

THE DANCER'S BODY

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1 Everyone is familiar with the general characteristics of Merce Cunningham's choreography: its rejection of expressive conventions, the decentred stage space, the autonomy of the music and the movements, the incorporation of chance into choreographic method, etc. All of these characteristics submit to a coherent logic, which works on the principle that one can render movement in itself, without external references. The idea, for Cunningham, was to do away with mimesis in danced movements: the mimesis of 'figures', the mimesis of a stage space that reproduced outside space, and even a kind of mimesis of 'interiority', since the body was thought to be capable of translating the emotions of a subject or group.

These three aspects in turn conditioned others, such as the opening out of space. In Cunningham's words: 'The classical ballet, by maintaining the image of the Renaissance perspective in stage thought, kept a linear form of space. The modern American dance, stemming from German expressionism and the personal feelings of the various American pioneers, made space into a series of lumps, or often just static hills on the stage with actually no relation to the larger space of the stage area, but simply forms that by their connection in time made a shape. Some of the space-thought coming from German dance opened the space out, and left a momentary feeling of connection with it, but too often the space was not visible enough because the physical action was all of a lightness, like sky without earth, or heaven without hell' (Cunningham, 1992: 37).

The characteristics common to ballet and modern dance (that of Loïe Fuller, Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham) from which Cunningham is attempting to free himself, can be grouped according to three principles: a principle of expression, by which movement is supposed to express emotion; a principle of verticality, which although it may not always direct movement upward, denies the body's weight; and, a principle of organization, whereby the body of the dancer or group of dancers forms an organic whole whose movements converge towards a common goal.

These three principles are related. In *Embattled Garden*, choreographed in 1958, Martha Graham sought to have danced movements reproduce 'the interconnections of these emotions [sexuality, anguish, tension, intensity of

emotional experience] by delineating a relationship between the body's centre and its periphery, and between the pelvis and the rest of the torso' (Foster, 1986: 73). The organic body served to express feelings, whose quality and sublimity inflected the direction of gestures upwards, towards the pure sky. Moreover, the representation of the outer world was translated into situations and behaviours engaging bodies, often described by means of a narrative.

We know that Cunningham combats these three principles by employing two essential weapons: incorporating randomness into choreographic method, and decomposing 'organic' sequences of movement by multiplying traditional articulations.

The adoption of randomness as a choreographic method has wide-ranging effects: once it becomes open-ended, movement is no longer the product of a centralized will, that is, of a subject wishing to express personal feelings in a particular way. In fact, the very notion of a subject (or 'body-subject') tends to disappear.

The relation between music and choreography, two fields that have traditionally operated in unison, is also affected. Since chance is now what directs the changes in danced sequences, the connection to music no longer holds. No longer does music provide the 'signposts' by which dancers guide themselves through alterations in space, rhythm, or relations with the movements of other dancers. Cunningham has given chance such importance that dancers might not receive the musical score for a piece until the day of the première. The outcome is not hard to guess: music and dance become two divergent series that intersect only at certain 'structural points', and between which no relation is established. Cunningham comments that, 'It is essentially a non-relationship' (Cunningham, 1951a: 52). This Deleuzian term indicates to what extent Cunningham's choreography can be seen to resonate with a Deleuzian theory of series.

A third consequence of incorporating chance into dance is particularly interesting: the break it produces in the traditional frame (or code) governing corporeal possibilities, and how that opens the body out to other previously unexplored movements. This implies yet another break, this time with the traditional 'models' governing the co-ordination of movements. These models, used in ballet as well as in the school of Doris Humphrey, always presupposed an organic image of the body as a finished whole. 'That was surely one of the reasons I began to use random methods in choreography, to break the patterns of personal remembered physical co-ordinations', says Cunningham (1951a: 59).

The latter relates to another procedure Cunningham systematically employs to undo the organization of the body: by multiplying articulated movements, such that sequences are no longer co-ordinated organically, they gain a sort of autonomy stemming from the very autonomy of 'parts of the body'. It is the relation of whole-to-parts that is thereby dislocated.

Cunningham's technique gives as much freedom as possible to parts of the body, so that series of disconnected movements can take off and develop at

the same time in the same body. Cunningham writes: 'This involves the problem of balance of the body, and the sustaining of one part against another part. If one uses the torso as the centre of balance and as the vertical axis at all times, then the question of balance is always related to that central part, the arms and legs balancing each another on either side and in various ways, and moving against each other. If one uses the torso as the moving force itself, allowing the spine to be the motivating force in a visual shift of balance, the problem is to sense how far the shift of balance can go in any direction, and in any time arrangement, and then move instantaneously towards any other direction and in any other time arrangements, without having to break the flow of movement by a catching of the weight, whether by an actual shift of weight, or a break in the time, or other means' (1951b: 253).

Once the centre of balance (torso or spine) has become an autonomous mobile force rather than a static vertical axis, it becomes possible to disarticulate movements from one another, since they no longer have to relate to a fixed body part, but can relate to one that is itself mobile. And since movement has been decomposed into multiplicities, a limb no longer has to align itself with only one body part and with that part in only one position to derive a sense of balance, when numerous parts are available. Any part of the body can now enter into composition with several mobile and plastic axes: movements of the arms and legs will anticipate future points of balance, while simultaneously balancing the body at 'this moment'. Call this a paradoxical or metastable sense of balance – as Deleuze would, after Simondon – presupposing tension and movement and especially a sort of decomposition of the whole body into its parts.

Once configurations of arms and legs on either side of the body dissolve, and movements of limbs disconnect, a mobile balance is achieved, inducing the simultaneous superposition of multiple positions in space. These movements achieve a maximum power of deformation and asymmetry through non-organic variation, as if many bodies were to coexist in a single body.

This increase in articulation allows divergent series of movement to arise at the same instant: a series of gestures disconnected from another series of gestures in the same body; the series wrought by any dancer's body in relation to another body; the music series and that of danced gestures, individually or in groups.

But, given that Cunningham has rejected all referents, meaning that he has rejected any motivation (be it emotional or representational) for movement other than movement itself, the question remains as to what triggers the series of gestures. How can movement, of itself, give rise to movement?

2 Cunningham's greatest difficulty can be formulated as follows: in performing a radical critique of traditional choreographic languages, and in rejecting any external referent other than movement itself, how was he able to transform what remained on the plane of movement after his critique, into the units of a new language?

In dance, the very notion of critique lends itself to debate. When everything takes place on the practical level of danced gesture, there can be no movements that signify negation (of other movements). There are no ‘negative movements’ – for all is affirmative and positive in the presence and fullness of danced movement. Then, what sense does it make to refuse or deny traditional choreographic languages? Even if one invents parodic or satiric movements (as is the case with many choreographers making fun of classical ballet), movement does not actively negate except when it becomes a sign, is doubled, and registers at the semiotic level. In itself, in its kinetic and muscular manifestation, movement is purely affirmative. A negative and negating movement would be one that is self-constraining.

Why would it be necessary to negate traditional choreographic languages? Why not simply discard them? In fact, isn’t this what Cunningham does?

The problem is this: if Cunningham invents a new language without referents, this can only be the outcome of the negation of referential languages, in other words of the negation of the referents of these languages. Such an operation, not restricted to the kinetic level, would thus remain on the aesthetic plane. While one can imagine pure movement without meaning (referent), as a kind of acrobatics or gymnastics (possessing meaning only as dictated by its aims), it is more difficult to conceive of pure movement that is also aesthetic, that is, movement unconditioned by any external elements, yet fulfilling a number of requirements – such as semantic saturation, infinitude or singularity – that make of it an object one could call ‘aesthetic’.

The task, then, consisted in hooking the critique onto a sort of artistic meta-language, to ensure the radical nature of the negation of all internal and external referents, in and by movement itself: a negation of movement by movement that would still preserve the formal aesthetic traits of negating movement.

Clearly, this ‘artistic metalanguage’ could be neither a true metalanguage, nor could it really be said to be artistic. Dance is not a language, first of all, the non-verbal nature of its movements rendering the idea of a meta-language inconceivable. Second, whatever the frame to which the movements were to remain attached while danced movements performed their necessary negations, its progressive dissolution had to achieve a sort of ‘degree zero of art’: the absolute prerequisite for the emergence of a virgin territory where a new language and a new aesthetic frame could come about. In other words, Cunningham’s choreographic language springs at once from a critique of earlier languages and from virgin ground.

It is to this paradox that all of Cunningham’s creative work has had to answer: how do you radically discard ‘the old’ without abandoning the aesthetic domain?

3 One can also pose this question otherwise, by substituting ‘linguistic unit’ and ‘metalinguistic unity’ for ‘language’ and ‘meta-language’. Though these expressions are as ‘theoretical’ as the ones they are replacing, they have the advantage of more adequately designating the reality:

the unit would simply be a minimum series of movements out of which the unity of a danced language would take shape.

The question then becomes: what metalinguistic unity does Cunningham create that is capable of transforming itself into (or acting as) the unit of a new language with no referent other than itself?

Remember that critical decomposition and construction are being undertaken in the name of a new unit(y) of movement which, in a sense, does not exist yet, for it is also the result of the destruction of the earlier languages.

Cunningham goes about it by making an empty space outside and inside.

Outside: He empties stage space (which is also the space of bodies, beyond the personal body that filled it in work such as Martha Graham's). This involves opening out the stage space so that all kinds of events can take place; 'A prevalent feeling among many painters that lets them make a space in which anything can happen is a feeling dancers can have too. Imitating the way nature makes a space, and puts lots of things in it, heavy and light, little and big, all unrelated, yet each affecting all the others', writes Cunningham (1992: 38).

Inside: He strips the dancer's experience of all representative and emotional elements that might drive movement (as in ballet or modern dance). He goes about this by forcing the dancer's attention to focus on pure movement, i.e. on 'the grammar'. Awareness of the body is focused on the energy, articulations, movements, and not at all on emotions or images constructing a narrative, in which case consciousness commands body awareness. Cunningham turns this around to make body awareness command consciousness.

In stripping away emotions and representations that might otherwise trigger movement, it is clear that Cunningham simultaneously empties the stage and the space of the body, which had always been an emotional space. In stripping away images and affect from corporeal experience and in emptying out space, grammar emerges, but what used to motivate or trigger movement has disappeared. For grammar to 'become meaning' as Cunningham loves to say ('the grammar is the meaning'), that is, for grammar to be able to become a constitutive element of movement, 'danced grammar' has to 'fill itself' with meaning; that is, this movement has to be danced, and has to invent its own logic, its own triggering elements, and its own orientation.

What then, one may ask, will replace the discarded elements? And, what will play the roles once assigned to the imagination, emotion and the space of the body? As discussed earlier, it appears that the roles will be taken up by the new unit (or unity) of movement itself, from which other new language combinations will emerge.

4 What does it mean to 'empty out movement'? The process entails creating vacuoles of time inside of movement, by means of techniques much like those used in yoga or Zen meditation. (The importance of both of these practices for Cunningham is well known.) This involves liberating the rhythms of thought from the movements of the body, especially from those of breathing.

Since thinking is no longer bound to the rhythms of the body, its base speed can slow down between one point and another, because space expands, whereas its surface speed may accelerate indefinitely. And since thinking is no longer swept along by breathing (since breathing is under control and independent of cardiac and other rhythms), it does not have to run, having nothing to follow but its own movements. Breathing, in turn, detached from thought, no longer speeds up with fear nor relaxes with feelings of serenity.

Isn't this what Cunningham does? He decomposes 'organic' gestures of the body through movement. He disconnects movements from one another, as if each movement belonged to a different body. Moreover, he assigns arbitrary periods of time to be 'filled up' with choreography. Finally, Cunningham makes thought espouse movement and movement only, and he does so in two ways: both in creating vacuoles of time between movements of the body, and in preparing for the construction of a plane of immanence where the actions of the body can no longer be distinguished from the movements of thought.

We can now understand what is involved in 'emptying out' or excluding emotions and images from the sphere of movements: by concentrating solely on movements, these two series can be freed from that of gestures. For their part, the void or vacuoles allow articulations to proliferate so that movements are no longer linked together on the surface, but are joined by means of a profound continuity. As has sometimes been said of Cunningham's style: his movements 'float'.

The question remains as to what makes these floating movements come together again on the surface to form danced sequences.

5 Several pending problems have yet to be addressed: (a) As we have seen, the emptying out and filling up of movements involved in the destruction and construction of a new language in turn imply the formation of a plane of immanence. For, in disconnecting movements from each other and in disconnecting these from thought, we are preparing a new osmosis whereby thought and the body become one, and whereby a new fluidity, a new kind of movement, may circulate on this plane of immanence that is dance.

This new osmosis comes about through body consciousness: having made itself a body of thought, consciousness orders and directs from within danced movement. What I mean is this: body consciousness implies a field of consciousness simultaneously constituted as a point of consciousness, which then becomes separate. The field of consciousness allows itself to be permeated by the body and thereby acquires two properties:

- it gains the plasticity, continuity, consistency, and pervasiveness of the self-awareness proper to the body;
- as it spreads throughout the body, it transforms into a map of the body; a whole cartography of the body and its movements is drawn.

The point-of-consciousness gains the power to influence the movements of the body by following this map.

(b) We seem to have located the unit of movement that maintains movement in the aesthetic sphere, even as it transforms and annuls itself in the process of negating earlier choreographic languages. It is a unity composed of virtual movement. It is an empty unit of (actual) movement.

The unity belongs to a virtual body whose composition takes place while the composing movements are themselves in decomposition. The multiplication of articulations and gestures (which will give birth to divergent series of movement) enable the construction of a body whose virtuality ensures the profound continuity of the movements that make up the dance.

Let us be more precise about the concept of a virtual body. As we have seen thus far, Cunningham decomposes gestures in the balancing act of the body-in-movement, so that the nexus of positions of bodily parts is no longer that of an organic body. One could even say that to each of the simultaneously held positions made up of heterogeneous gestures there corresponds a different body. (Organic, yes, but out of the multiplicity of organic virtual bodies that constitute one same body there emerges an impossible body, a sort of monstrous body: this is the virtual body.) This body prolongs gesture into virtuality, since what follows from gesture can no longer be perceived by and in an empirical, actual body.

It follows that there is no single body, like the 'proper body' of phenomenology, but rather multiple bodies. The body of the dancer, Cunningham's body, but in fact the body of all dancers, is composed of a multiplicity of virtual bodies.

The unit of virtual movement (or the virtual unity of movement) creates a space where 'everything fits', a space of coexistence and of consistency of heterogeneous series. It ensures several functions: as a non-actual movement stemming from the emptying out of movement, it guarantees that movement can 'reflect' back on itself, since every empirical movement is now doubled by a virtual entity to which it is linked. This means that there is a doubling of movement whereby it is now both virtual and actual; it can therefore 'double back on itself' from the virtual point of view. 'To double back on itself' can mean 'to negate itself' as well as 'to refer back to itself'. The virtual point of view becomes the source for a new type of actual movement and a new choreographic language.

The act of discarding certain classical movements can now be seen as equalling their negation, since the actual movements replacing the earlier ones have been achieved through the emptying out/exclusion of the earlier units, which is to say an emptying out/exclusion for the virtual-in-formation. The outcome is a unit(y) of virtual movement that makes the transformation (of the movements of classical languages) from actual to virtual take on a value of negation (the monstrous body as the negation of the organic body).

That is how the virtual unity of movement founds the complex

‘metalinguistic’ operations needed to posit a kind of non-verbal negation, and how it maintains movement, across its decomposition-negation, at the aesthetic level of dance.

6 I would like to conclude by saying a few words about the plane of immanence of dance, a notion I had surreptitiously introduced without justifying it. But first, I would like to summarize a few of our research results:

- (a) The virtual (‘meta-infralinguistic’) unity of movement is what persists as ‘pure movement’ once one has discarded all of the emotional, representational and expressive motivations of the body;
- (b) This enables the construction of a virtual plane of movement where all of the movements of bodies, objects, music, colour acquire a consistency, that is, a logic or a nexus;
- (c) It also enables the re-organization of movements of the body without recourse to external elements, since the actual movements of the body of the dancer obtain their impetus from the virtual plane and from the tensions produced there.

The virtual plane of movement is the plane of immanence. Its tension or intensity = 0, but on it are engendered the strongest intensities. On it, thought and body dissolve into one another (‘thought’ and ‘the body’ as empirical facts); it is the plane of heterogenesis of danced movement. To paraphrase Deleuze, one could describe the characteristic immanence of this movement as follows: what moves as a body returns as the movement of thought. As Cunningham says: ‘It is that blatant exhibition of this energy, i.e. of energy geared to an intensity high enough to melt steel in some dancers, that gives the great excitement. This isn’t feeling about something, this is the whipping of the mind and body into an action that is so intense, that for the brief moment involved, the body and mind are one’ (Cunningham, 1997: 98). In other words, intensities are circulating on the body-without-organs.

But, where is this plane of immanence located, and by what traits is it characterized? It is the virtual, invisible plane that founds the perception of a continuum of movements during a performance. In a fairly old text, Susanne Langer describes at length the perception of danced movement: ‘The dance is an appearance, if you like, an apparition. It springs from what the dancers do, yet it is something else. In watching a dance, you do not see what is physically before you – people running around or twisting their bodies; what you see is a display of interacting forces, by which the dance seems to be lifted, driven, drawn, closed or attenuated, whether it be solo or choric, whirling like the end of a dervish dance, or slow, centred, and single in its motion. One human body may put the whole play of mysterious powers before you. But these powers, these forces that seem to operate in the dance, are not the physical forces of the dancer’s muscles, which actually cause the movements taking

place. The forces we seem to perceive most directly and convincingly are created for our perception: and they exist only for it. ... Anything that exists only for perception, and plays no ordinary, passive part in nature as common objects do, is a virtual entity. It is not unreal; where it confronts you, you really perceive it, you don't dream or imagine that you do' (Langer, 1951: 341–42).

For Susanne Langer this plane of virtual forces is a 'dynamic image'. For us, it is clearly the plane of immanence.

Her very penetrating description shows to what extent dance is not, as per the old cliché, an art of the ephemeral. On the contrary, this virtual plane which we 'perceive' (with our eyes, but also with our whole bodies which tend to repeat the perceived movements) ensures the continuity of gestures and movements. Never has the spectator of a danced performance felt anxious about the disappearance of images in time. And it is not psychological memory which retains the passing moments, but rather the present gesture, which is incorporated into a more profound, virtual continuity.

It is the plane of immanence that lays out the profound continuity, as well as the consistency of all movements taking place in choreographic space. What we 'see' beyond and by virtue of the visible is not ephemeral as are the sequences of movements or the gesture-signs of the dancer. The plane of immanence is always there, and dance unfolds on its permanent surface, independently of its gestures and yet existing only by means of these gestures. The plane of immanence enables the coexistence of all of these movements though it never moves, and is also never still; empty, autonomous, enveloping signs and bodies, thought and movement, of dancers as well as of spectators, it is the ground zero of movement, never static, and consisting of a certain emptiness that constitutes its very texture.

To dance is to create immanence through movement: this is why there is no meaning outside of the plane nor outside of the actions of the dancer. Questions like, 'how do you achieve this kind of choreography?', 'how do you translate this kind of choreographic idea into danced movement?' or, 'how do you express that kind of feeling through movement?' deserve only one answer. As Cunningham would say: 'How do you do it? By doing it'. Because only danced gesture yields meaning: emotion is born of movement and not the reverse.

Cunningham wills immanence: for him, meaning does not transcend movement and life. The meaning of movement is the very movement of meaning. This is why, as he affirms, 'movement is, in itself, expressive'. Or, again: 'If the dancer ... dances, everything is there. The meaning is there, if that's what you want. When I dance, it means: this is what I am doing' (Cunningham, 1997: 86).

7 We now have a good idea why Cunningham, unlike Malevitch and Kandinsky, never feels anxious about the absolute negation of danced movement (i.e. the 'death of dance'). There are two essential reasons for this: first, because there are no abstract movements and, second, because there is no

‘degree zero of movement’, the annulment of actual movement coinciding with virtual movement.

There are no abstract movements because the ‘emptying out’ of movements makes them most real and concrete, the most unburdened of possible emotional and imaginative charges. In their utmost concreteness, as they circulate on the plane of immanence, they carry in themselves all of the meaning, emotions, and images that movements, by virtue of their intensities, are capable of arousing: for it is precisely movements of meaning and emotion that pure movement deploys on the plane of immanence.

If there is no ‘degree zero of movement’, it is because the virtual unity of movement, as a residue of the operation of ‘emptying out’, coincides with a remainder which, in the danced movement of the production of signs, never fails to escape semiotization.

It helps to consider that, both in the case of representation and of danced signs, the body represents the world, and in so doing, represents itself. If it expresses emotions, it also expresses itself. The body plays the body, in playing the world. Because there is an imbrication or overlap between the played representation and the referent, dance always preserves a non-representational element that escapes the production of signs.

This remainder marks the inherence of gesture to its corporeal context: here, the sign and the sign’s agent of contextualization are one (the body) or, rather, they are imbricated.

This explains why the emptying out of the body’s gestures can never attain a ‘degree zero of movement’, or a ‘degree zero of gestures’. If the body can negate the world and the representation of itself without self-destructing, it is because something of it escapes its self-representation. Something that resists, prior to representation. In taking a bow, a body is representing a body taking a bow, but the representing body never fully coincides with the represented body it is ‘figuring’.

Something holds back, remaining outside the actualized image of the body: something that is not only of the order of actual movements, but also of the order of virtual movements; something that is neither represented nor representable, belonging to the blind zone of their imbrication.

What holds back is also what triggers the expressive or mimetic image. It is the body virtual.

The virtual unity draws upon this remainder of non-representable movement that is always there. It is what guarantees the ‘reflection’ of the body, or rather the ‘meta-infralinguistic’ operation of the body that preserves ‘pure’ movement while meaningful and expressive movements are being emptied.

This leads one to suppose that the imbrication of sign and context, body and consciousness, prepare the construction of a plane of immanence or consistency of movements. It is by virtue of the inherence of the agent of construction (movement) in the materiality of the plane (movement) that

dance, more so than any other art, makes itself a plane of immanence directly, in the very act of dancing. To dance is to flow in immanence.

Translated by Karen Ocaña

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