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A Phenomenological Approach to an Aesthetic Theory of Western Concert Dance

Lara S. Murphy

University of Miami, larasmurph@gmail.com

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO AN AESTHETIC THEORY OF
WESTERN CONCERT DANCE

By

Lara Murphy

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

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Lara Murphy

Approved:

Eugene Clasby, Ph.D.
Professor and Director of
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

Terri A. Scandura, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

Otavio Bueno, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy

Frank E. Cooper
Research Professor, Music

MURPHY, LARA
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The goal of the paper is to develop a framework in which to ground the analysis of the aesthetics of Western concert dance, particularly contemporary concert dance, in order to help dancers, choreographers, critics, and the general dance audience understand and discuss dance from the perspective of a common intellectual ground. Examined are the relationship between epochs in concert dance and the corresponding aesthetic theories and the elements that differentiate and unify contemporary concert dance from other Western concert dance, including the unique spatiotemporal nature of dance and the simultaneous presentation of universal humanness and individual truth via the kinesthetic empathy of viewer and dancer. A brief explanation of phenomenology and of its parallels to the consciousness required of dancer, choreographer and viewer supports a phenomenological approach to a theory of Western contemporary concert dance as most relevant at this time.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Dance, in all its varied forms and incarnations, is at its essence about human movement. We can describe a tree as dancing in the wind or say an animal's rhythmic gestures are dancelike, but we know these are poetic anthropomorphizings. Dance is a uniquely human expression, requiring a particular awareness of self (even if only a subconscious one) that is distinctly human. It may be a reaction to sounds, an exploration of space, an attempt to communicate thoughts or feeling, a bonding with others, an invocation of powers greater than the self, a question, an answer, a response to a particular situation, but it is always of the individual context in which it was created. Whether participatory or performance oriented, a dance simultaneously communicates a universal human-ness and an individual truth. And it does so on a visceral level that is able to skip past the bureaucracy and red tape of the analytic brain and tap into a deeper part of the psyche.

Throughout time, dance has been vastly different things to different peoples. Although there is certainly a unifying factor to all dance, it seems incorrect to address all dance in the same way. One would not discuss an indigenous tribal dance, a sock-hop and a classical ballet in the same terms. The context surrounding the rise of each of these is different and, hence, the expectations of participants and observers of each are different. Imagine the tribal dancer dressed, painted and primed for his ritual, moving before the jeans clad, notebook-carrying anthropologist who watches fascinated. Or the teenager with hormones and rebellious spirit exploding in gyrations and oblivious to the nervous glares of the chaperones. Or the muscular waif

in tutu and *pointe* shoes perfectly aware of the fans that now sit enraptured by her movements and later, over a glass of wine, will dissect every one of those movements. These individuals approach the particular dances differently, in large part because of the differences in genre, but also because of the differences in context created by their unique personal histories, which have come to be linked to the genre in which they are participating. Each person brings a singular subjectivity born of his individual experiences. And yet we are able to speak of these very different dances in terms general and universal enough that we may understand their varied movements and meanings to be dances.

So it is for the diverse world of Western concert dance as well. Open the newspaper of almost any big city to the weekend's arts listings and one will discover story ballets, expressive modern works, abstract post-modern works, and an array of "contemporary" ballet and modern pieces being performed across town on the same night. How do we approach an understanding or appreciation of such seemingly different works, which have been lumped together as concert dance? And in particular, how does one begin to approach a unified understanding of the Western concert dance of today, the ubiquitous "contemporary" dance?

In the Western world the term 'concert dance' refers to dance, most often ballet or modern based, presented on a stage for an audience. There are certain obvious, necessary elements such as dancers, a "stage", and an audience. But these tell us only what is generally required to create the event. They do not explain what the event is or how to view it. Must one know something about what is being watched prior to the viewing? Can a concert dance be understood universally or is it

culturally defined? Is it the duty of the choreographer or performer to make an audience member understand what he is seeing or to engender a specific emotion? Is it possible to appreciate a story ballet and an abstract modern dance in the same way?

Over time, an array of aesthetic theories have grown out of the desire to answer these questions and create a unifying approach to concert dance. It should be noted that such aesthetic theories, like the dances themselves, were born of a particular context, a very specific time, place and way of thinking. It is equally important to recognize the symbiotic relationship that has existed between movements (epochs) in dance (and the arts in general) and movements in aesthetic thinking. This is because development of any legitimate theory requires viewing/experiencing a work, followed by reflection, thought and valuation. However, the act of reflection affects the perception of a work. This new perception in turn gets reinterpreted into a work, which is then once more reflected upon, discussed, analyzed. To further complicate the relationship, valuation, which is intrinsic to both the creative and the critical processes, functions differently in the work of dance than it does in the development of a theory of art. Given this ongoing evolution of work and theory, is a unified theory of aesthetics in regards to Western concert dance possible?

The first thing to note in attempting to discuss a unified aesthetic approach to dance is why such seemingly different styles can be placed under the same heading. Most simply, these styles of dance are all descendants on the same family tree. As with families, visible changes have occurred over time, be they subtle adaptations to changes in the environment or rebellious introductions of a new “gene pool” as a

reaction to an oppressive upbringing. The genes of a dance are its underlying aesthetic elements. The style of movement, the overall structure, the forms in space, the dynamics, the musicality, the color palette and design of costumes, scenery and lighting, all come together to create a single work that we see as a single dance. Much like we can spot resemblances among even some distant family members, we can sense the DNA that links concert dances when we experience them. And like a Darwinian survival technique, each of these “genes” represents a valuative selectivity, be it conscious or not, that determines the final *gestalt* of the work by reconciling subjective content with objective form.

As different styles of western concert dance have developed and been explored, different aesthetic theories have been developed along side them to clarify and understand the essential elements of those works. Though not always developed consciously on the part of artists and philosophers, there is no doubt that there is a strong relationship between particular styles of dance and the aesthetic approaches of the same time frame. Any theory of the art, if it is to be successful, must be able to assess, evolve and adapt to the form it addresses. And yet it can hardly be expected to anticipate the next development to challenge the art form. A brief historical overview will serve to demonstrate this relationship

Chapter 2

Historical Overview

The earliest documented aesthetic theory is the representational account of art, which began by addressing the issue of resemblance. For Plato and Aristotle, the ultimate goal of the artist was to imitate as closely as possible selective aspects of nature. This theory applied equally to painting, sculpture, music and the all-encompassing Greek theatre. This earliest ancestor of Western concert dance was not an independent entity, but merely an element of this bigger theatrical production. The representational approach to aesthetics dominated visual art and strongly influenced other forms well into the nineteenth century, and for most of that time dance remained subservient to theatre. (Again I am speaking here of dance as predecessor of Western concert dance. Folkloric dances have an altogether different *raison d'être* and a different history.)

What we might point to as the immediate predecessor of recognizable concert dance developed as an amalgam of presentational court dancing and dramatic element. A royal “social” dance of sorts, court dancing was an opportunity to see and be seen, specifically by the ruling royals. Under France’s Louis XIV, the social took backseat to the presentational and dancing was incorporated into grand theatrical spectacles, the goal of which was to impress and entertain.

Concert dance’s earliest *structured* form was as an element of opera. Because its purpose was to enhance and develop the plot of an operatic drama through mimetic movement that the audience could recognize, this form of dance continued to be bound by the representational requirement established hundreds of years before by

the Greeks. The dancer needed either to closely resemble what he represented or to at least be able to create the illusion for the viewer that he resembled what he represented. As concert dance came into an independent existence as formalized ballet, representation continued to be an essential element, but the idea of representation shifted from strict resemblance to emphasize the depiction of the illusory worlds associated with the Romantic era, such as those of the Sylphs and Wilis.

Considering the origin and purpose of the dance of this era, it is not surprising that a representational theory was used to examine it. Philosophically, the term *representation* has often been linked to visual resemblance and examined in light of various symbol systems. In visual art it is easy to comprehend how a representational theory might be applied- even a casual glance at paintings as diverse as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and Picasso's *Guernica* suggest to the viewer some relationship between what is being seen and the objects or concepts the artist meant to portray. In *Philosophy of Art* Noel Carroll clarifies the relationship between the original object and the perceived symbol by explaining, "x represents y (where y ranges over a domain comprised of objects, persons, events and actions) if and only if (1) a sender intends x (e.g., a picture) to stand for y (e.g., a person), and (2) an audience recognizes that x is intended to stand for y." (50) Under this definition Louis XIV successfully represented Apollo if (1) he intended to stand for a Greek god associated with the sun and (2) the audience recognized him as intending to stand for a Greek god associated with the sun and not something other like a god of war or a water nymph.

One can easily see why the representational account is suited to story based dances in which the dancer is playing a role that must be recognizable to the audience for the work as a whole to be successful. In such works each element, be it movement, organization of dancers in the space, music, costuming, or lighting, is selected for what it adds to the representational nature of the overall piece in order to advance the story. Even today we look at a Romantic era works like *Swan Lake* through representational glasses. We instinctively know that Paloma Herrera successfully represents Odette if (1) she intends to stand for an enchanted white swan princess and (2) the audience recognizes she is intending to stand for a swan princess and not a fairy princess or an albatross.

For audiences who are well versed in representational dances, understanding the symbol systems used becomes second nature and may seem a given for all dance, but not all of the traditional pantomimic gestures of story ballets are easily understood. For the viewer, a representational dance is best understood if there is familiarity with the “code” of representation being used. Movements such as an exaggerated shaking of the head might be easily interpreted by anyone to mean “no.” However, Odette’s desperate and insistent “soliloquy” in which she crosses her arms over her chest, points to the sky and then crosses her fists at the wrist with arms outstretched toward the floor does not for the average person automatically translate to “only a pledge of eternal love will destroy Von Rothbart and release me from his spell.”

It seems simple enough to say that to view dance is to view bodies moving in a specific, stylized manner (be it ballet, modern, jazz or any other formalized

technique) in order to convey a story and to point to well known ballets like *Swan Lake* as examples of dance telling a story. But this is oversimplified and deceptive, for even with this ballet, today there are multiple renditions, each with their own twist on the story, and endless interpretations, each unique to the individual performer. And certainly not all dance is narrative in nature. In fact much of the dance of the 20th century is only thematic at best. For these works representation is not the primary objective and the representational approach may be limited by or at odds with the intended rationale for the creation of such works.

Expression became the central principle of most art forms during the Romantic era when poets, painters and musicians all eschewed imitation of nature for revelation of human emotion, believing individual feeling to be the ultimate truth. However, Romantic ballets, despite embracing the illusory, other worldly entities of Sylphs and Willis, were still very much connected to their representational roots and the Aristotelian model. Better examples of the expression theories as we understand them today are those found in early Modern dance and particularly in the works Isadora Duncan, Mary Wigman and Martha Graham. In fact, one could make the case that the very existence of modern dance is predicated on the view that the unveiling of emotion is central to what dance is.

By the early 20th century expression of feeling overtook the strictures of ballet as the aesthetic element *du jour*. As had occurred significantly earlier in painting, music and literature, concert dance saw a shift from the presentation of the outside world (either a real or illusory outside world) to an exploration of the inner being. Beginning with Isadora Duncan, the goal in dance became to use movement to

present and evoke emotion. Dispensing with shoes and swathed in flowing scarves, Duncan decidedly and deliberately rebelled against the strict lines and formations of ballet, choosing instead to explore what she considered a more natural, human approach to creating dance movements.

Because classical ballet is defined by a precisely structured technique to which emotional expression is generally subservient, the true mother of expressionist dance, Mary Wigman also viewed classical dance and expressionism as irreconcilable. By embracing the drama found in gestures and the power of rhythms, she was able to embody the qualities of her “characters” and revealed them through movement, rather than developing characters in any narrative manner. In discussing modern dance she explained, “The primary concern of the creative dancer should be that his audience not think of the dance objectively, or look at it from an aloof and intellectual point of view... .” (What is Dance, 306) Wigman wanted her audience to be deeply affected by the rhythms and movements and for these “to stimulate the same feelings and emotional mood within [the viewer], as this mood and emotional condition has stimulated the dancer, ” (306) thereby directly linking the common, emotional experience of dancer and viewer.

Martha Graham took this notion even further and developed a complete technique on the principle of movement as a means to understanding universal aspects of human nature. Her contraction and release based vocabulary was meant to reflect the deepest, most primal of emotions shared by all humans and to thereby create greater awareness of life as a whole.

In Graham's approach we see exemplified the assertion of the expression theory that the purpose of art is to make inner emotions manifest for the world to see. As espoused by the famed Russian novelist and philosopher, Leo Tolstoy, art is an essential form of human communication. In his essay "What Is Art?" Tolstoy explained, "Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them." (457) In his view of expressionism, it is not enough for the artist to simply present his feelings to the world; the artist must evoke similar emotions in the viewer. Tolstoy further clarified, "art renders accessible to men of the latest generations all the feelings experienced by their predecessors and also those felt by their best and foremost contemporaries." (462) For the dance artist this would imply a need to create and present movement that could speak across time and culture to the mostly intrinsically human emotions.

It is precisely this form of expression that drove the explorations of the early modern dance choreographers, particularly Graham. The works of Hanya Holm, Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis embraced other cultures not only for the exotic qualities (although the exotic was en vogue at the time) but to try to discover the innately human. Watching even a fairly simple (in terms of structural form, not in terms of performance) Graham work such as the solo *Lamentation*, one can sense the tension, the weight and the physical longings of a person, any person, who is mourning deeply. The outward manifestation of a lament might be more culturally specific, but the inner feeling of anguish is universally human.

As modern dance developed and evolved, some of its practitioners sought to expand the boundaries of what could be expressed and communicated. Some choreographers moved away from the deeply emotional to explore the possibilities of “expressing” abstract concepts through movement. Others began to use the medium to present philosophical questions, such as what, if any, elements were necessary and sufficient for a concert dance to be a dance. This movement away from the expression of the inner being required an aesthetic theory that could address the elements being presented in such works.

Additionally, as the technical skills of dancers developed, dancers and choreographers alike sought to highlight those skills in performance. In ballet, the exploration of virtuosity in the dancer and of the structure of the work itself began to replace the emphasis on representation and expression, giving rise to a formalist approach.¹

The formalist theory of art aims to reduce art to its very essence, those elements without which the work simply could not be an artwork. By stripping a work down to its *significant form* the artist intends for the viewer to take note of and appreciate specific elements of the work. The artist is not necessarily concerned with

¹Though most closely associated with Balanchine’s neo-classical style, formalism in ballet actually dates back to the 1800s, when some choreographers stepped away from the narrative ballets to experiment with the structural elements of ballet. Writing in the late 1800s Stephane Mallarmé noted the distinctions between the gestures of pantomime and the movements of the ballet, commenting, “At those times when we ordinarily watch the Dance with no special object in mind, the only way to lead our imagination on is to stand patiently, calmly watching each of the dancer’s steps, each strange pose- toeing, tapping, lunge, or rebound....” (What is Dance, 114) It is precisely this attention to each step and the relationship of each step to the next within a particular frame of space that begins to define the formalist approach to ballet by focusing on the architecture of the work.

our emotional response but, as Maxine Sheets explains in *The Phenomenology of Dance*, with our “discovering formal structures designed to encourage our imaginative interplay with them.” (113) Under this schema the artist’s intention in creating the work takes on greater significance, as it determines what elements are truly vital to the work and in what way these are emphasized over, or altogether replace, other elements.

In dance this stripping down to the “barebones” truly began with Balanchine, who removed the ornamentation of sets and costumes, highlighting the dancer’s moving body. Often performed in classroom style leotards and tights, Balanchine’s choreography was free to investigate, as David Michael Levin points out in “Balanchine’s Formalism”, the relationship of the body to weight and weightlessness. By removing the distractions and spatial constraints of sets and props, Balanchine could explore the full effects of the ballet lines in space. The space could be constructed and reconstructed by the choreographic placement of dancers on the stage, but also by play of weight and line. With no cumbersome costumes to limit the view of the body’s lines, the viewer could follow the lines of the body through space much like one might follow the lines of a Cezanne painting, or perhaps given the three dimensionality of the human body and the stage space, like one might follow the lines of the Empire State Building.

Levin further credits Balanchine with the “discovery that there is exquisite drama concealed in equilibrations of corporeal contraries” (136) and with using the properties of classical ballet to reconstitute the field of the stage space from a horizontal field to a vertical field. By removing sets and other such decor, Balanchine

removed the action of the stage from a specific place. The constraints of the horizontal field of familiar, daily life were gone and the movements of the dancers could exist in any space or time. Moreover, Balanchine used the weight of the body to create optical illusions of lines that reach into a vertical space associated more with architecture than with the mass of the human body. (Balanchine professed to have been greatly inspired by the skyscrapers of New York.) One need only compare the arabesque of a Balanchine work to that of a classical Petipa ballet to see extraordinary difference in use of energy. The classical ballerina creates clear angled lines with her leg and her back, but her energy is directed at the space within which she moves and the dancers around her. The Balanchine ballerina presses her weight against the floor to reach her energy through the extended limbs of her body into the rafters and beyond.

Furthermore, Balanchine did not depend on traditional storytelling as a means of developing a work. For him the vocabulary of the ballet technique was story enough and thus was the essence of the individual dancer's artistry as well as the work as a whole. By uniting form and content, Balanchine's abstraction of the classical ballet idiom forced the audience to focus on the form of the work and view what Levin describes as "the expressive presence of an entirely abstract syntax." (131) This shift to formalism not only revolutionized the future of ballet, but also paved the way for similar shifts in modern dance and for the movement towards a "contemporary" style of concert dance.

While Balanchine focused on formalism in ballet, the modern and postmodern choreographers of the 1960s and 1970s took the question of what is dance even

further, dissecting traditional elements of concert dance and presenting them in ways never before seen.

A former Graham dancer, Merce Cunningham, turned away from emotion based works to experiment with structure and form in modern dance, even to the point that his dances were often thematic only in their dedication to being aleatoric (chance driven). Cunningham sought to remove as much of the human control element as possible, letting a role of the die determine such important structural elements of a work as which movement phrases would be used and in what order, how many dancers were on the stage doing a particular movement phrase at a particular time and what directions dancers would face or travel while dancing. This system immediately altered the relationship between the performers and the audience in that the dancing was not automatically frontal and presentational, a complete departure from concert dance's origins as a purely presentational form.

Because of the spatial-temporal nature of a dance presentation, one generally thinks of a dance piece as a whole that is larger than its individual parts. Susanne Langer notes, "Artistic forms are more complex than any other symbol system we know. They are, indeed, not abstractable from the works that exhibit them." (25) The overall form of "dance" is more than an equation of elements, but without certain elements there clearly is no dance. The focus on the barebones elements had lead Balanchine to a whole new kind of ballet, but choreographers of the post-modern dance period wanted to go beyond stripping the work to it's barebones elements. They wanted to separate the bones in order to decipher the importance and validity of each bone, or in this case each element of a dance. For this reason, post modern

dance performances were often presentations of a hypothesis. A work was as much a question as a statement and, as in the visual art of the formalist period, it encouraged the viewer to actively contemplate formal elements being presented.

A founding member of the Judson Dance Theatre, Yvonne Rainer is a perfect example of the experimental tendencies of this aspect of formalism. In *Trio A* Rainer challenged the “danciness” of dance by focusing on pedestrian (non-technical) movements, refusing to address the audience directly (she avoided facing the audience and if she had to, she dropped her gaze to the floor) and never repeating a movement phrase. Rainer was not interested in entertaining or producing pleasure in the audience, rather her intention was to provoke questions and thought about what was being seen, as well as to test the boundaries of what could be considered dance by questioning the essential elements of a dance. In doing so she and others of the time successfully expanded the definition of concert dance.

As in much of the rest of society, reaction to the experimentation of the 1960s and 1970s took many manifestations. Some choreographers returned to the classical romantic works of ballet; some continued to push boundaries by blurring the lines between concert dance and performance art. In her book, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, Langer explains that a new philosophy of a particular era inevitably reflects the *weltanschauung* of its proponents but that it also influences the thoughts and assumptions of those who come after. To elucidate, she quotes Professor C.D. Burns:

The experience of any moment has its horizon. Today’s experience, which is not tomorrow’s, has in it some hints and implications which are tomorrow on the horizon of today. Each man’s experience may be added to by the experience of other men, who are living in his day or have lived before; and so

a common world of experience, larger than that of his own observation, can be lived by each man. But however wide it may be, that common world has its horizon; and on that horizon new experience is always appearing . . . (112-113)

Burns and Langer make a clear case for the evolution of philosophical thought in general, which is easily applied to both aesthetic theory and the evolution of Western concert dance.

As we saw in the above historical overview, every philosophical theory of aesthetics has a relation, either as a development of or reaction to, that which came before, just as every style of dance has a relation to its historic predecessor. What Burns and Langer fail to note is that the horizon of experiences does not merely appear but rather is created by reactions and choices. Man is not an anemone on a beach, dragged to and fro by waves with no recourse but to experience the event. Man thinks and feels and makes evaluative choices- be they conscious, subconscious or perhaps even pre-conscious- that have direct impact on the creation of his experience horizon.

Because of the choices of successive generations reacting to experiences of daily life in an ever-changing world as well as to movement experiences in the studio or on the stage, the Western contemporary concert dance of today presents us with a new *gestalt*, a picture far bigger and more complex than the amalgam of its apparent features. Today's contemporary dance style is born of the horizons of all concert dance, but particularly of those of the last century: the vocabularies of both the classical and the modern dance worlds, the abstracted storytelling, the expressiveness found in the movement of the body rather than in the story, the experimentation with

structures and forms are all legitimate elements of a given piece. What then is the aesthetic theory that best suits Western contemporary concert dance?

Chapter 3

Strengths and Weaknesses

Each of the aesthetic theories thus far discussed illuminates some important aspect of concert dance. Looking at each from a historical perspective, it is easy to see how a given theory relates to the movement in dance with which it is most closely associated. Choices made choreographically and artistically reflect the values of the era during which they were made, just as theoretical musings about those works inevitably reflect the predominant (and corresponding) interpretations of a particular *weltanschauung*. Given this close relationship of theory to epoch, it is questionable that any theory can be successfully applied outside of the historical context of a particular genre or period. Can the various theories succeed for concert dance of all eras? More importantly, are they relevant to the concert dance of today?

The strength of the representational theory was that it made clear how a dancer could stand for the thing being represented. This worked well in advancing a story-based work, such as *Swan Lake*, but would it be as successful for other types of works where the object to be represented is an abstract concept and not a tangible thing? In such cases a representational theory of dance must acknowledge and account for the ever-fluctuating dynamism of action as well as of character, and it must also explain how this dynamism can be symbolic of an abstract.

Carroll recognizes that representation differs with respect to different art forms and considers four types of representation through which audiences can understand how x stands for y. *Unconditional representation* “triggers the audience’s innate recognitional capacities.” (50) In this case the ability that allows us to

recognize things ‘in nature’ also enables us to recognize those same things in the artwork. *Lexical representation* requires the audience to know the relevant codes being employed by the artwork. For example, a spectator unfamiliar with the lexicon of Romantic ballets like *Swan Lake* or *Giselle*, would have no idea that when the ballerina crosses her arms at the wrists with both fists closed that means death. *Conditional specific representation* is that which can only be recognized if the spectator already knows what is being represented. Carroll clarifies that while being told is a condition for understanding, “once told...we can use our native recognitional powers to decipher the other wise elusive gestures.” (51) Finally, under *conditional generic representation* the viewer need only know that something is being represented in order to notice that x stands for y. Carroll states:

Simply knowing that an artistic signal is meant to be representational, even if we are not told exactly what it represents, leads us to mobilize our natural recognitional capacities, our linguistic associations, and knowledge of strict semiotic codes, along with other factors, in order to determine appropriately what the representation is a representation of, without being told its specific, intended meaning. (52)

According to this, just being aware that we are viewing a representation is apparently enough to engage the capacities at our disposal and thereby make the necessary links to understand the representation.

Because Carroll’s types of representation can be combined in different ways and to varying degrees, his notion of a continuum of representation seems suited to addressing multiple aspects of dance. We may employ unconditional representation to identify the dancer’s flapping arm movements as swan-like, while relying on lexical representation to understand what the ‘swan’ is saying to Prince Siegfried with a particular kind of “flap.” A combination of lexical and conditional representation

may be at work in recognizing a Graham contraction as representing pain in one portion of a dance and ecstasy in another. Similarly, it may be conditional representation that allows one to understand that in Balanchine's *Four Temperaments* a particular combination of quick movements represents a sanguine feeling, while a slower, leggy section is reminiscent of melancholy.

Carroll's continuum does not seem as successful when applied to purely abstract or aleatoric works. In Cunningham's *Beach Birds* the title of the work might allow us to implement conditional specific representation to see something gull-like in the black and white unitards or the shapes created by the dancers, but Cunningham's abstract *Sounddance* is another matter completely. *Sounddance* is not seeking to be representational in any way, so for it, and works like it, it is pointless to even attempt to apply a representational approach. No combination of representational codes can explain a work that is not representing anything.

At first glance the expressive theory seems quite inclusive. One can scarcely imagine a dance that is completely stripped of emotional expressiveness. Representational dances use emotion as an essential part of developing a story and Balanchine sought expressiveness in the quality of the movement even as he explored the structure of a work. In fact, dancers have oft been criticized when technical skill seems to overpower emotional expressiveness. However, that a dancer be personally expressive is different from the intention of the expressive theory.

The expression theory does make room for a variety of works, so long as those works have as their focus the revelation and communication of that which is innately human. While representational ballets may have a fairytale-like emotional

appeal in their depictions of good and evil and eternal love, the feelings presented are generally subservient to the plot rather than the essence of the work. Thus, they are not true to the expressionist approach. One could make the case that Antony Tudor's ballets find a balance between the representational and expressionistic by using the story as a means to present the complexities of human psychology. In *Pillar of Fire*, for example, the viewer immediately gets a sense of the emotional and psychological state of the characters. One can empathize with the desperate longing for happiness that leads to the spinster Hagar's seduction and the fear and shame that would naturally follow in her repressed society. She is an individual grappling with a particular situation, yet her feelings are universally human.

However, it is more difficult to find how the abstract and experimental works of the later modern and postmodern movements can fit the expressive theory. In many instances the works of the post-modernists were developed to specifically challenge the notion that expression was a necessary aspect of dance. In other cases, such as in the works of Pina Bausch, expression continued to be an essential part of the creation, but the exploration of how to best present that emotion lead away from a pure dance interpretation to a more theatrical presentation.²

As previously mentioned, formalist works need not lack emotion, but the revelation of emotion is not their foremost goal, and neither is representation. For

² Compare Bausch's 1973 *Iphigenie Auf Tauris*, which is set to a Gluck opera and expresses the agony of the title character through pure dance, to her 1982 *Nelken* (carnations), which combines an array of music with sign language and dialogue and includes men in heels and dresses, a mostly naked woman with an accordion and covers the movement spectrum from pedestrian to classical ballet, all on a pink carnation covered stage. This comparison demonstrates the continuous commitment by Bausch to expressionism but also reveals the deep shift in form from pure dance to theatre.

example, Balanchine certainly implements some representational techniques to depict the stages of Apollo's life, but true to the "barebones" approach, he does so in a minimalist and nuanced manner that is far from a literal narrative. His choices place greater value on the form than on the detailed development of the story.

One as yet unmentioned theory is that of contextualization, which propounds that one must understand something of the conditions in which a work was created in order to fully comprehend the work itself. A contextual approach links the work to its historic, cultural and sociological paradigm, and in doing so, it connects the work to the overriding aesthetic goals of its day, and particularly to an understanding of the artist's intention in creating the work. For example, an audience accustomed to the vertical field of Balanchine's *Concerto Barroco* might be baffled by Graham's *Diversion of Angels* if not given a primer before viewing. Similarly, a viewer might better appreciate *Trio A* if he understands Rainer's intention in creating the work. There is no doubt that understanding something of the history of a work or of the reason for its creation can lead to a better understanding and greater appreciation. And while this will certainly help in addressing cutting edge works at the inception of a new movement, there is considerable debate over whether such understanding should be necessary for the work to be successful.

Critics of the contextual approach argue that a work should stand on its own merits and communicate its statement without additional explanation. I must confess that in teaching dance composition, I often find myself using exactly this reproach when a student wants to "explain" a work prior to presenting it. If the work requires more explanation than is provided by the title and, perhaps, a brief program note, then

the work has either failed to be comprehensible or is so audience specific (culturally, historically or intellectually) that it excludes people from fully experiencing the work in an effective manner.

In many ways, dance more than any other art form seems to marry theory and historical context. Where it is possible to imagine a representational painting created today that is intellectually and emotionally accessible to the viewer, a representational dance like *Swan Lake* or *Giselle* is likely to feel out of date to those not raised in the tradition of classical ballet. Even to many young people studying ballet such works can feel like something from a different time. It is not uncommon to hear people speak of older classical works (ballet or modern) as “museum pieces” for this very reason. Even for the dancers performing such works it can be a challenge to find the nuance, style and “timing” required of such pieces because they differ so greatly from the timing of our current daily lives. Hence, the relationship between a particular period or style of concert dance and its corresponding aesthetic explanation can indeed provide context if one is looking back in time, but what of the works of the moment, which do not seem to fall neatly into any of the previous categories?

Chapter 4

Contemporary Concert Dance

Bringing together the essential elements of past movement styles and the multi-tasking pace of today's world to create something simultaneously new and familiar, Western contemporary concert dance can, at first glance, seem a sudden Darwinian leap from the concert dance of even the recent past. It manages to implement both unconditional representation and conditional generic representation in that the viewer need only know he is watching a dance to begin to take in representations, which often link to something directly out of daily experience of our natural surroundings. While the physical dance movements used continue to explore and build upon the vocabularies of ballet and modern, in contemporary dance the overall works are generally stripped of unnecessary "extras" so that the structure of the work can more directly address the subject, which quite often has some strong emotional or psychological undercurrent that is expressed purely in the movement rather than in the drama of the facial expressions or in pantomimic gestures. And even when contemporary works include large sets, video or other technological components, the components are an integral part of the overall work rather than simply a decorative addition, e.g. the twenty tables in Forsythe's *One Flat Thing, reproduced* are as integral to the dance, as the dancers themselves. (The dancers not only move between and around the tables, they slide across the tops and suspend between them: at times they are "partnered" by the tables as they might be partnered by a fellow dancer. The work explores the dancers' relationships to the space and to

each other by adapting to the restructured space, rather than by restructuring the movement vocabulary of the dancers.)

Given this combination of elements it seems none of the aforementioned aesthetic approaches can, individually, address the multiple components of a contemporary dance. We have already noted that, while some of the theories can be mixed with varying degrees of success, ultimately they vie for importance and do not coalesce well. How then are we to understand a dance style that does manage to create a harmonious cohesion of these potentially contradictory elements? Instead of focusing on the links to the past, let us now focus on the unique elements that characterize this new evolution.

What is particularly interesting about Western contemporary concert dance is that it speaks to us at a visceral level. The connections, be they representational or expressionistic, are built into the *experience* of the work via its formal structure. Contemporary dance maintains formalism's commitment to emotion coming from movement, but differs in the approach to the structuring of the movement itself. Both the extended lines of ballet and weighted curves of modern continue to be used to delineate and carve space, though often in more extreme ways than have existed in the past. The vertical horizon of the Balanchine arabesque is pushed beyond its limits, quite regularly appearing as *penches* and tilts that reach beyond 180 degrees. Weight, speed and gravity are also challenged by "falls" that seem to defy safety. But perhaps most impressive is the fusion of the pedestrian and the technical. Any human movement could potentially be included and even featured if the choreographer deems it appropriate: no movement is considered intrinsically more important than

another because of the technical skill involved. Unlike more traditional ballet and modern works, which frame technical steps with transitional steps, contemporary concert dance tends to “remove” transitions by treating every movement as a “step”. The result is that movement phrases (series of steps or movements that are strung together) can look more organic, as if one movement flows naturally from the previous into the next. This can give the impression of either faster, continuous movement or, alternately, disconnected movement that has somehow been magically connected by the dancer, as when one’s mind “magically” synthesizes seemingly disconnected thoughts into a cohesive idea.

In this way contemporary dance is a perfect reflection of the world of today, particularly our fast paced, technology driven culture. Just as we juggle multiple screens on the computer, typing commands and reacting pre-consciously, as if without taking time for any apparent reflection or analysis, contemporary dance provides us with information that we absorb and to which we react (love, hate, etc) before we have taken the time to truly reflect or analyze. It is not surprising that the choreography of today reflects the lives of today by pushing boundaries, connecting ostensibly disparate ideas, presenting ideas and movements that are deceptively complex in their seeming simplicity. The Western contemporary concert dance of now is Starbuck’s and an Iphone, multitasking at warp speed to provide something for everyone, striving to be simultaneously universal and personal. Choreographers from Alonzo King to Hofesh Shechter, from Wayne McGregor to Kate Weare, from Anjolin Preljocaj to Robert Battle all look to present some small speck of truth about the world by exploring the dynamism of new spatiotemporal physicalities. But no

matter what speed, lines, or other stylistic movement qualities these (or any) choreographers require, contemporary dance continues to be a personalized, subjective experience because of the human bodies creating and performing the movements.

At the center of anything we call dance is always the body. The body pulsing with life, even in stillness. The body not only as marvelous machine but also as the conduit for our interactions with the world around us, the connection to all that we think, feel, dream. The body as a universal subjective: the reminder of what we all are and what we each can be. Because of this, our discussion of Western contemporary concert dance must take into consideration the awareness created in and through the body.

In the introduction to *Choreographing History*, Susan Leigh Foster makes the case that a body's "habits and stances, gestures and demonstrations, every action of its various regions, areas, and parts- all these emerge out of cultural practices, verbal or not, that construct corporeal meaning." (3) She suggests that all bodies carry and project their histories with them at every moment and that dancers not only carry and project their own histories but also those of the works they perform. Because a living person, a dancer in this case, is always having new experiences, the body is perpetually being written upon: a casual meeting that leads to a new job is equivalent to a new sentence that grows into a paragraph or maybe even a chapter. And every new bit of writing contained by the body adds to the impermanence of being. As Foster notes, "The body is never only what we think it is (*dancers pay attention to this difference*). Illusive, always on the move, the body is at best *like* something, but

it never *is* that something.” (4) What we deem the most tangible aspect of the self, the body, is really but a reflection of the infinite intangibles contained within it.

Given the fluid and impermanent nature of this corporeal “conversation”, dance cannot be the creation of an object but must be the creation of an action. Even in pose the dancer is not static. She is looking, listening, breathing, always consciously creating some shape with her body: even a shape that appears pedestrian is deliberately so. The final result is intrinsically and selectively spatial and temporal—the dancer(s) moving through a particular space, in a particular way, at and for a particular time. To account for this ever-fluctuating dynamism of action and to explain how the viewer experiences this dynamism, we must acknowledge and remember that the body of the dancer is more than a choreographer’s tool. The dancer is a living body that brings his own bodily history to the movements being executed. Moreover, his movement is simultaneously informed by the individual sense data that has contextualized him as a unique being and by the shared sense data of first the technique of a dance and later the choreography of a work.

Because the individual consciousness we know as the self is inseparable from the body, the dancer necessarily brings some bit of that self to every movement, every class, every rehearsal and every performance. And he generally does so with great sensitivity and heightened awareness of all that is reflected by his movements. However, as Foster noted, the dancer is not unique in carrying his personal history in his movements, every person does so at every moment. And every person uses his subjective experience to inform his reactions and relations to the rest of the world. Therefore, gaining some understanding of how one translates individual perceptions

of experience into interactions with the world beyond the immediate self can help to elucidate the relation of the subjective and objective in Western contemporary concert dance.

Chapter 5

Applying a Phenomenological Approach to Contemporary Dance

One of the foremost phenomenologists of the last century, Maurice Merleau-Ponty made the argument that all understanding of the world comes from our bodily experience. He explained that before we can comprehend our environment we must develop corporeal awareness because it is through the body that sense data is collected and processed and it is with the body that we react to that data. This is not to say that the psyche works separately from the body collecting sense data in a ghost in the machine capacity. For Merleau-Ponty the body is the conduit for experiencing the world and a person is the combination of those experiences; a person comes to know the external life-world from the subjective vantage of his corporeal experience.

Like Husserl before him, Merleau-Ponty assumes that to be alive is to experience and participate in the spatiotemporal framework into which we are born and through which we come to accept the world as a given. An individual interacts with the world to meet his physiological needs and his psychological desires, but in order to do so successfully he must have a sense of the spatiality and temporality of his body as this is the mechanism by which sense data is received and processed. For example, early in childhood, a person develops an intuition for the length of his arm, then for the distance of the cup on the table and the time it will take his fingers to reach that distance, curl around the cup and raise the cup to his mouth. Eventually the child abstracts this spatiotemporal awareness into an understanding of the existence of objects (cups or other) separate and apart from himself in different spaces.

As Merleau-Ponty explains,

Man taken as a concrete being is not a psyche joined to an organism, but the movement to and fro of existence which at one time allows itself to take corporeal form and at others moves towards personal acts...there is not a single impulse in a living body which is entirely fortuitous in relation to psychic intentions, not a single mental act which has not found at least its germ or its general outline in physiological tendencies. (*Phenomenology*, 88)

In this way the objects of the world exist objectively, independent of man, while man relates to the world using the only perspective of which he is capable, that of his corporeal consciousness.

While this level of individuality would appear to make shared experience difficult, Merleau-Ponty suggests that consciousness allows us to reach beyond our individual sense data. To be a conscious being is to internalize the external sense data in such a way as to comprehend that the experience is not solely individual but may be had by others, e.g. the child recognizes that others too have a similar desire to quench thirst and the ability to reach for a glass of water. Hence, Merleau-Ponty determines, “To be a consciousness or rather *to be an experience* is to hold inner communication with the world, the body and other people, to be with them instead of being beside them.” (96)

In *Phenomenology and the Theory of Science*, Aron Gurwitsch further develops this relationship between the perception and evaluation of sense data, treating it as a vital, simultaneous and inseparable element of consciousness. For him,

the life-world and all that it comprises, man as a mundane existent, all his modes of existing and conducting himself in the life-world, reveal themselves as correlates of acts and operations of consciousness and of multifarious concatenations, syntheses, and systematic organizations of those acts and operations. (13)³

³ Italics by Gurwitsch as printed in the original text.

Our reality is in fact more than the internalization of external sense data into an objective form; it is the continuous (and ostensibly instantaneous) equilibration of the external and internal. Consciousness is a basic requirement for knowing ourselves as human beings and phenomenology is the examination of the method by which consciousness “open[s] up access to objects and entities of every kind...” (13). Thus, at every moment the mind connects sensory experiences and binds them to create the consciousness we interpret as the self. This same “self” reflectively analyzes and systematizes the experiences and consciousness of which it was born as a means to know the world beyond itself.

In addition, Merleau-Ponty recognizes that body and consciousness together are ever adapting to the dynamism of movement, which “is not limited to submitting passively to space and time, it actively assumes them, it takes them up in their basic significance which is obscured in the commonplaceness of established situations.” (*Phenomenology*, 102) Because our consciousness can only know and understand the body as existing through time and in space, we assess and acclimate to and through movement. We have the capacity to readily adjust to fluctuations in our spatiotemporal reality, but we can also become quickly accustomed to and even take comfort in certain spatiotemporal relations over others. Given that this preferential selectivity is the result of an active corporeal/consciousness connection, it would seem that some level of intuitive or pre-conscious valuation of the experience must be built into the experience itself.

It is particularly significant that, regardless of preference, humans are keenly able to universalize individual experience. As Husserl pointed out in his lectures on

Phenomenological Psychology, “The supreme universality of the single instance is manifestly a form which must be closely related to the all-inclusive form of the world.” (74) In effect, the life-world is an objectively recognizable form in which all humans can find common ground that is born of singular perceptions deemed significant enough to be universalized.

Applying these concepts of phenomenology to Western contemporary dance, we can begin to discover analogous elements. Dance is a uniquely corporeal art in that the body is the essence of the art. (Unlike other arts that require something external in addition to the body, in dance the body is simultaneously canvas, brush and paint.) From the very first dance class, dancers are guided by their sensitivity to their physical sense data and trained to develop a heightened awareness of their personal relation to the specified space and time in which they move. The slightest shift of the body can drastically change the execution of a movement. The timing with which a movement is done not only determines success or failure from an aesthetic perspective, but can also be the difference between a moment that appears magical and one that is injurious. Because contemporary dance gives equal weight to “steps” and “transitions” while pushing the dancers’ physicality to extremes, the need for physical acuity is often greater in this style of dance than in any other. And this heightened sensitivity inevitably leads dancers and choreographers to discover and challenge the dynamic potential of movement within what most people would assume to be a bound spatiotemporal existence.

It is through the dancing body that the choreographer universalizes the singular individual. Combining her own physical historicity and perceptions with

those of the dancer(s), the choreographer creates an objectively recognizable form, a dance, that when viewed in its entirety is always identified, despite changes of cast, venue or audience, as that particular dance *x*.

To reach the level of professional contemporary concert dancer or choreographer requires the ability to communicate something (stories, emotions, ideas) to a viewer not through some predetermined, universally understood movement, but through any movement (pedestrian, gestural, classical, or urban) incorporated into the work by the choreographer. This demands a particular consciousness as well as a heightened corporeal awareness.

We have already noted that any attempt to discuss dance will need to include mention of space and time. Because of this spatiotemporal nature, dance in general is an experience rather than an object and to fully grasp the experience of dance, the sense data that is the dance must be absorbed pre-reflectively. Just as one does not reflect on every moment of the process of drinking a glass of water as one is in the process, to fully grasp the experience of the dance performance both dancer and viewer must assume a particular consciousness and immerse themselves fully, suspending reflection till after the work has been completed. While performing, the dancer must be “in” the work simultaneously as an individual carrying his own physical historicity and as dancer carrying out a specified, preset choreography. He must be fully, actively and attentively present to all that is happening as it is happening, but not to the extent that he is distracted by his own reflective analysis. In short, the dancer must experience the dance completely and in so doing be the experience of the dance for the viewer.

The spatiotemporal nature of dance lends the experience a particular *gestalt*, as well. Watching random movement phrases is not the same as watching a complete dance and can even be a significant misrepresentation of the work as a whole. But whereas classical ballet and even many early modern works were structured in segments and sub-segments that could conceivably be shown apart from the complete work (ballet galas are still often comprised of a series of *pas de deux* and solo variations from full length works), Western contemporary concert dance is usually structured with the intention of being taken as a single entity. Giving equal weight to steps and transitions makes the dance a singular whole that is far more than the sum of its parts and cannot be accurately dissected. While all dances are broken down in the rehearsal process for the purposes of learning and “cleaning” a work, contemporary concert dances are very seldom presented before an audience in this broken down form. And even in informal viewings of works in progress, choreographers and dancers of contemporary works are often uncomfortable presenting segments out of context.

In *Problems of Art* Susanne Langer defines dance as “an apparition of active powers, a *dynamic image*.” (5) Noting that dance is more than the sum of its parts, she recognizes that the aesthetic elements of a dance together “create something over and above what is physically there.” (4) Key in her analysis of dance is the observation that dance “expresses the nature of human feeling” (7) and requires a particular state of consciousness to do so. The dancer does not express her feelings,

but rather expresses the feeling of the dance.⁴ Langer grants, and undoubtedly most dancers would confirm, that a dancer may draw upon life experience to recreate or illuminate the emotion being portrayed, but she clarifies that this is significantly different from personally feeling the emotion during a performance. Choreographer Alonzo King wholly agrees with this concept, stating, “The dancers are more concerned with illuminating an idea rather than expressing their personal feelings. Because of the depth of their movement investigations, and the clarity of their understanding, they live in the moment and the work is theirs.” (Yiannaki—Lines Ballet)

In *The Phenomenology of Dance* Maxine Sheets also presents the concept of the aesthetic experience of dance as a phenomenological one and notes that to make it a successful experience, a dual consciousness is required of both performer and viewer. It is necessary but by no means sufficient for the dancer to properly represent what is asked. In addition to the dancer simultaneously having some sense of her self and of the emotions/ideas being portrayed as part of the dance, the viewer must be complicit in maintaining his own duality. Sheets explains, “Only when we give ourselves to what is being presented, wholly and unequivocally, neither analyzing nor judging, but intuiting what is going on as a *Gestalt*, separating neither the body from the movement nor the movement from the dance, do we see the form which sustains the illusion.” (78) For Sheets it is by willingly suspending the everyday reality of our life-world, including that of being in a theatre to watch a dance performance, that the

⁴ For example, in the first variation of Balanchine’s *Four Temperaments* the dancer herself does not feel melancholic. On a purely personal level, she may be giddy with excitement at having just become engaged, but what is presented in the movement conveys a sense of what it is to feel melancholic.

viewer enters the emotional realm being created by the dancers. If either party returns to the consciousness of daily life mid-performance, be it the dancer worrying about a costume malfunction or the viewer being distracted by a text message, the magic of the aesthetic experience is lost.

Having established the required consciousness for an aesthetic experience, Sheets then examines what it is that is being experienced. She states, "Movement in dance is peculiar in that it neither signifies something otherwise designatable, nor is any particular movement in the dance a symbol in and of itself." (79) Like Langer, she recognizes that dance cannot be separated from, and yet is more than, the phenomenon of the body moving in time and space. In and of themselves, individual movements do not necessarily symbolize or represent anything particular. Only when the movements are unified in the form of a complete dance does a peculiar transformation occur. What separately might have been a random swinging of arms, an oddly exaggerated walk, potentially dizzying turns, a twist of the spine and a worrisome fall to the floor take on a different significance when strung together in a particular manner and executed with a particular timing and intentionality of focus. Unified as a dance, these movements express/communicate something that did not exist seconds before and that ceases to exist when the dance is completed.

Sheets concludes, "It is thus the qualitative nature and structure of movement as a revelation of sheer force which is the foundation of the unique illusion which any dance creates and the pure phenomenon of feeling which it reflects." (85) This is particularly relevant to contemporary concert dance in that it is the unified form of the

movements, particularly selected out of all possible human movement to form the dance as a whole, which provides access to feeling.

In discussing a recent commission for The Australian Ballet, choreographer Wayne McGregor seems to confirm this. For him, every work begins with the question, “What is it that I want the body to say about the ideas in the piece?” (Dyad 1929—*Behind Ballet*) From there he creates the movement vocabulary he believes carries the essential message of that work. The movement reflects the ideas through feeling, and it is through feeling that the visceral experience of the dance is had.

In an interview about her work for the American Dance Festival, Kate Weare also emphasizes the importance of feeling and suggests that through the experience of a dance, viewers may understand something that defies linguistic articulation. She hypothesizes, “Maybe they understand it on a more feeling based, more visceral level. That’s where I think dance can be really powerful, is that it goes sort of past your brain or underneath your brain and into something even more powerful than your brain.” Weare thinks contemporary dance is most successful when it can be felt without needing to be analyzed and intends her own works to “speak” directly to the pre-reflective consciousness that feels, perceives and experiences the dance.

But not all contemporary choreographers believe analysis should be subordinate to feeling. William Forsythe creates dance as a way of exploring mind/body connections. For him movement is a way of connecting and understanding ostensibly disparate thoughts as well as feelings. He explains, “each instance of choreography is ideally at odds with its previous defining incarnations as it strives to testify to the plasticity and wealth of our ability to reconceive and detach ourselves

from positions of certainty.” (*Choreographic Objects*) Truly a phenomenologist in his approach to dance, Forsythe embraces the endless potentialities of dynamism and the choreographic discoveries that come from exploring the relationship between consciousness and sense data, all of which he uses to encourage reflection and analysis in both dancer and viewer.

Thus far, the phenomenological approach makes room for individual dancers to relate to and interpret movements in a subjective manner while maintaining the objective form of the choreographed work. Because of their highly sensitized corporeal consciousness, the dancers themselves are privy to a heightened attentiveness of their spatiotemporal sensory experience within and throughout the dance being performed. Moreover, the non-transitions that make up so much of Western contemporary dance directly relate to the non-transitions of active, perceptual consciousness. But just how is a viewer who has never trained in any form of dance nor previously experienced a concert dance able to relate to the movements being performed on the stage?

Dance seems to carry a particularly visceral impact for the simple reason that the dancer performing produces an art that (at least theoretically) could be done by any body. It is the pure human-ness of a body, much like any other, moving in space and through time in a manner unique to itself that makes dance distinctive. To a great extent the viewer can “feel” the dancer because the viewer has felt himself. There is universality in a reach, a jump, a turn, a response to music. Certainly the majority of viewers do not have the required physicality or the training to move as Baryshnikov. But the majority of viewers have some sense, if only subconscious, of what their own

muscles feel like when reaching towards a loved one or jumping with excitement. As Merleau-Ponty notes, "...my body moves itself, my movement deploys itself. It is not ignorant of itself; it is not blind for itself; it radiates from a self..." (284) And it is that awareness of self as body, which produces the kinesthetic sensitivity that then makes possible a kinesthetic empathy in the viewer. Granted, such physical empathy may also be felt by the sports aficionado watching a football or basketball game. But what sets concert dance apart is the combination of physical empathy and human emotion presented in a structured manner with the express intention of communicating something to or sharing something with the viewer via those elements.

Langer reminds us that through the "outward showing of an inward nature, an objective presentation of a subjective reality" (9), the audience experiences the feelings being presented. And it is precisely because the feelings are objectively symbolized through the physical ownership of the dancer's movements and not the personal emotions of an individual that the feelings are accessible to the wide range of human experiences of a single audience.

Also noting that emotion is born of the constant interaction between the body and the brain, science writer Jonah Lehrer applies neuroscience to Walt Whitman's "poetic hypothesis—the idea that feelings begin in the flesh," and explains, "bodily changes are detected by the cortex, which connects them to the sensation that caused the change in the first place." (19) In a very real way feeling is created as much in our muscles as in our brain, and consciousness is the link between the two.

Lehrer looks to research done by Antonio Damasio, Director of the Brain and Creativity Institute at the University of Southern California, whose work has shown that “the mind can induce it’s own emotions.” (20) Damasio not only found that the mind can trick the body into feeling by essentially hallucinating a change in the body, but also that “feelings generated by the body are an essential element of rational thought.” (20) This means a dancer responds emotionally to the movement because her brain is receiving a particular sensation from her muscles and her consciousness interprets the physical feeling as a particular emotion. The viewer takes this a step further: his consciousness induces in his brain the feeling of the dancer’s physicality. This kinesthetic empathy triggers both the corresponding emotion and an understanding of that emotion.

In *The Feeling of What Happens*, Damasio clarifies the roles of body and emotion in consciousness, noting that emotion may be produced in direct response to physical sensory stimuli or in response to the mind conjuring objects or situations from memory. But the process is not biologically preset: development and culture also play key roles. Damasio says,

In all probability, development and culture superpose the following influences on the preset devices: first, they shape what constitutes an adequate inducer of a given emotion; second, they shape some aspect of the expression of emotion; third, they shape the cognition and behavior which follows the deployment of an emotion. (57)

These guidelines serve to explain the importance of individual, personal experience on emotion. Individual experience might be universalized into movements that constitute an objective form that can be discussed and analyzed using common intellectual ground, but the experience of the movements (for viewer and dancer

alike) is always influenced by one's individual historicity and is therefore deeply personal.

Whether they use these relations as the foundation of a work or merely to inform their work, choreographers of Western contemporary concert dance are quite aware of the connection between the body, consciousness and emotion and how these may be perceived by the viewer. Forsythe believes choreographers and dancers together use their physical awareness to express much more than the purely physical and likens the movements of contemporary dance to "physical thinking."

(Choreographic Objects) Similarly, McGregor speaks of his movement as an exploration of "kinesthetic thought" and is often influenced by the idea of consciousness. *(Making of Entity)* Alonzo King, too, deems consciousness a vital element in the aesthetic experience of contemporary movement. He suggests, "What someone sees is uniquely personal and completely dependent on [his] ability to see. What we see with is our consciousness." He recognizes that because of its deep impact on consciousness, the personal historicity of the viewer can be as vital and determinative a factor to the successful understanding of the kinesthetic thoughts presented in a dance as the movements choreographed or the dancer's execution of those movements.

Damasio's studies, like King's observations, suggest that sensory data gained via kinesthetic empathy may make contemporary concert dance accessible to a wide array of viewers, but that personal (even cultural) history can supersede the most finely crafted of universalized movements.

In comparison to the other aesthetic approaches discussed earlier, the phenomenological approach seems well equipped to address the needs and intricacies of dance in general and of Western contemporary concert dance in particular. It takes into consideration many of the elements deemed essential to dance and provides us a way to speak of the subjective consciousness of the individual, be he dancer, choreographer or viewer, as well as a spatiotemporal framework through which individual corporeal experience can be shown to have a universal link in an objective form. However, it is questionable whether this approach, taken in the traditionally defined manner as established by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, fully tackles one of the key elements of today's society: the actively evaluative mind.

Traditionally the phenomenological approach looked to understand experience by engaging a mind that took it all in before engaging in any significant form of reflection or analysis. But the mind of today is trained from birth to engage actively. Short of deep meditation, for which one must consciously train oneself to dismiss the constant barrage of thoughts that flow through the "still" mind, one is hard pressed to think of a moment that the mind is not actively engaged in processing some aspect of corporeal experience, physiological need or psychological desire. Today's mind is making evaluative choices even as one is mid-experience. At every moment the mind connects sensory experiences- ignoring some, highlighting others- binding them to create the consciousness we interpret as the self and through which we continue to evaluate the next round of sense data. The judgment may be preconscious or in some way intuitive, but it is nevertheless a valuative judgment that influences the experience.

More recent work in the phenomenological camp has indeed sought to include the challenges of our sensory overloaded society as a part of this philosophical system. Alva Noe, a philosopher at UC Berkeley and a member of the Institute for Cognitive and Brain Sciences, does not consider perceptual experience to be something one passively receives, but rather something in which one must be actively involved, willingly or not, by the engagement of the senses in response to the world in which one lives. In an online symposium on art and cognition entitled “Art as Enaction”, Noe explains, “the content [of an experience] is given only thanks to the perceiver’s exercise of knowledge of sensorimotor contingencies. The content of experience isn’t really given at all- it is *enacted*.” (Art as Enaction) For this reason Noe proposes that an artist is actually an “experience engineer.” He explains, “Perceptual experience is itself a temporally extended activity, an activity of skill-based exploration of the environment.” (Noe—Art as Enaction) To him the artist uses his skills to create and illuminate- to enact- possible experiences to which the viewer can, through the aesthetic experience, relate and thereby understand his perceptual experience of the world.

Notably, Noe studied the corporeal consciousness required for dance and determined, “dance is a model of how we relate to the world” because the “skillful ability to move is at the very core of what it is to be a sensory perceiving agent.” (*Dance as a Way of Knowing*) He himself has begun looking into the neural processes of dance improvisation and choreography and believes the work of contemporary choreographers like William Forsythe could shed light on the workings of consciousness. Hopefully further inquiry into improvisation and choreography

will also illuminate how individual perception influences the specific movement choices and what the valuation process is for that instantaneous, seemingly pre-conscious decision. In the mean time, phenomenology continues to be best approach through which to analyze and discuss the workings of contemporary concert dance.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Dance allows us to communicate through our most primal and yet vital interaction with the life-world, the movement of the body. A corporeally based form of communication, it is inevitably bound by the space and time in which it exists and reflective of the prevailing consciousness of that same space and time. As such, dance echoes not only the thoughts and feelings of the choreographer and dancer(s), but also of the socio-economic, political and even scientific leanings of the culture from which those individual emanate and to which their expression is a response, even if a sub-conscious one.

Just as every person carries with them a singular history that informs his subjective perceptions of the world, every dance has a singular existence never to be recreated or repeated. Certainly a set choreographic form of a work can be restaged and performed again, but it will be a new dance insofar as it is performed by dancers whose lives are different today from yesterday and whose bodies bring that added bit of history with them.

For the viewer, too, it is impossible to separate personal experiences, preferences and biases from the experience of the work. We react to a feeling the work engenders in us, then rationalize that feeling, quite often almost instantaneously. Yet in subsequent viewings we need not be ruled by that first visceral response. Knowing something of the history of a dance or of the artist's intention in creating the work may provoke a new respect for a work that previously left us unmoved. We may become disillusioned in a piece that we

discover was created for purely commercial gains. We may find a second viewing of a work does not live up to the memory of the original experience or be pleasantly surprised when it surpasses that memory.

Like the river that cannot be stepped in twice, a dance is new each time it is performed. This is part of what keeps dance “alive” and also part of what makes a permanent, successful understanding of all dance under a singular aesthetic theory unlikely.

Historically, phenomenology was meant as an approach to understanding man’s experience of the world. It has had very little to say about art in general and nothing specific to say about dance in particular. So what can phenomenology say of dance as an art that has not already been said by the other approaches previously discussed?

In transposing this approach to the experience of dance, we first note, as Noe observed, that the experience of dance is not so different from daily experience of life in that it involves corporeal consciousness in time and space. And yet the experience of dance as an art form- of concert dance- is not a part of the normal daily experience for most people: it is the experience of a time and space that has been altered and manipulated to communicate or express something.

Certainly any philosophy of dance as an art form must account for expression and structural form as key aesthetic elements, but merely melding these two approaches as they have been presented to date neglects the vital element of kinesthetic empathy, which is created through the enaction of the

corporeal consciousness. The phenomenological approach to dance addresses corporeal consciousness as experienced by choreographer, dancer and viewer and makes room to include important aspects of expressionism and formalism, insofar as these are innate to the experience of the dance work.

As established in the earlier historical overview, there will always be some creative invention, addition or development to challenge established thoughts on what Western concert dance is or should be. We can find commonalities that make possible discussion of the dance styles with which we already have some familiarity, but no theory can anticipate what is to come. Therefore, until the next revolution in the art form challenges our current understanding, the phenomenological approach seems best suited to address how concert dance generally and contemporary concert dance in particular create this spatiotemporally bound connection between the uniqueness of the individual and the commonality of the human experience using only our innate corporeal consciousness.

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