

## On Bodies in Motion: New Perspectives in Contemporary Choreography

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**Abstract:** The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought about intense debates among artists, curators, and theoreticians on what choreography is or what it could become. A wide range of critical positions point towards the necessity of a reflective context in which the relation between the body and the movement should be discussed, questioned, revisited. By rethinking this relations new distinctive perspectives on choreography are encouraged and produced. Contemporary choreography is concerned with the body in motion in an ever-expanding field of disciplines, which brings about a multitude of shifting attitudes, and connects it with a wider range of discourses in the contemporary culture. As the traditional understanding of dance is questioned by innovative practices, the new choreographic modes and strategies challenge the very specificities of dance and affect, in return, the body on stage, its relation with motion and the choreographic discourse. The present article explores the transformations the occurred in the understanding of the body and its relation to movement (as choreography traditionally is recognized as the art of organizing the movement of the bodies and the bodies in movement in space and time) with echoes in making, performing and the reception of dance. My argument will take into account the contributions of some artists, researchers and theoreticians that, in the last 20 years or so, have been engaged in redefining choreographic practices and research, as I will reflect on these diverse contributions which innovated and revitalised the discourse around and about contemporary choreography.

**Keywords:** body, movement, dance, embodiment, contemporary choreography, post - dance

Dance has always been inextricably connected with the bodies in motion. Author Andre Lepecki reports, in the introduction of his book *Exhausting Dance. Performance and the politics of movement*, a rather interesting situation<sup>1</sup>: in the summer of 2004 the International Dance Festival Dublin was sued by a civil party (Mr Raymond Whitehead) for displaying nudity in a performance by Jerome Bel and

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<sup>1</sup> The Festival was sued for the amount of 38.000 euros on the grounds that it misled the audience regarding to what was presented as a dance performance, but did not contain a single dance step. On the contrary, it was only annoying, shocking and disgusting and it traumatized Mr Whitehead to such extent that he wasn't able to attend theatre since that incident. The Festival paid a 10.000 euros legal fees and the case was dismissed in 2004.

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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” (Lepecki, 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 numerous *hiccups* in choreographies. The situations presented above were thought to state a sort of *betrayal*<sup>2</sup> of dance and choreography by its practitioners that characterises contemporary choreography.

The act of dancing, for both performers and viewers, is never simply the product of personal preferences, but “is constituted in and through our lived experiences in a variety of contexts and events” (Bull in Desmond, 1997, p.267). An artistic event is a net of meanings created through movement, 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 dynamic 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. It is here where the first situation described in the beginning of this paper falls into consideration. *Moving rhythmically and conveying some emotion* corresponds to what traditionally we recognize as dance - the art where the body in movement is cultivated for its own sake in order to affect the spectator or to produce some sort of emotional effect. The physical movement of the body and the psychic accompaniment of it are the denominations of a single underlying reality: the authentic experience of the dancer and of the audience that points towards a personal, individualized value of dance. This is the legacy of the modern dance with Isadora Duncan’s liberated dance, with Martha Graham’s “the body never lies” statement, with Mary Wigman’s “the dance is a language which is inherent 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” (Wigman in Huxley & Witts, 2002, p. 402 - 403). It induces the idea that dance and movement are born self - expression and personal feelings, that are somehow shared between the dancer and the audience and create a valuable connection between them. This is the main value that dance holds for its audience.

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<sup>2</sup> The term is coined by Andre Lepecki in the book *Exhausting Dance. Performance and the politics of movement* and refers to the “treachery” of dance by conceptual dance artists who prioritised non - dance, stillness, standing, presence, etc as predominant modes of performing and presenting.

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For the spectator of International Dance Festival Dublin the bond between movement and emotion, kinetics and kinaesthesia is *a must* of every dance/choreography. The authentic movement, the *inner necessity* of the dancer/choreographer, the individual experience are externalized through 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 direct 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 we would extend it even to the present day for many contemporary dance audiences.

But the empathic bond 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 dancer and the audience. 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 artistic products are to be shared with the audience, they must not be considered as belonging exclusively to 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 consisting of trained bodies committed to a certain dance technique or an individual choreographer. 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 was 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" (Cunningham in Huxley & Witts, 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 Manifesto<sup>3</sup> from 1965 stood as a strategy for demystifying dance and making it objective. It was a

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<sup>3</sup> Yvonne Rainer's NO Manifesto: No to spectacle No to virtuosity No to transformations and magic and make believe No to the glamour and transcendence 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

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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 through dance. Sports, games, scores, walking, running, everyday gestures were presented as dances. The body itself became the subject of dance, rather than an expressive instrument or a symbol. Movement was not something added to the body, as it was already in motion. “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.xxii). Choreographers deliberately used untrained performers in their search for *the natural body*, 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 hiccups in choreographies*, dance as being a continuum of movements, is one more time put to the test with the emergence of European conceptual dance<sup>4</sup> in the 1990s (Xavier le Roy, Jerome Bel, Vera Mantero, La Ribot, etc) and their urge to create new possibilities for thinking relationships between bodies and movements. 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).

*The embodiment of thought*<sup>5</sup> that stands at the centre of these explorations refers to the reconfiguration of the relationship between body and movement<sup>6</sup> (for both choreographer/dancer and spectator) that brings about a reframing of the understanding of the body on stage as an open entity, “a dynamic system of exchange” (Lepecki, 2006, p.5). The acts of repetition, stillness and language introduced as non-

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<sup>4</sup> The term *conceptual dance* was never recognized by any of the choreographers that were labelled as such, nor has it been theoretically elaborated in the discourses of the performing arts. These days the term is used usually with a negative intention and impact as *non-dance* or *anti dance*, closing down an artistic paradigm.

<sup>5</sup> 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*, in “Performance Research: A Journal of The Performing Arts. On Choreography”, Volume XIII, No1, Routledge, 2008

<sup>6</sup> The body - movement bind is extensively analysed by Bojana Cvejic in *Choreographing Problems. Expressive Concepts in European Contemporary Dance and Performance* (2015)

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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). Conceptual dance had the tendency to disrupt the stability of forms, to refuse the aesthetics of shapes, lines and emotions and instead to privilege the critique of representation. If we were to refer to the example mentioned at the beginning of this paper, with Jerome Bel being one of the representative choreographers of conceptual dance, he explains his artistic choices he made by looking for *the zero degree of a dance show*<sup>7</sup> that would create an effect, a tension, a movement of thought between the performance and the audience.

According to Una Bauer what Jerome Bel’s performance “is a question that inspires a dialogue: a question that asks not what choreography is and what it is not but how is choreography constructed. And a proposal is framed: choreography is not constructed through the successful staging of particular representations or through the impossibility of their staging (thus the success at staging abstract movement) but through the movement of embodied thought which refuses to fix itself in particular recognizable types of discourses” (Bauer in Lepecki & Allsopp, 2008, p.41).

Dance and choreography<sup>8</sup> at the begging of the 21<sup>st</sup> century became a widely polyphonic thinking and writing about/with moment, “an almost ecstatic volume of possibilities in which dance shows itself.”<sup>9</sup> And because terms are, to some extent, produced by their usage, they best reflect the changes and the dynamics of an artistic field. Andre Lepecki states 2008 in the editorial *On Choreography*: „if we approach choreography critically, we see how the term’s syncretic composition condenses and outlines a whole constellation of concepts that have defined for the past two decades at least, some of the main debates in performance theory. Indeed, the mere fusion of two apparently incongruous terms - movement and writing - into one single linguistic sign not only unleashed a series of effects in the creation and reception of dance performances in the past, but it has also shaped current theorizations and some performance practices in the last four decades” (Lepecki & Allsopp, 2008, p.1). Over

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<sup>7</sup> Jerome Bel argues that he is trying to represent *neutrality on stage* that can be translated as *the zero degree of signification*, a play between representation and presentation

<sup>8</sup> The terms *dance* and *choreography* are used interchangeable, although *dance* usually refers more to the expressive, communicative, affective, poetic aspects of movement, while *choreography* has more to do with the craft of structuring, arranging and organizing bodies and movement in space and time (although today we also talk about choreographies of objects, of light, of natural phenomena, of materials, of language) therefor it has a more cognitive and interpretative function. We have also encountered theoretical positions that presented *dance* as *choreography*, the term *dance* being more susceptible for the academic, critical discourse.

<sup>9</sup> In 2010, CorpusWeb (an online platform dedicated to performance, philosophy, politics, practice and projects in the field of contemporary art) asked more than 100 people from the field of performing arts the question *What does choreography mean today?* The answers conveyed an eclectic and dynamic status of the term, which shed a really diverse light upon the discourses and practices of dance and choreography.

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time the body in motion was indexed as performance art, happening, event, experimental dance, new dance, multimedia performance, site specific, and installation, physical theatre, etc expanding the field's potential, crossing the boundaries between genres and investigating new territories.

In *Post - Dance conference*<sup>10</sup> Marten Spangberg presents a lecture titled *Post - dance, An Advocacy* in which he reflects on the need to find a new term more suitable for the for tomorrow's dance and choreography. He argues that "What we know is that dance is no longer enough. Either the term becomes too convoluted and cannot host contemporary practices nor its relations to contemporary contexts, environments, concerns, ecology (in its wider sense), critical theory or philosophy. Alternatively, dance becomes a term so wide that it envelops anything that moves" (Spangberg, 2017, p 350). He proposes that this term should be *post - dance*, with an attention not to the *post* (in the negative, restrictive sense) but to the *dance* that can create for itself a new agency, an agency of the present and of the future, "an advocacy that empowers dance to be an active part of its past, present and future not only as dance, art, decoration, entertainment but as an active force or intensity in our societies, in the formation of social, human, relational, political realities" (Spangberg, 2017, p. 352).

Going back to the situation stated at the begging of the article: it appears that for the general audience once the natural, organic regime between body and movement has been broken, by reducing the kinetic spectacle of the body<sup>11</sup> (conceptual dance), by introducing *ordinary* movements (post - modern dance) or by constructing artificial conjunctions between body and movement (contemporary choreography) and 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. 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 movement. By rethinking this relationship, distinctive concepts rise that influence not only the making and the performing, but also the act of viewing/attending.

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<sup>10</sup> *Post - Dance* was a conference organized between 14 - 16 October 2015 at MDT Stockholm by Danjel Andersson, Andre Lepecki and Gabriel Smeets as an open - source concept, revolving around topics of dance, performance, choreography, philosophy, critical theory. The conference became a book in 2017.

<sup>11</sup> This is how Andre Lepecki explains (conceptual) dance's exhaustion in *Exhausting Dance. Performance and the politics of movement* (2006)

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Philosopher Boyan Manchev refers to the present tendencies in contemporary dance with the term *transformare*<sup>12</sup> that he opposes to the term *performare* and argues that with this term one could designate a new form of dance, as it refers to the constant stepping beyond the borders of what we know, accessing new potentialities: “anthropologically speaking *performare* served as an opening of the properties of the body, as an experimentation of the techniques of the body, that is to say a demonstration of the body as *tekhne* par excellence. That means that dance and performance as well provide an open space for experimenting with body techniques” (Manchev in Lepecki, 2012, p.126) while *transformance* would be a new mode of dance and performance that would not aim for body’s functionality but, on the contrary, on becoming dysfunctional, disorganized, thus refusing systems of identification (social, political, aesthetic, gender, etc). “Thus, the body detaches from the order of representation and functionality in order to reveal itself as a space of possibility, the potential for metamorphosis and transformation. (...) a potentiality which is opposed to fixation in actuality” (Manchev in Lepecki, 2012, p. 127). The accent on possibilities of the body to transform itself in or outside its relationship to movement. This body is no longer necessarily *moving rhythmically, jumping up and down, usually to music and conveying some emotion*. It’s not the one that the Dublin International Dance Festival spectator was expecting to be presented on stage.

The dance of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brings about an ever - changing corporality and corporeality. There are around 37, 2 trillion cells in our bodies and that makes the body in motion an ever changing performance. The number suggests distinct possibilities for both physical and conceptual articulation of its movement capacities and challenge the dancer/ the choreographer to open up to an immense range of neuromuscular and discursive possibilities. There are still new configurations to be revealed. The body remains, as always, a catalyst and a generative source of ideas, a space for creative, reflexive and/or critical processes.

We believe that the new assertions of contemporary dance or choreography contain many smaller counter assertions, for there is no longer right and wrong, good or bad when it comes to bodies in motion. There is no real rupture between the past and the present, between body and movement, there is no *anti dance*, and we believe that the contemporary attitudes within the dance field reflect a necessary questioning of ideas around dance (a historical condition of all performing art) as in the body in motion of a dancer lays a variety of simultaneous histories, forming his presence and his dance on stage. The contemporary choreographic discourses, like never before, can accommodate a simultaneity of artistic attitudes and a diversity of perspectives. Dance still remains an expressive medium as well as the movement of ideas and

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<sup>12</sup> Boyan Manchev presents the concept of *transformance* (to change, to modify) by opposing it to *performance* (to execute, to do). The latter refers to the fulfilment of a form, while the first means to shift the shape of something, thus opening new possibilities of choreographic thought and form.

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significations. Artists can provoke the choreographic codes, deny the emotional, avoid the affects, dehumanize the dancer, propose just abstract choreography devoided of flesh dance and still remain expressive and rhetorical. Maybe the body in motion is no longer the locus of truth, authenticity and uniqueness but in the same time dance speaks about the body through the medium of the body itself, making it about personal experience and reflective of social and political realities.

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 an audience to resist, critique, accept or embrace these changes. In the end it is the task of dancers, choreographers, philosophers, scientists alike to embark in a quest for dance's and choreography's future, a future that connects the past and the present and looks for a new path.

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