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Translated by Anna Pakes from « Sens et fiction ou les effets étranges de trois chiasmes sensoriels », in Michel Bernard, *De la création chorégraphique*, CND, Pantin, 2001, p. 95-100. © Michel Bernard

# SENSE AND FICTION

Michel BERNARD

## OR THE STRANGE EFFECTS OF THREE SENSORIAL CHIASMS<sup>1</sup>

Translated by Anna Pakes from « Sens et fiction ou les effets étranges de trois chiasmes sensoriels », in Michel Bernard, *De la création chorégraphique*, CND, Pantin, 2001, p. 95-100. © Michel Bernard

Merleau-Ponty's most important and fruitful insight remains, in my view, his chiasmatic theory of the sensorium. This theory famously led him to "implode" the classical concept of "body" in favour of an entity that is enigmatic although empirically lived, and which he suggests is equivalent to "the generality of the Sensible in itself".<sup>2</sup> This strange medium or reversible tissue would be immersive like the natural elements of water, air, earth or fire; it would envelop beings, even all Being, both collective and individual, spiritual and material; and it is designated, in Merleau-Ponty's writings, by the ambiguous term "flesh".

Unfortunately, the insight remained merely schematic and was not developed in the ways it deserved. Not only did Merleau-Ponty's death bring a sudden end to these early explorations, they were also geared to an exclusively ontological end: namely, that of proposing a new, more specifically reflexive philosophical approach to the being of Nature – a new metaphysics thereof. One consequence, I think, was that he remained unaware of the full richness and aesthetic complexity – in the etymological sense of "aesthetic" – of his remarkable discovery.

So here I will attempt myself to outline how this Merleau-Pontian insight might be developed and interpreted in the field of dance, connecting his chiasmatic theory to my own conception of the utterative

<sup>1</sup> Originally published as "Sens et fiction, ou les effets étranges de trois chiasmes sensoriels" in *Nouvelles de Danse*, no. 17, Contredanse: Bruxelles, October 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968, p. 139.

mechanism of the sensory act and, simultaneously, its hidden fiction-generating power – or, perhaps, its enduring but covert process of originary simulation. This attempt has no pretensions beyond stimulating as much reflection as I can on dance corporeality and, particularly, choreographic creation.

First, I need to explain how I think the Merleau-Pontian concept of “chiasm” should be interpreted, as it is discussed in the well-known chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* entitled “The Intertwining – the Chiasm” and the accompanying working notes, since this concept is undoubtedly the basis of his theory of “flesh”. The chiasm is, initially, a rhetorical figure involving the reversal or crossed arrangement of two terms in either the same phrase, the same line of verse or two separate such phrases or lines. According to Merleau-Ponty, this crisscrossing structure – illustrated by the shape of the Greek letter  $\chi$  (*chi*) – seems to apply not just to discourse but to corporeal reality as a whole, more particularly, to the complexity of our sensory system. The writing of “The Intertwining – the Chiasm” is sometimes obscure and the appended notes elliptical. But careful reading, alongside rigorous analysis of the various claims and examples presented, reveals that, for Merleau-Ponty, there is not one chiasm but several. More broadly, our sensory apparatus and corporeality as a whole function chiasmatically. Thus, three principal chiasms must be distinguished if we are properly to elucidate Merleau-Pontian thought:

- Firstly, an intrasensory chiasm resides in that double, simultaneously active and passive dimension of all sense experience, by which I am seeing-seen, touching-touched, hearing-heard, and so on. Although Merleau-Ponty interprets it in his own way, this builds on an important observation of Erwin Straus in his remarkable book *Vom Sinn der Sinne*, published in German in 1936, in revised and complete form in 1956.<sup>3</sup> Straus emphasises how every sensory act which claims to reveal a sensed object involves what he calls “a pathic moment”. Henri Maldiney paraphrases beautifully when he writes that “Erwin Straus reveals the feel of feeling”.<sup>4</sup> Before it discovers an object of cognition, each sense event is an *encounter*, lived both passively and actively, with a pre-conceptual materiality, as is illustrated for example in the pictorial world of Paul Cézanne. In this sense, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, “fundamentally [the body] is neither thing seen only nor seer only, it is *Visibility sometimes wandering and sometimes reassembled*”.<sup>5</sup> More generally still “the body sensed and the body sentient are as the obverse and the reverse, or again, as two segments of one sole circular course which goes above from left to right and below from right to left, but which is but one sole movement in its two phases”.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Merleau-Ponty’s formulation should be modified here to clarify that this applies not to a body so much as *a single sensory experience*, envisaged in its double passive and active aspect: so there is no longer, as he claims, “a fundamental narcissism of all vision”;<sup>7</sup> rather vision, like all sensation, involves an immanent *auto-affection*. In short, all sensory contact with our natural and social

<sup>3</sup> Translated into French by G. Thinès et J.-P. Legrand, *Du sens des sens. Contribution à l'étude des fondements de la psychologie*, Ed. Jérôme Million, 1989. Translated into English by Jacob Needleman, *The Primary World of Senses: A Vindication of Sensory Experience*, New York / London: Free Press of Glencoe / Collier-Macmillan, 1964.

<sup>4</sup> In the original, “E. Straus met à nu dans le sentir un ressentir”. Henri Maldiney, *Regard, Parole, Espace, L'Âge d'Homme*, 1973, p.136.

<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, pp.137-8, my italics.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.138.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.139.

environments as well as, *a fortiori*, with one's own organism itself, is charged with a bivalence or qualitative bipolarity, inscribing in each corporeality the affective effigy (as it were) of an otherness.

- The second chiasm – which I term the intersensory chiasm – is much more widely acknowledged, being that crisscrossing of one sense with another or several others (vision with hearing, for example, or hearing with vision with touch) that is celebrated by poets everywhere and by the majority of contemporary painters and musicians. Indeed, the act of dancing itself perhaps offers a prime example of such mysterious crossing: as Nietzsche remarked, “hath not the dancer his ear – in his toe!”<sup>8</sup>

This intersensory chiasm connects to the first chiasm, both modulating and corroborating it, and suggests a strange image of an unlimited, plural, auto-reflexive corporeality, like a sort of echo-chamber without walls – or a mesh or magnetic net, whose thin, distinct threads constantly displace and substitute for one other. The ostensible biological, anatomical or physiological body of the individual then becomes merely an epiphenomenon and to some extent the artefact of an immense and nebulous *intercorporeality*, expressed in resonance between not just my own sense impressions, and their double active and passive aspect, but also between these sensations and the hybrid configuration of the sensations of those around me and, more broadly, the diverse sensory *qualia* that emanate from the wider environment.

- The third chiasm – which I call the parasensory chiasm – is more radical, more subtle and (by contrast with the second) often goes unacknowledged. This concerns the strict connection, even homology, between acts of sensing and acts of utterance, or between perception and discourse generally, whether in written or oral form. Merleau-Ponty himself, it seems, mentions this chiasm only indirectly, in a veiled and partial manner. He turns his attention to what he deems the “mystery as familiar as it is unexplained” of the combined experience of “seeing and speaking”. He notes pertinently that “[a]s there is a reflexivity of touch, of sight, and of the touch-vision system, there is a *reflexivity of movements of phonation and of hearing*”, that is, of the acts of speaking (or even vocalising) and hearing.<sup>9</sup> Yet he is interested in this reflexivity only insofar as it enables him more clearly to discern how it introduces a further reflexivity with the act of thinking – in how it prefigures “the point of insertion of speaking and thinking in the world of silence”.<sup>10</sup> He thereby focuses his attention on what he calls “the operative Word” as a change in “the flesh” of the sensory body into that of language, conceived as a reversibility of the sensory and the said. Merleau-Ponty’s first and fundamental concern, therefore, is to show that this reversibility prefigures the “reversibility of the speech and what it signifies”, recognising “an ideality that is not alien to the flesh”.<sup>11</sup>

He simultaneously neglects, even obscures, the real nature of the motor chiasm at the basis of the connection between sense experience and discourse: the chiasm of their respective functioning via the

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common, Frankfurt: Outlook Verlag, 2018, 3rd part, p.228.

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p.144, (my emphasis)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.145.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 154, 152.

shared mechanism of *utterance* as a process of projecting an apparently real sensory or intelligible world. Consequently, the “paradox” here is not, as Merleau-Ponty claims, one of *expression* as the emergence of meaning within sense experience, like the epiphany of signifying invisible within the apparently mute visible, or like a transmutation of corporeality into language. Rather, the paradox is that of *utterance* as foundational act of both the visible and the invisible, of sensation and language.

In this respect, the beautiful line from Valéry, cited by Merleau-Ponty to support his reflection, seems as relevant to me as it does to him, but only once reinterpreted: “language is everything,” he writes, “since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests”.<sup>12</sup> But recognising that such a universal voice of Nature exists surely presupposes that all sensing which presents that voice to us is wrought, just as much as speech and writing, by the act of self-projection into the virtual or, as linguists might say, by *disengaging*, in other words by the desire for utterance. So if it is really true, as Merleau-Ponty claims, that “the structure of [the body’s] mute world is such that all the possibilities of language are already given in it”,<sup>13</sup> I think this is only on condition of situating these possibilities of language in the underlying process of disengagement [or *shifting out*], not in the postulation of ideal meaning inhabiting flesh and actualised in speech or writing. In short, the real parasensory chiasm seems to be that between the act of sensing and the act of utterance, not between the sensible and meaning.

If we now consider the combined action of these three chiasms and, more particularly, how the third illuminates the functioning of the other two and thereby serves as their basis, we can reveal the hidden, secret and subtle connection between sensing and the imagination which, as we know, is the deep impulse at the heart of dance.

Indeed if, as I hypothesise, all specific sensation emerges as a result of the projective mechanism of linguistic disengagement, it also becomes clear how this projection consists above all in a process of *simulation*: it is, in other words, a mirroring play or fictive duplication operating at all levels and in all areas of the sensorium. As we saw with the first, intrasensory chiasm, the auto-affection inherent in each sensation, which is also necessarily both active and passive, is always a way of generating a virtual reflection, a pleasurable simulacrum of itself, giving rise implicitly and recursively to the presence of a fictive, anonymous otherness within our corporeality itself. Each time my hand brushes over any material surface (organic or inorganic, that of another body or my own) that it seeks through touch to discover and know in itself, that hand also produces and traces the implicit outline of another imaginary hand which is “felt” affectively, not merely cognitively or in its capacity to reveal identified objects.

Moreover, alongside this process, the crisscrossing of our different senses, articulated via the second chiasm, broadens, generalises and simultaneously deepens and intensifies this first kind of fiction: not just

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p.155.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.155

that the fiction inherent in the exercise of each sense resonates with those generated within the other sensory organs; it also modifies their nature and mode, creating a kind of second-tier imaginary or metafiction which dance corporeality cannot help but exploit. Paul Claudel's famous idea that "the eye listens" does not merely acknowledge the way hearing interferes with, influences, perturbs or externally diverts seeing, but rather captures how hearing's distinct imaginative process produces within visual sensation another hybrid and unique simulacrum, both more diffuse and fleeting, more subtle and (most importantly) entirely temporalized. The eye, in its very work of internal simulation, is somehow invested with and subverted by a virtual ear, which imposes on it a strange new fiction of an *uncommon visible* that is paradoxically also capable of being heard. To summarise, all our sensations do not just respond to or resonate with one another: they weave together a fictive corporeal mesh, mobile and unstable, which inhabits and mirrors our surface corporeality in the manner of the linguistic act of utterance.

As a dynamic of constant metamorphosis, determined conjointly by the auto-reflexive and enduring play that weaves and unweaves temporality and the defiance of gravity, dance corporeality cannot but be nourished and moved at a deep level by this secret fiction-generating mechanism of sensation. The range and intensity of the sensations produced by the dancer's movement, the multiple postural and gestural forms of his/her struggle with the forces of gravity, the fluctuations of his/her impulses and affects – all are sources of a "fictive kinesphere" which overdetermines the visible kinesphere with all of its utterative force: this is what generates the poetic "aura" emanating from the dancing of the best artists performing the richest and most varied choreographies, and which touches the imaginations of attentive spectators. In other words, the complex sensory labour of the dancer itself involves an originary fiction that is displayed, deployed and conveyed merely by its performance onstage.

In fact, what is conventionally known as "musicality" or "theatricality", or even (more generally and confusedly) as the "expressivity" of danced movement, indicates the polymorphous power of this radical and enduring *nexus* between sensation and the imagination. These three hackneyed terms, although they are intentionally relevant, merely emphasise specific, distinct dimensions of the simulation process inherent in sensing: the concept of musicality evokes its implicit rhythmic temporality; that of theatricality identifies the distortion inherent in its mirroring play; and, finally, the more general term "expressivity" refers to its impulsive and auto-affective dynamic.

From the point of view developed here, then, a number of contemporary choreographers appear unaware of this power immanent to the sensorium of dance corporeality as such: hence their attempts to put that corporeality in service of other objectives or to subordinate it to the performative demands of neighbouring art forms, such as theatre, film, circus or even the visual arts. Yet the ends, histories and modes of realisation of these art forms tend to inflect, even obscure the distinctive, unique strengths of dance itself. Rather than seeking to theatricalise, dramatise, pictorialise, cinematographise, give itself up to showy acrobatics or even dialogues with groups of musicians, dance would surely benefit from first asserting its own power to make visible the fiction-generating richness of its sensory, corporeal practice as such. If art is essentially nomadic, it remains appropriate that it nonetheless acknowledge and exploit to the full its distinct capacities to travel and move. In summary, far from needing to resort to external artifices of whatever sort (narrative, dramatic, symbolic, decorative, musical, and so on) to excite a productive imaginary,

dance should exploit *first and foremost* the poetics immanent in its own sensory praxis, the very qualities which render it “infinite”, as Valéry claimed.

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