desire for artistic liberation, for exaltation, for personal ecstasy, for bodily movement, in short, for activating his own imagination is also present in the non - professional dancer. (Wigman, 2002, pp. 402-403)

For the spectator of International Dance Festival Dublin the bond between movement, emotion and kinaesthesia is *the must* of every dance/choreography. The authentic movement, the *inner necessity* of the dancer/choreographer, the

individual experience are externalized thought the intuition of the dancer/choreographer, the process of feeling with a sensitive body in an aesthetic form must provoke a reaction in the beholder. There is a causal relation between the dancer's feeling, the movement and the emotions that are evoked in the spectator.

One moves out of a feeling. And because one is moved by a certain feeling while watching dance, the movement must be expressing that feeling. Movement is predicated on the body that feels. And because it arouses the feeling in its beholder (...) it idealizes the body as the locus of truth (Cvejic, 2015, p. 165). This would be the doxa of the modern dance thinking and I would extend it to the present day in contemporary dance.

But the empathic bound between the dancer and the audience should be looked upon critically. Studies in contemporary neuroscience, cognitive science, audience qualitative research and even in dance practices contest the uniting experience between the performer and the audience.

The claim – that dance is born from self – expression based on a personal feeling that binds the spectator to it by way of empathy – operates as an ideology in contemporary dance. It promotes the ideas of freedom and individualism, which – understood as an emotional experience of one's own body and its freedom in movement – are traded as a value that dance holds for its audience. (Cvejic, 2015, p. 163)

As dance enters post-modernism, a divergence from the modern dance tradition occurs, and art's domain is not to be found anymore exclusively in the production of affects and sensations. And although these products are to be shared with the audience, they must not be confused or mistaken as the property of the attenders.

The *stop and go* practices reported by Senior Dance Editor Anna Kisseloff need to be understood in the context of post - modern dance tendencies. By the late 1950s, modern dance became a recognizable dance genre. And, as a reaction to this, the Judson Church Theatre post - modern choreographers (Steve Paxton, Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Deborah Hay, etc) proposed a radical change in their approach to choreography – they wanted to reconceive the medium of dance. This change is rooted in Merce Cunningham's emphasis on dancing for its

own sake, without any emotional or psychological determination: “what you have in my work is the dancing itself” (2002, p. 169).

Reacting against modern dance which connected movement with emotion and self-expression, the post - modern aesthetic in dance challenged the purpose, motivations and structures in dance. Yvonne Rainer’s famous NO Manifesto² from 1965 stood as a strategy for demystifying dance and making it objective. It was a strategy of aesthetic denial, a breakdown of the distinction between art and life, in the sense that real life movements provided the material for art. Is dance making an act of construction or a process of decision making? What sort of movement can qualify as dance? What is the nature of dance? Were the questions to be answered thought dance. Sports, games, scores, walking, running, everyday gestures were presented as dances. Dance was dance not because of its content, but because of its context, because it was presented as such. The body itself became the subject of dance, rather than an expressive instrument or a symbol.

In the analytic post - modern dance, movement became objective as it was distanced from personal expression through the use of scores, bodily attitudes that suggested work or other ordinary movement, verbal commentaries, and tasks. Tasks were a way of introducing impersonal, concentrated, real movement – goal oriented in the immediate sense. (Banes, 1987, p. xxi)

Choreographers deliberately used untrained performers in their search for *the natural body*, a body that could potentially foreground the movement per se. Striving towards objectivity, a down to earth style, a casual and cool attitude (“it is what it is”) post - modern dance (especially the 1970s aesthetics) still continues to inform choreographic works today.

The permanent hiccups in choreographies, dance’s identity – as being in a flow, a continuum of movement – is one more time put to the test with the emergence of conceptual European wave of choreographers in the 1990s (Xavier le Roy, Jerome Bel, Vera Mantero, La Ribot, etc) and their urge to create new

² Yvonne Rainer’s NO Manifesto: NO to spectacle, no to virtuosity, no to transformations and magic and make believe, no to the glamour and transcendancy of the star image, no to the heroic, no to the anti-heroic, no to trash imagery, no to involvement of the performer or spectator, no to style, no to camp, no to seduction of the spectator by the wiles of the performer, no to eccentricity, no to moving or being moved

possibilities for thinking relationships between bodies, subjectivities, politics and movement. *The embodiment of thought*³ that stands at the centre of these explorations refers to the reconfiguration of the relationship between body and movement, that brings about a reframing of the understanding of the body (as an open entity, “a dynamic system of exchange, constantly producing modes of subjection and control, as well as resistance and becoming” (Lepecki, 2006, p. 5)) and of the movement in terms of what a body can do or as charged presence. The acts of repetition, stillness and language introduced as non-kinetic forces are intrinsic to choreography and thus “hunt its conditions of possibility at least as powerful as the desire to move” (Lepecki, 2006, p. 6). *The slower ontology of dance* (Gaston Bachelard) refers to the tendency of conceptual dance to disrupt the stability of forms, to refuse the aesthetics of shapes, lines and emotions and instead to privilege the critique of representation. The body proposed by these artists is

a visceral matter as well as a socio-political agent, discontinuous with itself, dissident of time. (...) Dance as critical theory and critical praxis proposes a body that is less an empty signifier (executing preordained steps as it obeys blindly the structures of command) but a material, socially inscribed agent, a non – univocal body, an open potentiality. (Lepecki, 2004, p. 6)

A system of intensities, I might add.

Conclusions

The last two decades of the European contemporary dance have been characterized by the conceptualization of artistic methods and of the medium of the dancing body, reinventing relations between the body and the movement. By rethinking this relationship distinctive concepts rise, that influence not only the making and the performing, but also the act of viewing/attending. Such a rupture engenders a shock upon the audience’s sensibility, one that renders many aspects of these contemporary choreographic performances hard to grasp, to identify, recognize or

³ The term refers to the neutral corporality deployed by the choreographer Jerome Bel in his performances and was first introduced by the author Una Bauer in the article *The Movement of Embodied Thought. The Representation Game of the Stage Zero of Signification in Jerome Bel*, Performance Research: A Journal of The Performing Arts, published on the site www.tea-tron.com.

accommodate within the horizon of the audience's expectations. Once the natural, organic regime between body and movement has been broken, by reducing the kinetic spectacle of the body (conceptual dance), by introducing *ordinary* movements (post-modern dance) or by constructing artificial conjunctions between body and movement (contemporary choreography), and furthermore with the development of technology (where movement can be delinked from the body) the body - movement synthesis is disrupted, and therefore needs to be reinvented or constructed. Philosopher Boyan Manchev refers to the present tendencies in contemporary dance with the term *transformance* and argues that the term could designate a new form of dance and performance, as it refers to the constant stepping beyond the borders of what we know, accessing the unlimited potentialities of dance. Maybe the question to be asked today is no longer what a body can do in terms of movement, but what a body is, thus "opening the potentiality of a body as pure manifestation of its freedom, without any end" (Manchev, 2012, p. 126).

The question proposed as the title of this article could be read in a double sense. In the negative aspect to *what happened to dance* I would add *as we know it*. In the positive aspect I would stress upon the cumulative changes and the effects of these changes upon the choreographic thinking, making and presenting. It is only natural for a live art to change its looks, its interests, its paradigms, its questions and answers. It is only natural for the audience to resist, critique, accept or embrace these changes.

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