

CORE MODULE ONE / Final paper

Art and Performance Research Within and Across the Humanities

Seminar MA Art and Performance Research

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A DANCE STEP AND A TURN, A FALL AND AGAIN.

Twenty years of poststructuralism ought to have taught us the impossibility of accessing unencoded experience of any sort. The obsession with the body to the exclusion of dance is perhaps symptomatic of a failure to think beyond the binary opposition between body and mind that seems to hold out the body as the realm where the problems of the mind take on a concrete form that removes from them the stigma of scholarly abstraction. The pervasive absence of dance from cultural studies may well reflect dance's inability to provide the sorts of bodies cultural studies scholars find most engaging. But this, far from being a disadvantage, suggests the importance of what cultural studies has to learn from dance scholarship."

Amy Koritz, quoted in Andrew Hewitt, Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 7.

introduction

Perhaps this is a path somewhere between the autotheoretical and the academic, where I place my own working body as the object of study. I like thinking through the filter of labour, perhaps as an orientation closer to a materialist dialectic. I wanted to begin by positioning my body within the back-and-forth of consumption / production in the dance sector today, in Amsterdam. Moving between being the creator of my own work, centralising labour in relation to other media, positioning myself in the in-between of creation, and being an extra, an appendix to a structure that exceeds unimaginable budgets, hyper-codified, like *Swan Lake*.

This is why I decided to begin by speaking about something from yesterday. Yesterday? Yes, yesterday, during my rehearsals at the National Opera. I am sitting on the stage of the Dutch National Opera in Amsterdam, where the five *Swan Lake* répétiteurs sit to watch the scenes and space them. I am interested in exploring this ambivalence of freelance work, moving between being at the centre of the stage as the author of my own work and being an extra in a classic that has been reverberating for over 150 years, and in those extremes to make a detour on perceptions.

I am no longer the same person who aspired to that, nor am I interested in it anymore. As a dancer, I become aware of the space I occupy. It is as if I begin to space myself within the context of production, labour, and the contemporaneity of dance today, in Amsterdam, now, and I see conflicts in every niche. I admit this artificiality makes me nervous, it makes me uncomfortable, and at the same time I try to detach it from the political symptom in order to sublimate it into a fantasy at the service of the spectator.

Artificiality serves to inscribe something of the social. Following Hewitt's reasoning, the social is always choreographed. Articulation requires intervention, and choreography requires a temporality, a rhythm that responds to an organisational structure. I think about the obsession with intervening in it and, at the same time, the repetition of never quite being able to grasp it.

an extra out of the symptom

I am sitting on the stage of the Dutch National Opera in Amsterdam, where the five *Swan Lake* répétiteurs sit to watch the scenes and space them. *Spacing* is what happens almost a week before a ballet: placing bodies in space in relation to distance and audience, but fundamentally, and for the function of ballet, according to the symmetry it needs in order to be readable. It is particular because there are répétiteurs, people responsible for reproducing the classic almost symptomatically, in perfect scale and spatiality, drawing on different references. It might be a local version from ten years ago, or a version performed by a London ballet company in 1940. It depends on what they consider relevant in order to contemporise it, today, in 2026. And although they believe they have this freedom of interpretation and modification, we are speaking of millimetric changes, centimetres in the angles of profiles, or subtle shifts in the tone of a two-second turn in the middle of a fifty-minute act. I think about the obsession with intervening in it and, at the same time, the repetition of never quite being able to grasp it.

It is from this spacing that the rehearsal of technique begins, which is interesting to watch because the dancers are not dancing at maximum intensity, as if they were being watched by 900 people every night. They are in a low-key, marked rehearsal, and this makes a different porosity appear in their bodies, where the tone is oriented towards spacing themselves rather than producing the ballet code to show and applause. In these moments when the tone drops, the répétiteurs become alert to the possibility of something no longer functioning, and sometimes ask the dancers if they are doing alright, while a dancer has just performed four jumps with a turn at the end, repeated twice within ten minutes, except that the last time it was done with slightly less intensity. This brings me to the question of those who guard the classic as a fixed object, checking, almost lovingly, whether everything is alright... or everything is wrong.

Ultimately, I begin to sense the fragility of the staging, of this tremendous structure involving more than fifty dancers on stage, plus an orchestra. I find it amusing to watch the maestro pushing the tempo, and the dancers accelerating so as not to fall out of time. At moments, I admire the dancers as if I knew nothing about theory, as if I were new to the world. They make me perceive something beyond myself; let's say, they take me out of myself.

It is there that I began thinking about this force of moving outside oneself towards the other. It reminded me of essays on Eros, where Byung-Chul Han describes the erotic as that passage from oneself towards the other, the movement towards. Well, yes, something of the erotic emerges in my observation, as a spectator immersed within it. Something in their technique functions as a spell.

And I return, and I step outside myself in order to see again. And I confirm that a classic holds this possibility: to situate ambivalence within a spectator who goes out to see something, but who looks as if seeing it for the first time. It is beautiful to watch, somehow convincing me in giving up the aesthetic, almost without any filter. I think before I would have felt more conflicted about the role of being an extra, but somehow, this time, unlike when I did it in 2023, I see it more as a symptom of an era. For Lacan, the symptom is that which insists and repeats itself, not only for him, for my psychoanalyst too, and for *Swan Lake* too. The black swan insists and repeats itself. Maybe this is the most visible characteristic of a classic: it traverses time by insistence. From its premiere at the end of the nineteenth century at the Bolshoi until today, it has been performed, I dare to say, thousands of times across these 150 years of history.

Anyway, I am sitting there, watching Act I, with my noble costume ready for me to enter in Act III and become an extra who acts and performs the nobility of the early European

Enlightenment. It begins with a photograph of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. I get a little emotional because I know he was gay, and I imagine how queer he could have been in this Russian context at the end of the nineteenth century, how much could have been allowed, whether yes, whether no — I don't know — a trans-temporal confidence with a faggot from another time.

I was moved by seeing the face, because really, what he did as a work is a hundred times more than a DJ with a MacBook Pro at a rave today. The instrumentalisation of composition was something else, as were the notions of complexity, and of completion, of what it meant for a piece to be finished. Let us remember that we are speaking of a time when Marx's Capital had not yet been published. We are situated within a different conception of production, automation, and, as we will elaborate on later, a principle of alienation, as proposed by the technique of ballet.

But I resist wanting to compare one symptom with another, and I try to contextualise and focus. I look at him: enormous, in the centre of a curtain. The queen appears behind, the prince too, and a bird somewhere between black and green moves its wings, announcing the final tragedy.

That is to say, one can see in the dramaturgy of the work a model of Greek tragedy, minimal and sublimated, where the tragic ending is announced from the beginning in the form of a threat. The queen is embodied by a dancer over seventy years old, which makes me think about her as a body and as a dancer, whether at any point in her career she ever thought she would arrive at this moment, having a role because she had aged. And there, a somewhat transhistorical world opens up for me > the faggot from 150 years ago, the dancer who has danced, I dare to say, perhaps 55 of her 70 years? A body completely taken over and constructed in relation to a discipline, to ballet. Her hands, full of experience and mannered gesture, appear at the beginning as an index of periodicity. She embodies, a little, a ballet from before, opening the scene for a ballet of now.

Anyway, at this point everything moves me, from a very particular critical distance. I am no longer the same person who aspired to that, nor am I interested in it anymore. As a dancer, I become aware of the space I occupy. It is as if I begin to space myself within the context of production, labour, and the contemporaneity of dance today, in Amsterdam, now, and I see conflicts in every niche. Anyway, I think about what my life would have been if I had continued ballet all my life, and I think how lucky I am that I didn't, but with suspicion.

Spacing myself makes me understand what place I occupy. Now I am the spectator of a first act, dressed as a bourgeois, prepared to come out in the third and represent the bourgeoisie. I admit this artificiality makes me nervous, it makes me uncomfortable, and at the same time I try to detach it from the political symptom in order to sublimate it into a fantasy at the service of the spectator. I think something about making art functions there, at the practice of catalyzing.

from there to nowness on a click

Just as Andrew Hewitt names in the introduction to his book *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*, ballet emerges alongside, and within, the space of the Enlightenment at the beginning of the eighteenth century, as a social representation of perfection within a bourgeoisie and nobility in decline, and as the representation of an alignment of bodies that separates dance from its communal factor and cuts it, dissects it, into stylised movements and exciting acrobatics that produce and reproduce aesthetics in the service of the new project > accelerationism, the human-machine, the body as artificiality:

[...] bourgeois class cannot have been without effect on the content of the ideas that were developed under its protection. Thus, aesthetic concerns entered from the very beginning into bourgeois political calculations. More specifically, here I wish to argue that dance—as an aesthetic form that had yet to fully establish its autonomy as something other than a social observance or entertainment—was a particularly “porous” membrane of communication between the aesthetic and sociopolitical realms.

But what is my purpose in naming artificiality? I think that the imprinting of aesthetics onto the body produces an effect of artificiality, necessary for its inscription within a discipline. The artificial is perhaps connoted as that which is not natural, in opposition to everything that is created outside of the “natural,” in quotation marks. Yet nothing exists outside of it. That separation is an illusory negativity, a schism that reproduces the very abstraction itself. In itself, everything belongs to the order of the natural. The pristine ideal that nature is something given, born, primordial, has come to an end. It is the refrain of the political right, calling for a return to tradition, to the natural.

This is why thinking about the artificiality of the body might allow us to re-enter the terrain that has been taken away from us, that is, to insert ourselves back into it. Yet, at the same time, this artificiality, within the context of a discipline, serves to reproduce and

commercialise it. Like any manufactured object, imprinted with a certain aesthetic, it can be dissected, sold, exported, and transferred, from 150 years ago until today.

Artificiality serves to inscribe something of the social. Following Hewitt's reasoning, the social is always choreographed. He understands the choreographic as an articulation, neither as an aesthetic nor as the political itself, but as something that articulates. Very much like the way certain sectors of the political left refer to the state, the articulation of the state, as opposed to the invisible hand of the state imagined by liberals. Articulation requires intervention, and choreography requires a temporality, a rhythm that responds to an organisational structure.

This makes me think of ballet in the service of a nostalgic perfection belonging to a nobility in decline, of the extensions of a body that occupy time in its entirety, infinite projections, like colonising links reaching towards every corner of space.

In itself, as an effect, we can understand the rise of ballet as a counterforce to pagan dances, to street dances, and fundamentally, to everything that is not communal. This becomes clear in the frontality of ballet, in contrast to African dances, African American dances, and the development of dance outside European Westernism. The pelvis, which could be understood as the area from which the body rotates in order to turn and reveal its other three-dimensional surfaces; a weight towards the floor, a body that turns. Ballet, instead, always works through frontalities within its turns. A frontality that rotates, directed towards a fixed point in order not to lose balance.

Through this brief choreographic description, departing from a more kinaesthetic analysis, we can really begin to see the symptom investing in what serves its own interests. To this day, the Dutch National Opera & Ballet in Amsterdam receives an annual budget of 36 million euros from the state.

the social is always ahead

It somehow brings me a sense of calm to think that the *social* is always already there, ahead of us, moving what we later integrate and codify. I like thinking of the social as an impossible form of importation, with its mystery of historical and future convergences, politics, atrocities and horrors, the uncanniness of the present, the necessity of making art in the world, things related to the social, art as a translator of and an intervention into the social, in its complete artificiality.

Then I begin thinking about the back-and-forth of the freelancer that I am, making my own work as a creator of contemporary dance and performance in this Northern European context, today. I think about the back-and-forth of a life, just as I do when thinking about being a ballet dancer. What would my forms of production have been if I were living in Buenos Aires today, in another context of wealth and poverty, with different alarms? But this back-and-forth within an imaginary serves to position myself between extremes. The social, I would reply to Hewitt, has to do with geopolitics.

But why did I decide to work with a duet with death? In the thing the *second & the first*, the piece appears as a solo that unfolds into a duet when the literal representation of the Grim Reaper appears, death, with its scythe, yes, in all its literality.

I found it interesting to recreate a figure of immediate readability, in order to access other levels of abstraction of labour through a rapid point of access for the audience. But also to confront myself with the challenge of representation in dance, which is like a ghost that nobody ever wants to touch, but that is always there, waiting for the exact moment to speak. And so it ends up happening, because within this accelerationism there is a growing symbolic poverty. Coming back to it, death as a duet also made me process practices of mediation between one thing and another, and moreover, in delaying actions, it was like being confronted with de-accelerationism itself, represented. We wanted, as I mentioned earlier in the introduction, to filter death through the perspective of labour. That is to say, the choreographic began, following a line of reasoning from *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*, to unfold systems of mediation between money and art. Both as forms of organisation. Money because dying is expensive, art because contemporary dance is inscribed within it.

an approximate conclusion within my practice

Why within my practice? Because between being an extra and a principal, between being a freelancer and being employed, it is the same body that metabolises all these levels of metaphor, representation and labour. It is my own body that is responsible for reproducing and organising the social into a form of labour.

And moreover, to think that the symptom only ceases when meaning is given to it, understanding that it never repeats itself in the same place, that every repetition is different from the previous one. And that desire, the very desire to engage in a practice, is a remedy in the face of this.

I find myself asking questions about passion, desire, intuition, and also, on a deeper layer, about the place I chose to spatialise myself within this social context, the space I chose to occupy and assigned to myself, the number of communities and works I have been part of, full of people, the large-scale productions, the years of study.

I think about this reservoir of futurity in the making of art, beyond a repetitive critique, as if there were a very wide and expansive present within the practice itself. Academia has pushed us to dissect and explain everything, but I feel encouraged to leave questions open, and to allow emotional states of subjective positioning to remain as an important place not to conceptualise. I think it is there, where the non-conceptualisable can resist, at least a little, the cutting of the social, without losing the possibility of being either art or money.

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1. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book V: Formations of the Unconscious, 1957–1958*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).
 2. Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
 3. Han, Byung-Chul. *The Agony of Eros*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).
 4. Georgelou, Konstantina, Efrosini Protopapa, and Danae Theodoridou, eds. *The Practice of Dramaturgy: Working on Actions in Performance*. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017.