



Modern dance “brought to heel”?

Isabelle Launay

► To cite this version:

| Isabelle Launay. Modern dance “brought to heel”?. 2019. hal-02292359

HAL Id: hal-02292359

<https://univ-paris8.hal.science/hal-02292359>

Submitted on 31 Oct 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

MO
DERN
DANCE
"BROU
GHT TO
HEEL" ?

Isabelle LAUNAY

Translated from: "La danse moderne 'mise au pas' ?", *Danse et utopie, Mobiles n°1*, Collection Arts 8, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1999, p. 73-106.

MODERN DANCE “BROUGHT TO HEEL ”?¹

Translated from: “La danse moderne ‘mise au pas’ ?”, *Danse et utopie, Mobiles* n°1, Collection Arts 8, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1999, p. 73-106.

I.

The recurrent outrage that the recollection of choreographic activity under the Third Reich causes within the dance community (in France, Germany and the United States) amongst those who were themselves major players of modernity in dance enables the dance historian to gauge the delicate and demanding nature of his task. And although he cannot dispense with a reflexion about the specific nature of his subject matter, he should be more than ever encouraged to seriously consider his own motivations, the intended purpose of his behaviour and recollections, and the way this history will be used.

These activities are not however “revelations”: as early as 1934, they were the subject of important debates within the circles of American left-wing dancers.² More recently, however, they have been subjected to renewed analysis which has made it possible to clarify their nature, by using different archive material.³

¹ This text is an extended version of a conference given following an invitation from the Centre Chorégraphique National de Montpellier (director Mathilde Monnier) in December 1997.

² In *New Theatre and Dance Observer* between 1934 and 1936. See also *Studies in Dance History*, “Of, By and For the People, Dancing on the Left in the 1930s”, vol. V, number 1, Spring 1994 and the summary of these debates by Susan Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon, Feminism and Nationalism the Dances of Mary Wigman*, University of California Press, 1993.

³ Amongst others: *Dance Perspectives*, “In the Shadow of the Swastika”, n°57, 1974 ; Valerie Preston-Dunlop, « Laban and the Nazis », *Dance Theatre Journal*, vol. 6, n°2 ; Suzan Moss, *Spinning through the Weltanschauung : the Effects of the Nazi Regime on German Modern Dance*, Thesis, University of New-York, 1988 ; Susan Manning, *op.cit* ; Susan Manning, “From Modernism to Fascism, the evolution of Wigman’s choreography”, *Drama Review*, vol. XIV, 1987, “Modern Dance and the Third Reich, Six positions and a Coda”, in *Choreographing History*, Indiana University Press, 1993 ; Hedwig Müller et Patricia Stöckemann, « ... Jeder Mensch ist ein Tänzer », *Ausdrucks- und Tanz in Deutschland zwischen 1900 und 1945*, Arabas, 1993 ; Hedwig Müller, « Mary Wigman and the third Reich », *Ballett International*, n°11, November 1986, Marion Kant and Lilian Karina, *Tanz unterm Hakenkreuz*, Berlin, Henschel, 1996 ; Laure Guilbert, *Danses macabres, La danse moderne en Allemagne dans l’entre deux-guerres*, Thèse de doctorat d’histoire et civilisation, Institut Universitaire Européen, 1996 (published by Editions Complexe in 1998) ; dossier “Le chant du destin”, in relation to the book by Lilian Karina and Marion Kant followed by an interview with Laure Guilbert, *Les Saisons de la Danse*, n°279, April 1996 ; Marilen Breuker, “Tribune libre”, *Nouvelles de danse*, autumn 1997 ; Isabelle Launay, *A la recherche d’une danse moderne, Rudolf Laban et Mary Wigman*, Paris, Chiron, 1996.

Although the sources, interpretations and methods are different, and the arguments backed to a greater or lesser extent, the aim was to show how and why modern dancers played an active part, or even an initiating role,⁴ in the cultural dance policy under the Nazis, and to what extent their political attitude had direct consequences on the aesthetics of their own choreographic work. In short, we would have cause to talk about German avant-gardist choreography being "brought to heel" or "Nazified". This means that there is now a historiography on this question, which, despite historical discussion,⁵ is essential, if we believe that erasing memory contributes to the dangers of fascism. But we still need to define which memory this is about, which dimension in dance we are talking about, at the risk of overshadowing the "work of dance"⁶ and the memory of its activity, in order to write the history of its institutions and its ideological values.

Some intend to fight against the occultation of what they call "historic reality" with the aim of objectively setting the record straight for a past which has been falsified by a "legendary" memory in the name of a "duty towards scientific lucidity and honesty."⁷ Thus, one of the explicit goals of research seems to be to demystify the important figures of modern dance.⁸ The sacred history, the legendary tale, the idyll conflicts with "the truth", "the reality" of written history which strips away the veils, uncovers the past with a view to pushing contemporary dance to "assume both an artistic heritage and a political liability", to put an end to the "schizophrenia of memory".⁹ The aim is therefore to dismantle a mythical heritage and to make dancers face up to their political responsibilities by showing how "the values of the modernist movement make it possible to explain the gradual shift towards Nazi ideology and its cultural messianism".¹⁰

Others do not recognize this as being a part of their memory, even if they are already familiar, at least partially, with this period in history. Suffering from the violence of these analyses, most (including those who fled persecution) cannot imagine admitting that their dance could have participated in Nazi aesthetics.

Looking beyond the actual contents of the controversy, its recurrence over the past thirty years challenges us. A recurrence which highlights that the terms of the debate are fixed, that the controversy is flawed, and that its implications on the present are sometimes negative. New commonplaces are already being developed, encouraged by the popularization of ideas in daily newspapers, magazines or television programs. As soon as this doxa touches upon the question of dancers in Germany during the thirties (and more specifically R. Laban and M. Wigman), it makes a point of first discussing their activities under the Nazi regime, summarizing, as it were, the closed case in sometimes staggering shortcuts.¹¹ As Philippe

⁴ For M. Kant as well as for L. Guilbert, *op.cit*

⁵ On this subject, see Frank-Manuel Peter's very precise and detailed criticisms about the interpretation of facts according to M. Kant in Frank-Manuel Peter, "War Harald Kreutzberg ein "alter Nazi?" (Was H. Kreutzberg an old Nazi?), in *Tanzwissenschaft 2* (*Dance science*), Digitale Fachzeitschrift.

⁶ According to the expression used by Laurence Louppe, *Poétique de la danse contemporaine*, Contredanse, 1998.

⁷ Laure Guilbert, reply to Jacqueline Robinson, « courrier des lecteurs », *Danser* n°166, June 1998.

⁸ "The legend is that of an avant-gardist art form, of humanist inspiration that would have been censored and exploited by the Hitler regime – the reality that we saw was that of an art which was used to build up the national socialist myth", Laure Guilbert, *Danses macabres...*, *op.cit*, p.17.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p.29.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p.24.

¹¹ Thus, as one example amongst others, Alexandre Adler's introduction to the film *Monte Verità, l'utopie d'un nouvel âge* by Henri Golomer, broadcast on the television channel Arte in 1998, which presented Laban as a genius but "perverted choreographer (...) who became master of dance of the culture ministry directed by Goebbels. (...) His exile (...) hid his true role in the ideology of the triumph of instincts that he called for, and that was eventually implemented in a complete but highly unexpected way in Hitler's social revolution in 1933". Alternatively, in the program *Miroir culturel* (Cultural mirror) on the serious German television channel (ARD) in March 1996, about dance in the Third Reich in which it was said on the television (with no other information given), "It was with impudence that the artist from Harald Kreutzberg's movement was able to hide his true identity after the war, that of one of Goebbels' dancing ambassadors on the world stage in 1937." See the summary by Frank-Manuel Peter "War Harald Kreutzberg ein "alter Nazi?" (Was H. Kreutzberg an "old Nazi?"), *op.cit*.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy note, in the present historiography,¹² does not the denunciation of myths and intellectual or artistic figures now belong to "the media's mythological system" which increasingly feeds on the myth of the denunciation of myths?¹³ To move from this point and to throw suspicion onto the work in general, to move from the person to his artistic activity is a step which is too easily taken. The rhetoric of indignation that is shared by both points of view reveals the difficulty brought by the return of what has been repressed. How is it then possible to escape this neurotic repetition, to defuse the violence of these claims, other than by changing the terms of the question and replacing them in a way which is of relevance to us today? By ignoring the use made of this part of history, we risk wishful thinking, or worse still, believing in an illusory separation of historic science and current preoccupations. The dance historian cannot neglect the practical stakes of his research, failing which we risk seeing the gulf increase between artistic and research environments, between practice and theory, particularly in France, and to see the share of theory in dance education shrink, increasing the difficulty that an artistic environment experiences in thinking through their activity, especially when the entire pedagogical system holds it back. One of the characteristics of dance research in France is to renew ties between an artistic community and theoretical knowledge, in order to proceed with a critical analysis of its entire operation. Henceforth, if the stakes of dance memory are too great to be imprisoned by the affects and the operation of its media possibilities, which tools, what kind of intelligence should be put in place to think through this past, knowing that, without these founders, most of the very foundations of contemporary dance will collapse?

Several attitudes are possible: one is either to keep quiet, to mope around, and to surround oneself in a protective silence. This was the attitude adopted by the large majority of intellectuals, academics, artists (including dancers) who remained in Germany to work. A silence which H. R. Jauss describes as linked to "this radical strangeness of Nazi barbarity that paralyzed a generation of German intellectuals in mental passivity and inertia"¹⁴, or Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, talking about Heidegger, "stunned (...), dazed by the Nazi defeat or the revelation of the camps, by all that they had not foreseen"¹⁵.

Furthermore, the global silence of the choreographic environment indicates that the contradictory debate and discussion can only be truly effective if their actors feel strengthened by a certain social and artistic legitimacy, which was not the case for dancers after the war. Moreover, this legitimacy still does not seem to be well established in France today. Critical interrogation is always easier within the context of scientific fields and communities that are certain of their status. Yet the history of the thinking surrounding corporal activities and categories that are specific to gesture analysis is far from recognized for its singular relevance, even if it has recently begun to attract various artistic, scientific and medical fields. Dance may be an object of knowledge for humanities, but it is not yet generally accepted that dance can be the very subject of its own discourse. The aim here is to state what dance thinks, and not what humanities think about dance, placing it in a position of control from above with regards to undifferentiated choreographic works. Not that we are refusing a sociology, an ethnology, a psychoanalysis and a cultural history of

¹² As is demonstrated, for example, in the recent biographies on Brecht, Foucault, Bettelheim

¹³ *Le Mythe nazi*, Paris, L'Aube Poche, 1996, p.21.

¹⁴ Interview with Maurice Olender in *Le Monde*, 6 September 1996.

¹⁵ Interview in *Libération*, 12 April 1989.

dance. Quite the contrary. But these extrinsic approaches, which are currently dominant in dance research, often go beyond their field of expertise¹⁶, forgetting that the analysis of works and activities themselves must be developed from specific theoretical tools. Could dance possibly be the only domain that humanities could thoroughly cover? Could we imagine that musical sociology be confused with musicology? That a cinema review could be written without analysing the cinematographic language at work in the films? Dance's view of the world is one whose critical project is all too rarely examined, and then clarified, starting with, on the one hand, the analysis of the choreographic work itself and the implicit positions of a gestural project, and on the other hand, its reception and the conditions of its reception.

The second attitude would be to return to this past, to analyse it with a view to condemning what needs to be condemned. But, in return, a conviction which goes no further (and which furthermore comes mainly from German, American or French academic environments), does it not condemn dancers to nurse their wounds and feed their resentment, by not retaining what is exceptional about this history for the present day? A historiography, which tends to make the facts intransitive¹⁷ and the event unsurpassable, imagines that the movement of this part of history of dance begins with this trauma: everything seems to progressively lead here, and the result will be analysed according to this point of reference. Apart from the fact that there is barely any merit in taking the right side once the consensus has been established, this attitude also recalls what Marc Bloch has already called an "obsession with judgement"¹⁸, and the position of "expert historians" who "confuse the job of historian with that of a policeman or prosecutor"¹⁹, trying to enter the intimacy of conscience rather than of works. These militants of memory "turn us away from the present by providing the benefits of good conscience"²⁰, "encouraging us indeed to be very vigilant about the past, but barely about the present", and in addition ensuring us a commitment by procuration.²¹ With regards to the history of Nazism, there is an even higher risk of not being able to avoid this role of "investigator" which clears or condemns from an improbable or anachronistic place of justice.

In this sense, historical writings about dance must consider epistemological achievements specific to this field that lead them to refuse the arrogance of history as "science". We can therefore redefine the status of historical discourse in relation to the category of narratives, its organisation depending on the effects it should produce on the reader, its accreditation procedures, its protocols of presentation. These considerations lead us to refuse to take for granted the relation of the historian with the reality he claims to explore and the matching of his sources with reality. The style of the account in history does not lessen his knowledge status but withdraws his scientist delusions, that of saying "the truth", "the reality" of history faced with a real-life "legend". While the researcher understands that the historian is not made by the archives, but in fact by the actual problematics implemented to explore the materials, he therefore knows that his method, his choices, the selection of his sources, the way in which he combines and confronts

¹⁶ See in France, the contributions of Laurence Louppe, *Poétique de la danse contemporaine*, op.cit., and of Michel Bernard, *L'expressivité du corps*, Paris, Chiron, 1986 as well as all his articles about dance, and the publications by Hubert Godard on the analysis of movement.

¹⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, *Les Abus de la mémoire*, Paris, Arléa, 1998, p. 30-31, on the opposition between "literal memory" and "exemplary memory".

¹⁸ *Apologie pour l'histoire*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1993.

¹⁹ Interview between Roger Chartier and Gérard Noiriel at the time of the publication of *Au bord de la falaise, l'Histoire entre certitudes et inquiétudes*, Albin Michel, 1998, see also *Le Monde*, 13 March 1998.

²⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, op.cit, p.54

²¹ See Marilen Breuker's article, Tribune libre (Letter to the editor), *Nouvelles de Danse*, supplement n°32-33, autumn 1997.

them is first oriented, unwittingly, by his own values (and in the case of the history of dance, by the history of his own body), according to criteria that will also be used to orient the future use of the past.

Of course, we can energetically condemn the activities of dancers under the Third Reich in the name of political and moral conviction, or of an intimate form of rejection, because nothing can remove their compromises. And no doubt we should do this. But the problem arises as soon as this condemnation stops us having an opinion of the importance of their thinking in its own terms, measuring the meaning they give to their gestures. In the absence of a willingness to understand the logic of this practice itself, and of the resulting works, we can only condemn or clear the practitioner or artist. So, the lack of analysis of "the work of dance" means that dancers are turned into ideologists.

This debate therefore ends up questioning *in fine* the profound sense that everyone gives to contemporary dance, to the way it is considered. Moreover, the issues at stake are, for us, part of today's dance, because, while we do not fear a return to the collusion of the contemporary dance world with a totalitarian regime, we should at least try to remain vigilant when faced with "other forms of repetition, which, moreover, may not be seen as such, the proof being considerably more concealed, the approach itself being much more complex and discreet and the risks being no less real"²², the one which means that many dancers continue not being the subject of their dance or, in other words, not enjoying and playing with their own gestures and the gestures of others.

What is at stake here in these few thoughts is not therefore historical: indeed, they do not aim to protect, restore or condemn legendary figures of modern dance history. They aim to highlight the extent to which, in French choreographic life today, the professional milieu still produces and is subjected to behaviour similar to that of the past. This behaviour, which begins during the dancer's training, leads to specific habits of accepting the teacher's authoritative knowledge because the processes are not sufficiently explicit, because the "how" and "why" of a movement are barely discussed (or they are so omnipresent that they inhibit all action), and because the technical, human, artistic, historical, political context seems to be missing from the studio. So much so that dancers seek to nurture their ideas outside their usual professional training venues. Hence, a dual relationship is favoured where each one sees and recognizes himself in the other's mirror, due to the lack of a common project that could outgrow them and in which they could participate, each at their own level of responsibility. Despite a few spaces for freedom of thought gained by dancers, the absence of debates on ideas or constructive contradictory exchanges in dance, which would try to go beyond personal conflicts and susceptibilities, makes it difficult to analyse a choreographic project when the artist, even if he is well-known, risks feeling personally violated. Dominant political cant, encouraging censorship and self-censorship, takes on an air of false politeness or merely of protective words, leaving space for the intimate outpouring of all the resentment. These processes create an expectation of gurus, erect statues and fetichize teachings and teachers in order to compensate for the forgetfulness or contempt that existed, at one moment in time, for a work or people. In this way, the difficulty of sharing a project, a desire, a movement, is found at all levels of artistic life: in relationships between members of a company, between companies, between companies and public bodies, artists and the press, as well as within different structures responsible for dance policy in France.

²² Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Mythe nazi*, *op.cit.*, p.9.

II.

A cultural historian considers modern danse to be a cultural activity which, like other cultural activities, is part of the State's general policy upholding ideological values that must be thought of within the categories of the history of ideas and performances. This cultural approach assumes that the range of practices would form a "text", from which culture and cultural ambition could be read (or even "mirrored") and described. But a practice can actually only be a "text" if it relates culture alone. This hyper-culturalist hypothesis, implying total transparency between society, culture and the individual, is no longer tenable today.²³ While an immanent symbolism exists in the practical field, in this case the danced gesture and how it is learned, an imaginary organization that continually prefigures and refigures it following the flow of sensations while working on the gesture, this organization does not constitute the text or the sub-text of the action, but its "texture". And this texture which makes it impossible to separate action from perception, can only be imagined through aesthetic and technical categories which are specific to dance (it is useful to specify that the categories of knowledge are different in baroque, classical, romantic dance etc.)²⁴

By ignoring this side of the activity, there is a strong risk of assessing the "texture" or the quality of artistic gesture using inappropriate tools, of limiting the function of art to denunciation or to promotion, and thereby of reducing the work to the ideology of its creators, whether it be considered progressive, revolutionary or reactionary. Although risking the banality of political alliances that do not take into account artistic projects and choices, we should remember that modern dance is not necessarily left wing and that monumental order is not only a result of fascism. And furthermore, that the perception of a work surpasses "the author's intentions", possibly being seen as anti-consensual when it is not, and vice versa. In other words, the quality of an artistic activity would be mingled with the political, moral and intimate qualities of its author? And thus, can the notions of "author", "body" "technique", "space", "time", "subject", notions that the thinking and history of contemporary art have continually questioned, be taken to be self-evident? Does not ideology (and therefore the ideological reading of artistic practices) ultimately find its legitimacy in a metaphysics of the subject, in "this thinking that the being (and/or evolution of history) is defined as a subjectivity present to itself, as the support, the source, and the finality of representation, certitude, and will"²⁵, like in a general logic of rationality? "The ideology of the subject (which is perhaps no more than a pleonasm), that is fascism, and of course, this definition still holds for today", decry P. Lacoue-Labarthe and J.L. Nancy.²⁶ As a consequence, dance history risks falling victim to the very danger that it is denouncing, if it does not take into consideration the effort, theoretical as much as practical, of movement thinking, including that during the 1930s, in order to escape from a classic conception of the subject which itself depends on a conception of the body as a stable and universal anatomical entity. The-

²³ Cf. Marc Augé critical thinking about Geertz and Ricoeur in *Les Formes de l'oubli*, Paris, Manuels Payot, 1998, « La vie comme récit », p.39-73.

²⁴ For this reason, we cannot agree with the analysis of *Adieu et Merci* de Mary Wigman (1942) by Laure Guilbert (*Danses macabres*, *op.cit.*, p.534), a danse which was fortunately filmed. This analysis which brings the thesis to an end, is based only on the thematic argument of this dance: transforming the dance into a text, and ignoring what we can still see today thanks to the film, she concludes that *Adieu et Merci* is the crowning achievement of Wigman's ascension into the realm of myth! An effective analysis of this choreography and of this dance could allow a radically different reading of this, using analysis of the processes to remove the immanent symbolism of this solo.

²⁵ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc.Nancy, *Le Mythe Nazi*, *op.cit.*, p.24.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p.25.

refore, it is only using practical and conceptual tools specific to dance that it is then possible to imagine the political dimension of a choreographic project, not the reverse.

Furthermore, by duplicating ideological logic using aesthetic and technical logic, does this not itself perpetuate the confusion that Nazi ideology aimed to create between art and politics? If the ideological reading of works of art defies logic, it means that all artistic work, as well as the reception of the work, results from conforming to one idea, as part of a unified and perfectly coherent process. This reductionism tries to model the work on a vision based on categories which are not challenged by contact with the work. Obviously, this is not at all about defending here an essentialism of the work of art isolated from all historical context. But it is a question of knowing what we are talking about when we talk about "dance", about recognizing both the autonomy and solidarity of the different fields of thinking as the existence of different modes of rationality. Preserving and respecting movement that characterizes reality, means remaining wary of "a type of interpretation that reduces all scientific work deciphering reality, down to a process of identification"²⁷, not forgetting that the distinctive features of different languages used in works each have their own lines of development, multiple temporal experiences and a historicity of the psychological functions themselves. Apart from the specific goals of cultural history, what would be the point of a history of "dance" if it does not ask the question "how is it made on the inside?", (on the understanding that sociality is also inscribed on a bodily level and in the working of the forces that make up a simple posture²⁸).

Therefore, if we try to analyse the aesthetics and practices of modern dance under the Nazi regime, we would need to be able to do this comparing their conceptual tools and aesthetic categories one by one. Is it really the same conception of the body, of movement, space, time, experience, the organism, composition, history of dance? Do these concepts have the same meaning, knowing that there are very limited sources about dance itself and dance education in the studio? So, to write the history of a cultural policy and an artistic corporation giving it the title of the history of dance, would be to forget the unique and complex nature of the research subject.

Dance archives are by no means reduced to written and pictorial sources. Knowledge is not written into dance only by "thinking in words" but also by the experience of the body. However, we must be able to read this "library" of flesh, read what is said about the relation to the world as soon as the dancer comes onto the stage. But, in fact, we are suffering from a form of "gesture illiteracy"²⁹, not so much because we have no feeling for this, and we are unable to experience the danced movement, but because we still cannot name it or describe its qualities correctly. Thus, this debate refers to the abilities of our own perspective, to our scale of perception which has itself been formed by our language and informed by our habits, as well as to our ideology of the dancing body. Widening the potential of perspective is one of the practical and theoretical stakes of the history of dance, not as a history of the danced movement itself, but as a history of the perception of movement. Consequently, a history of dance which is ill informed about its own areas of knowledge runs a strong risk of only analysing what falls within the choreographic theme, or better still

²⁷ Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Entre mythe et politique*, Paris, Seuil, 1996, "Lire Meyerson", p.152.

²⁸ See more about this in Laurence Louppe's article, "Qu'est-ce qui est politique en danse ?", *Nouvelles de danse*, n°30, winter 1997, by Hubert Godard, in particular "le geste et sa perception" in *La danse au XXème siècle*, by Marcelle Michel and Isabelle Ginot, Bordas, 1997, the programmatic text by Marcel Mauss, "Les techniques du corps" (Body techniques), *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris, Quadrige, PUF, 1997 as well as Michel Bernard's reflections on the body as a "social and mythical structure" in *Le Corps*, Paris, Point Seuil, 1995.

²⁹ As expressed by Hubert Godard, seminar notes, Université de Paris 8, 1998.

the choreographic figure and the most recognizable "form" of movement, rather than the dynamics of the forces behind the figure, forces which give a gesture its specific meaning and which are more difficult to analyse. When two dancers do the same thing, they do not actually do the same thing: in other words, one same movement can produce two different gestures, depending on the performer. It is therefore necessary not to be trapped by the figure and the meaning of the sign, and to make the difference between body space and choreographic space, scenic space, musical space, symbolic space, in order to analyse what we have called the "porosity"³⁰ of dance using the physical culture supported by National Socialist values. Furthermore, dance memory is not limited only to that of the choreographic show, which is the most visible and exposed part of it. It also includes workshops within companies, educational work within schools. Each level (creation, research, education) is to be thought about individually, because it stems from a logic, from specific attitudes and provisions which, while they are supportive, are no less independent. Bearing this in mind over and above administrative and political activities aimed at defending a corporation's interests, means being attentive to the multiplicity of human timeframes, to the discordance of individual time in relation to collective time. One person's fiction is not the same as someone else's, and each one gives meaning to the great tale of History, as Marc Augé reminds us³¹. Not taking this into account means exploiting dancing bodies as producers of signs to be consumed, or objects of discussion. It means taking part -through ignorance - in the spectacular ideology that overlays forces. It also means confusing ideology and utopia, cultural and artistic practices.

III.

Could the "national socialist revolution" have represented a real possibility of development for modern dance? To what extent were artistic projects of modernity in dance able to meet what P. Lacoue-Labarthe called "national aestheticism"³² ? To what extent can we say that they participated in the enterprise of mystification and aestheticization of politics, to the edification of the German people as a work of art?³³

This article will be limited to shedding light on it from a sociological aspect, (that of the creation of an artistic corporation and the defence of its interests, in other words, in sociological terms, the creation of a "choreographic field"), an ideological aspect – which will not be limited only to rhetorical and choreographic figures, but also to their mythical use, (if, as the historian R. Paxton outlines, "fascism is not defined by its clothes but by its function")³⁴ – and a technical-aesthetic aspect. The first point has already been analysed in Lilian Karina and Marion Kant's works in Germany³⁵, and even more by Laure Guilbert³⁶ in France, who showed, in an extremely well-documented study, the complexity of modern dance networks, its internal power struggles, the game of alliances underpinned by ideological debates unique to dance's

³⁰ Isabelle Launay, *A la recherche d'une danse moderne, Rudolf Laban et Mary Wigman*, Paris, Chiron, 1996.

³¹ *Les Formes de l'oubli*, *op.cit.*

³² *La Fiction du politique*, Paris, C. Bourgeois, 1987.

³³ This question would imply reflecting, within a much larger framework, on what is covered by the concept of "Nazism" and making the difference between Nazism as a doctrinal ensemble, as rhetoric, as psychology, as techniques, as aesthetics, as a way of feeling, as an immanent dimension, in order to see to what extent and at what level there were links with the activities of the modern choreographic world.

³⁴ « Les fascismes, essai d'histoire comparée », Marc Bloch conference, June 1994.

³⁵ *Tanz unterm Hakenkreuz*, *op.cit.*

³⁶ *Danses macabres...*, *op.cit.*

cultural policy under the Nazi regime. We will review here the essential features. First it is necessary to stress the huge gap between the stupendous rise of the art of modern dance at the end of the 1920s and the absence of any supporting institutional structure. While modern dance had achieved international recognition, had already invented and outlined the majority of its theoretical and practical foundations, and was being spread with more or less confusion throughout the entire country, professionals still did not have a true status or social identity. This situation was made worse by the crisis of 1929, which hit the sector very hard. Dancers' material expectations, their search for an identity and their need for social roots, followed by the failure of the Weimar Republic, which had not been able to or had not wanted to find a solution, were disproportionate to other sectors of the entertainment industry.³⁷

This symbolic deficit is historic: the dancer's job and also his knowledge were not acknowledged as such, dance remained symbolically prostituted, constantly needing a financial or intellectual protectorate to secure legitimacy from other spheres of knowledge (literature, philosophy, art etc.). Dancers had a bohemian artistic life style which was much more dramatic than that of artists, musician or actors, who had more social recognition and were supported by the legitimacy of an artistic tradition.

Today it is difficult to gauge the strength of this thirst for identity, and above all the extraordinary need for movement in the face of a feeling of inertia and suffocation at this particular moment of the 20th century, a fundamental thirst for movement committing the entire being that demanded the invention or rediscovery of new gestures. It seemed as though dance had become a question of life or death for an entire generation, so much so that no longer being able to dance meant no longer existing³⁸. Was it the absolutism of a passion for movement inherent to this expressive dance based on improvisation in threatening times? A tragic historical situation when the cost of inventing new gestures meant the oversight or disregard of politics?

The profession's mobilisation at the three dancer conventions in the late twenties bears witness to the maturity of a sector which was conscious of itself, its expectations, its propositions and its contradictions. Two dance unions ("Der Tänzerbund", created by Laban and "Deutsche Tanzgemeinschaft", or "German Dance Community", created by Wigman) therefore demanded equal status with that of actors and singers, an end to the exploitation of dance-extras, the inclusion of dancers in the management of certain theatres, a specific budget for dance, the recognition of copyright for choreographers and choreographic notation, the regulation of teaching jobs in schools, the creation of a large modern dance training centre. It should be noted that, while some of these demands had recently been met in France, others were still battles to be fought, particularly regarding the unequal status of dancers compared with other stage artists, the management of conservatories by dancers, the budget for contemporary dance compared with that of ballet, etc. So, once the Nazi regime took, with the help of dancers and sometimes at their own initiative, a series of essential steps to restructure, develop and recognize their profession, there were few who, for political reasons, would go into exile and give up their career in Germany. This is how, as L. Guilbert explains, the choreographic sector slowly organised its integration into cultural institutions and played an important

³⁷ Like in the account told by Julia Tardy-Marcus of a community of homeless people in the late 20s and early 30s who were not only struggling to survive materialistically but also struggling for the survival of their identity, see the interview with Isabelle Launay and Christophe Wavelet, "Entretien avec Julia Tardy-Marcus", *Danse et utopie*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1999, p. 41-54.

³⁸ See the account by the dancer-choreographer Julia Tardy-Marcus in *Danse et utopie*, *op. cit.*

role in the cultural policy of the regime until 1937 (when the support of the modern dance world was no longer a political issue), maintaining good relationships with Department officials and a network of powerful friendships in order to control as much as possible the internal balance of power relations within the government. But the State's policy for an art which it never considered as important as architecture, music, cinema or Fine Art, was neither highly coherent, nor did it have a clear definition of its project, and it was arbitrarily characterised by what Ian Kershaw called "the feudal anarchy" of the State³⁹. It also ran into abrupt turnarounds, fluctuations and contradictions.

From 1933 to 1935, the regime demonstrated a special openness towards modern dance in the name of its "German" specificity, which had achieved recognition abroad (particularly in the United States under the name "new German dance"), as well as towards the success of amateur dance in youth education. The choreographic avant-garde movement, from Wigman to Palucca, Kreutzberg, Georgi, Günther, Lex, Laban etc. therefore found support in the name of German identity⁴⁰. Modern dancers' corporate interests objectively converged with those of the Propaganda Department against classical ballet which was defined as "international formalism", anti-German. A convergence of interests which, although it obviously hid different reasons for opposing classical ballet, benefitted the modern choreographic environment (which was not the case, we know, of the pictorial avant-garde movement, forced into exile for aesthetic reasons). This openness during the first years of the regime, that made it possible for modern dance to escape State censorship, also stems from the fact that its effective powers of subversion had not yet been identified. An aesthetic bringing into line does indeed imply clearly defined aesthetical and ideological criteria, whereas Nazi censors had difficulty in perceiving and naming what actually happened on stage. They had no markers to evaluate contemporary works⁴¹. Dancers' art, if not condemned, because it was not identified, did not, in any case, seem to harm the regime's cultural ambitions. Only artists, who were left-wing political activists, or works carrying an ideologically clear message, theme or subject, or those who ignored middle class agreements concerning nudity were censored – the censorship being limited to a purely thematic reading of the work. Paradoxically, the paucity of censorship protected avant-gardist works which remained tolerable and tolerated⁴².

So, from 1933 to 1935, dancers enjoyed programming freedom, official orders for dance festivals in 1934, 1935 and 1936, the first grants for their schools and company, as well as solid support from the press with numerous publications defending the new art. They also saw the creation of a large training centre. Furthermore, lessons were organised for unemployed dancers. The number of teachers increased considerably.

³⁹ See his analysis of the dissolution process (and not the reinforcement process) of the State as a condition for acceptance by the masses of a charismatic domination, Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, Essai sur le charisme en politique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1995.

⁴⁰ Including Jooss whose exile was regretted by the municipality that welcomed him and took him to be an exceptional representative of Germanic dance.

⁴¹ Moreover, were they the only ones?

⁴² This paradoxical situation was not unique to dance in Germany and it also applied to censorship of theatre in France under the Vichy regime. Without any clear criteria for censorship, censors were reduced to checking the origin of authors, titles and texts which could harm the prestige of the army or morality, and not the scenes or artistic choices of the actors which could radically change the meaning of a text. The paradox lies in this conservative approach to theatre which played into the hands of little effective control on works. A paradox that could again be seen at a second stage during debates on the actor's place in theatre: the modernist point of view, defending the importance of the actor's role, found itself, in this context, advocating the exclusion of Jewish actors. For more on this subject, see Serge Added, *Le Théâtre sous les années Vichy, 1940-1944*, Paris, Ramsay, 1992, ch. 1, "Vichy, un interventionnisme anarchique".

Recognition of the dance profession was put in place (the profession of dance notation was recognized in 1936, following an important exhibition in 1935 on notation systems in dance). The practice of amateur dance was structured within the framework of the League for community dance and different recreational organisations for young people. This ambitious group of reforms, led from 1934 by Laban, who was at that time at the head of the Deutsche Tanzbühne (German dance scene), completed the integration process and sociological anchorage of dancers in German society. By fulfilling a large part of the sector's historical expectations, the regime, which was at that time in favour of Goebbels's line for "national expressionism", was able to largely get on board an avant-garde movement, which had been booming since the end of the nineteen-tens and which was not about to stop dancing, to close its schools or abandon its activities and go into exile as long as it had no reason to. Racial laws, daily brutality did not bring any collective reaction from the sector, and the exile of Jewish and/or left-wing dancers were written off when faced with the newly acquired benefits. In this way, the dance world took part in joining forces massively with the regime's elite.

Indeed, in the complex chronology of persecutions, studied by Saul Friedländer, the historian emphasises the speed with which persecutions were carried out from 1933, affecting all the upper spheres of society, the civil service, universities, the art world, theatre and music, in comparison to other social classes (shopkeepers or entrepreneurs)⁴³. Not only did these departures free jobs for other artists in a sector where opportunities to work were particularly rare, but, in a manner of speaking, a pseudo legal basis freed them of any individual responsibility. Furthermore, dancers did not escape the lack of political foresight nor the overall slowness of the elite (including Jews and left-wing activists) to grasp and predict the profound nature of the regime. Fascism, as R. Paxton reminds us, is an unexpected phenomenon, and the Left understood very late that it was a mass reality, and that universal suffrage did not necessarily bring with it a socialist orientation⁴⁴. Was it in the name of corporate and professional interests rather than in the name of a racist and anti-Semitic ideology that the most well-known figures of the choreographic avant-garde movement participated in dance politics, accepting racial laws, with the help of individual arrangements? Moreover, this attitude and determination to dance would lead Wigman, in 1945, to reply to the Soviets' request, wanting to associate the most famous German artists, as long as they had not been members of the Nazi party, with the rebuilding of post-war Germany⁴⁵. The increasingly radical anti-Semitism of the regime neither hindered their will nor their desire for their art to be recognised. They were able to include their activity in a society from which Jews had disappeared. Such was the disaster, if, like H.R. Jauss, we define it not as an apocalyptic event but as "the result of something in which everyone participated, if only implicitly".

From 1936, the nature of cultural dance policy changed and was directed mainly towards the preparation of the celebration of the Berlin Olympic Games. The control of activities was increased; teachers and schools had to become members of officially recognized leagues. Folk dance and classical dance became part of the

⁴³ Saul Friedländer, *L'Allemagne nazie et les juifs, t.1, les années de persécution 1933-1939*, Paris, Seuil, 1997.

⁴⁴ « Les fascismes... », *op.cit.*

⁴⁵ She accepted the honorary presidency of the Women's Central Community in 1946, and this work for the Soviets meant her visa for the United States was refused: she was then considered as being pro-Communist.

pedagogical syllabus of modern schools, at the expense of theoretical teaching. Dance became the main issue in the power struggles between Goebbels and Rosenberg, and Laban's contract was not renewed⁴⁷. Dancers preferred the administrators' grip on schools rather than running the risk of having to close them. After the success of the Olympic Games, in the eyes of the regime, the modern dance world seemed to have completed its contribution to the edification of German culture. At the same time, mass theatre, "Thing" theatre was no longer supported and the trend for movement choirs, encouraged since 1933, was radically slowed, or even censored. The regime deemed it necessary to put an end to their similarities with the red army choirs which were serving the socialist revolution. Furthermore, in Laban's movement choirs, the expression of the sense of community did indeed promote a mystique of the people's organicity, but it did not intend to embody the ambitions of a god who had become visible and personified in the Führer himself. This was the meaning of the expression used by Goebbels when he censored Laban's choral piece "*Of the Spring Wind and the New Joy*" in June 1933⁴⁸. While the show seemed, in the censor's opinion, to be in search of one same political figure, whose signs or clothes it adopted, the censor underlined that his position and the dynamics used by this figure were no longer what the regime wanted. Beyond the palace plots that led to Laban's eviction, it was the very manner of participating in a myth as much as the subject of the myth which was at stake. In a pro-socialist context, the choral works by Martin Gleisner, Laban's closest collaborator and a socialist, encountered an antifascist interpretation as part of the organization of anti-fascist youth in Holland, even though the artistic processes used were the same⁴⁹. So, it was not so much the artistic practice itself which was at stake, but the context within which it was received, as this practice proved, and this was a constant threat. Care should also be taken not to attribute to all potential interpretations of the work that which was a result of the work's reception. It was the perspective, the organization of this perspective and what was expected of it which were fascist. In order to understand how perception deviated and affected the works and even gesture itself, we need to carefully analyse here the conditions in which choreographic works were received and how a fascist perspective was created – a question which has not yet been addressed. But in offering only one reading, is the historian not also exposing himself to that which he opposes?

Finally, the move towards war radicalized censorship and meant that from 1938 funding of almost all dance professionals for official events was removed. Dance could no longer consider itself to be anything other than light entertainment, showing beautiful feminine bodies, relief for warriors, to encourage a population of fighters. Thus, the modern dance world placed itself in a position to serve the regime, taking advantage of it materially and symbolically, due to it being so imprisoned, both through its history and that of the dancing body's position, by a dizzying lack of identity. By refusing to take into consideration conditions of production and reception, which were exceptional as long as they were reaping personal, corporate, media and symbolic benefits, this attitude exposed their works to a radical shift in meaning in

⁴⁷ The arbitrary nature of the regime nevertheless allowed some artists to continue performing without being monitored by the censorship bodies (this was the case of Kreuzberg, whose well-known homosexuality, in spite of his dance, should have been enough to condemn him in the eyes of the regime).

⁴⁸ "Something vaguely like Nietzsche, wrong, badly made and affected. I forbid a large part. It is all too intellectual. I don't like that. He wears our clothes but has nothing to do with us." Goebbels diary, 21 June 1936, quoted by Laure Guilbert, *op.cit.*, p. 484.

⁴⁹ Laure Guilbert, *op.cit.*, p.488.

the context in which they allowed them to be a part. If we support Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's and Jean Luc Nancy's analysis⁵⁰ of German nationalism as Germany's "long history of the appropriation of a means of identification", in a country which, lacking a unified language and art representing this identity, wanted at last to be "the subject of its own future", the dancers could be tempted on three counts by the regime's promises and achievements between 1933 and 1936: as Germans⁵¹, as artists but also as dancers, in a country known to be "a country without dance". This was not naivety, nor an accident, but an overestimation of the promises for recognition that the Reich's cultural policy made them. Indeed, the dread of not being considered as artists lead to this "intellectual or artistic voluntarism"⁵² which remained active until the time of the expressionists, in particular amongst modern dancers.

This situation was worsened by a deeper mistake, that of having supported a certain political figure as soon as he embodied a mythical dimension. This point has been analysed by Laure Guilbert who we support in a large number of her conclusions. But our approach seeks to underline the essential differences that separate the basis of national-socialism from the philosophical values that were so important to dancers, and in particular to R. Laban and M. Wigman, the most important and most well-known artists. Drawing attention to these divergences does not necessarily mean that we are denying the fact that avant-gardist choreography was drawn into the magnetic field of Nazism. It does however indicate that, between two attracting forces, opposing strengths exist, creating this powerful area of divergence. Amongst these differences, we will address the question of "body", and what it infers, "race", "the organism", and the notion of the "lived experience" ("Erlebnis"), and what it infers, movement specific "technique", which is itself linked to a certain relation to history. Are these notions thought of in the same way and are they based on the same fundamental points? Do they indeed stem from the same myth? These differences lead us to develop a different point of view from that which metaphorically defines Laban's and Wigman's global work in the 1930s under the label of "dances of death"⁵³.

IV.

Although dancers shared a desire for unanimity and communitarian reconciliation, they did not share – and this was a radical philosophical and ideological difference – the notion that was at the very foundation of the national socialist community: Race. And if they did not share this racist base, which arose from the most sectarian biological determinism, it was due to the fact that they did not share the same conception of the body. The word "race" appeared in some of Laban's and Wigman's texts, but did it have the same meaning as that of Nazi ideologists? To our knowledge, nothing exists which would enable us to make a case for this. Indeed, while Wigman (more than Laban who only became a German national in 1935) interpreted the exploration of corporal dynamics and their interior requirements as the return of a native cultural background, she appealed to the forces of the ground. In other words, her movement was essentially driven by German fantasy⁵⁴, and not by reasons of a biological nature. To our knowledge, no official

⁵⁰ *Le Mythe nazi*, *op.cit.*

⁵¹ Wigman writes, "Are we truly a people with no myth, and must we describe our era as a non-mythical era?", "Der Tänzer und das Theater", June 1933, quoted by L. Guilbert, *op.cit.*, p.419.

⁵² *Le Mythe nazi*, *op.cit.*, p.39.

⁵³ This is the title chosen by Laure Guilbert for her study on modern dance in Germany during the inter-war years.

⁵⁴ See Michel Bernard, « L'imaginaire germanique du mouvement ou les paradoxes du Langage de la danse de Mary Wigman », in *Confluences, essais en l'honneur d'Anne Ubersfeld*, Saint Cyr l'Ecole, 1989.

or private text by Laban or Wigman promoted antisemitism or eugenics as the basis of an aesthetic activity, and while modern dance was defined by Wigman as the "confession of one's self", this did not mean a self that only belonged to the Aryan race. De facto, the singular nature of the dancing body is not reduced on a mythico-racial core. Laban nor Wigman would have followed the slogan "your body does not belong to you, it belongs to your bloodline and your people"⁵⁵, for the simple reason that, for a dancer at work, there is not one "Body". Indeed, they did not consider gesture to be the result of an anatomical and stable machine-tool, transformed by one single order from the bio-mechanical mind. They did not "use" it to "express" a feeling, desire, will. Their gestures imply exploring the intelligent use of a "corporeality" that responds to the stimulations of context seen through modulations of perception, and that sets up inextricable links between imagination and feeling⁵⁶.

There was therefore a difference between the propositions made by Laban or Wigman and those of ideologists, such as Böhme or Fischer-Klamt, for whom modern dance was the fruit of a biologically German production. The international dance competition in 1936 was the opportunity to "clarify and delineate what was specifically German and what was foreign"⁵⁷, in other words, the opportunity to normalize the criteria for assessing artistic projects, incorporating racial criteria into them. It is precisely the very idea of normalization that Laban, supported by Wigman⁵⁸, challenged when they attempted to modify the competition rules, suggesting that they should simply award certificates. Did their participation in the Olympic game celebrations wipe out this difference?

Furthermore, they did not undertake to criticize foreign dance forms (classical ballet, music hall shows) first for racist reasons, but in the name of their intellectual aesthetics and pedagogy, as well as in the name of their commercial nature which contributed to the exploitation and alienation of bodies in movement⁵⁹. Nationalism, even the most ardent, could not be lowered to racism, even if these two elements worked together in the context of the 1930s. The expression of nationalism and patriotism did not necessarily mean racism⁶⁰.

The skill and power of invention of a so-called "German" dance was seen as not exportable, like Nazism itself (which, we know, was thought of as a German specificity). Yet, the emigration of the founding thoughts, principles and practices of modern dance, its influence in Europe as well as in the United States

⁵⁵ Eric Michaud, *Un art de l'éternité, L'image et le temps du national-socialisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p.257.

⁵⁶ On the same subject, see M. Bernard, « De la « corporéité » comme anticorps ou de la subversion de la catégorie traditionnelle de « corps » in *Le corps rassemblé*, Agence d'Arc, Université du Québec, Montréal, 1991 and « Sens et fiction », *Nouvelles de danse*, n°17, October 1993.

⁵⁷ Quoted by L. Guilbert, *op.cit.*, p.446.

⁵⁸ "A normalization of performance, such as it exists in sport with the definition of internationally valid rules and laws, is not applicable in the same way in the arts", quoted by L. Guilbert, *op.cit.*, p.443.

⁵⁹ We should remember that a similar problem existed in France under the Vichy regime, within the framework of the defence of artistic theatre against light comedy and commercial theatre. Wanting to "purify" the theatre for businessmen who owned the performance halls, Dullin, Baty, Copeau saw their artistic interests objectively converge with those of Vichy and the Germans. A structure made up of professionals that imposed and awarded a professional licence for theatre management was set up at the same time as the policy to exclude Jews, Aryanization measures that were written off in the defence of the interests of artistic theatre, that at the same time saw its grants increase by more than 60%, see Serge Added, *Le Théâtre sous les années Vichy*, *op.cit.* If the refusal of jazz and African dances is linked to a racism attitude, this refusal was not unique to German dancers, it was much more general and formed one of the most shared prejudices, both among American and European dancers.

⁶⁰ "This is why, in Germany, consciousness of what is essential in this danced expression forces us to recognize new German dance for what it is: an asset matured on German soil, carried by the German spirit that has silently fought and won its place in the heart of our culture.", M. Wigman, quoted by L. Guilbert, *op.cit.*, p.415.

(through H. Holm, I. Bartenieff, K.Jooss amongst others) emphasises how much the foundations of this art can not be reduced on racist premises. Therefore, as they did not share the same vision of the body, these practices could not be defined by the same grounds for existence as those at work behind seemingly similar, imaginary cultural figures. The aim of Nazi art was to define an ideal type⁶¹. With that, it required the reproduction of the same: it was "naturally endogamous". The same body, the same movement. The finality of a "Nazified" dance would therefore be to produce dancing bodies according to a model imposed by a master who would sculpt body clones of himself, following a logic unique to movement. This racist conception of the dancing community implies that the union of beings of the same species has eliminated the degenerate part, in other words, everything that constitutes the "Jew in us" (over and beyond the Aryan aspect). Consequently, as E. Michaud underlines, the creation of the community relies on "a background of primitive anxiety when faced with the opacity of bodies⁶²", when faced with the familiar no. Yet, for several reasons, awareness of all artistic and pedagogical activities of avant-garde choreography, beyond the elaboration of certain choreographic figures, does not conclusively point to their endogamous character. The exceptional diversity of bodies and artistic personalities who came from the Laban and Wigman schools, during the 1930s, made it difficult to think that the nature of their work was "to produce" human material and instruments to be used in the only edification of a choreographic model, or that the project for an ideal body was part of their *savoir-faire* (even if a certain atmosphere reigned which encouraged a cult of personality). If the large majority of modern dancers who in turn became choreographers were trained in Laban's, Wigman's or their associates' schools, it is because the training there stimulated their capacity to invent. One of the necessary conditions for the emergence of choreographic projects which are different from each other, and not simply choreographic stereotypes, is to take artistic risks, to promote the performer's independence by giving him the tools to analyse his movement so that he can then invent his own training method. The pedagogical methods used by Laban and Wigman, on the contrary, had a tendency to explore the obscurity of bodies, to make them strangers to themselves. In other words, to question the gestural habits fixed by a preconceived image of movement projects and a certain use of one's self. We also need to question the nature of this "experience".

The power of seduction that national-socialism exerted on artists firstly implied the need to take a look at its conception of art. This is one of the essential aspects of E. Michaud's book⁶³ which shows that, far from being a simple instrument of propaganda, art held a central place in the implementation of Nazi ideology when policy itself was imagined as a work of art, political activity as artistic activity, which, in a famous expression, Benjamin called the "aestheticization of politics", and Lacoue-Labarthe "national-aestheticism". In this framework, only an artist could achieve Germany's political dream, form the identity of the people, draw up the outline, sculpt the "Gestalt" which would transform a shapeless and divided mass into one unique Subject. E. Michaud emphasizes that Nazism did not present itself as a rational political program, but as a spiritual movement, a "steel romanticism" whose project was carried by the desire for the absolute incarnation of a myth, since it could not be happy with a symbolic presence. The tradition

⁶¹ See E. Michaud, *Un Art de l'éternité*, op.cit, ch.4, « La reproduction du génie », p.207-220.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p.47 and the whole ch. 1, p.5 à 48.

⁶³ *Un art de l'éternité*, op.cit.

of German romanticism was not unfamiliar to Nazism in that it placed art as a religion whose mission would be to guarantee the survival of the spirit, to arouse creative concern – an imperative that we find with numerous modern artists as well as with dancers. It was however radically different because its finality was not to arouse the creativity of the “Race” or to guarantee the survival of a “biologically Aryan” spirit.

But the importance that Nazi ideology gave to the valorisation of the revolutionary emotion, to “the lived experience”, to the power of bodies’ expression, was fertile ground for a whole network of ambiguities in a period which was particularly prone to the wavering of signs and words. Firstly, this magnetization was made possible by the belief that art could be the perfect way to build a community. This community would be reunited not through the abstract order of language or law, but through the sharing of the same experience. Using the experience of movement choirs on a large scale, it meant leading the people to the “*Erlebnis*”. The people must live the physical experience of an “organic” membership of a community, and it is because the individual is able to dissolve within the vast body of the people that he can become a powerful and eternal subject. Claiming a cultural dimension to movement choirs, believing that it could embody the unity of the people in a choreographic figure through the sharing of a community of visions, the dancers seemed to participate with one same desire for identity, promoting slogans of body movement, blinded by “a will of art” which did not know that cultural value could not be decreed, that mythical power could not be manufactured. So indeed, the speeches which accompanied their choral works used the incantatory rhetoric of official speeches. The works were adapted to the fashionable themes of the moment, to the setting, the lighting and the colossal space of stadiums or new stages, in order to build these choreographic cathedrals suitable for celebrating the legendary union of the people and its guide⁶⁴. Consequently, we can reflect on the value of this Dionysian experience ordered by a director and formulated in terms of the awakening of mythic powers. In fact, the shows produced tended to prohibit the image of division, and instead tended to celebrate the dead as heroes in order to erase defeat, to give new life to the missing, as part of a show which followed an increasingly static choreographic order. E. Michaud defines this new community order as “a human order supporting the architectural order” for the purpose of constructing the people like a building, following a logic that went from movement to consistency⁶⁵. Henceforth, when the choreographic order can only reach its climax under a stone-like command, dance no longer has its place, it is dominated by a power of death which promotes the sacrifice of the dancing body to a choreographic project. But were these shows petrifying or did they necessarily impose an absolute model for movement processes themselves?

New corporal knowledge introduced and developed since the 1920s affected the medical world as much as amateurs of “danced gymnastics”, of “modern dance” and top-level sportsmen, and this was essential in revealing the corporal culture of the time. These extremely varied methods of corporal work were based on a philosophy where the gesture is considered as “Gestalt”. Some were introduced (as L. Guilbert underlines) into the training of German sportsmen in the preparation for the Olympic Games. This indicates the

⁶⁴ On this subject, see L. Guilbert’s analysis about *Jeunesse Olympique (Olympic youth)*, staged by Hanns Niedecken-Gebhard, for the Olympic Games ceremony, involving the cooperation of Palucca, Kreutzberg et Wigman, *Danses macabres...*, *op.cit.*, p.453-472.

⁶⁵ *Un art de l'éternité*, *op.cit.*

extent to which influential politicians from the dance world had understood the importance of kinaesthetic culture⁶⁶ in the well-being of the future great Germany. It shows that while a regime of terror was being enforced, one part of the State, supported by the entire associative network, was participating in the development of an in-depth physical culture. This was one of its most subtle and strongest powers of seductions because it penetrated the body. Thus, State officials had understood how evocative and contagious the power of movement was, once it had been experienced by man⁶⁷.

But the promotion of this way of feeling was not an end in itself: tactical, in essence, and politically temporary, it was soon abandoned after the Games. Did this objective convergence, from 1933 to 1936, remove something from the nature and quality of this transferral, once it could not intrinsically aim to embody the "Race's body"? The revolution of academic corporal activity led by numerous dancers and movement practitioners was not in order to criticize the bourgeoisie's "limpness" and "effeminate" character, but to criticize the exploitation, and even more so the alienation of dancing bodies. The cultural upheaval that they were expecting was not aimed at hardening morals for the purpose of a racist society, but at discovering new areas of freedom, pleasure and care through gesture.

It is however fair to state that modern dancers effectively entered the magnetic field of Nazism once they claimed a mythical dimension to their activity. But to stop at that means not adequately considering the double imperative that directed their efforts during the dark years. The first was to win over an identity as part of this illusory enterprise for creating myths (Weimar's democratic framework had not offered it to them). The second was to define the singular nature of a work and of experiences that Laban called "movement thinking"⁶⁸, of which the reasons and specific modalities had not yet been sufficiently thought through. While Wigman's conception of the body still has a mythical side to it, meaning the return to "organic" powers, she integrates this mythical theme into the score of her existence as an artist. A mythical theme that we come across again, need we add, throughout the history of dance, from Isadora Duncan to Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. A review of organic thinking, as the core from which an identity is fixed and upon which a movement depends, still needs to be undertaken in dance thinking. But this myth surrounding the organic body strikes a chord with the fiction of the community being an organism, or with an organic interpretation of politics. However, Wigman's conception of organics was not based on biological determinisms. As a dancer, her body was by no means a mythical Body, which had become eternal and stable because it had rediscovered its "natural" foundations, in this case those of race. That body would be radically ineffective for a dancer, since the art of movement implies an intelligent body endowed with movement thinking processes, and not a stupid body driven by the game of bio-mechanical laws, the emptiness of which would be replaced with magical slogans. In other words, it knows, in its activity, that ges-

⁶⁶ At the same time in Germany, a whole range of research on movement was being developed, which was as varied as the trend for "Swedish gymnastics", yoga, Bess Mensendieck's and Elsa Gindler's work. This research was contemporary to Alexander's who published *The Use of the Self* in 1932 in England, to Mabel Todd who published *The Thinking Body* in 1937 where Ida Rolf was already working, Feldendrais and to I. Bartenieff who would go into exile in the United States in 1936. This shows that in most industrialized countries at the time, there was a huge interest in the movement's ideas and that it significantly exceeded the interest for the body during the Nazi period.

⁶⁷ "The dancer must know that gestural rhythmic form presented during a show has a strong effect on the spectator, that a simple movement can plunge hundreds of men into imaginary confusion (...) that gestures do not just transform the dancer but also the spectator.", quoted by L. Guilbert, *op.cit.*, p.473.

⁶⁸ In *La Maîtrise du mouvement*, Paris, Actes Sud, translation by Marion Bastien and Jacqueline Challet-Haas, 1996.

ture is not related to the displacement of an organ. Active (and not necessarily theorized) criticism of the Body concept and its organicist corollaries is a necessary condition to escape academicism in dance and the kitsch side which inevitably accompanies it, whether they come from social dance, ballet or contemporary dance. Therefore, by not mentioning that modern dance, both in practice and in thinking, took part, during those dark years, in the vast critical project of a general trend towards rationality, in order to focus on what we can quickly call the dancer's "*metis*"⁶⁹, we are not taking into account the very dynamics of its history.

This driving thought stems from an empirical intelligence, intelligence of movement, of connivance with matter, of fluid reality, tentacular intelligence that belongs to the domain of uncertainty and multiples, following a logic of what is probable, not based on a search for truth, on the definition of an essence, on a principle of stable identity and internal coherence. The efficiency of a way of feeling that, calling on intuition, a helping hand or a glance, uses routes other than the Subject's attentive consciousness. And finally, intelligence offering expertise in the work of perception that constantly links the gesture to its particular project. The discovery of this field of rationality is still, it must be remembered, one of current experimental science's tasks. It is about paving the way for a philosophy of the body which stems neither from biomechanical positive rationalism nor from magico-religious irrationalism. The reasons behind gestures are to be explored outside the duality of body/spirit, psyche/Sôma and attempting to link them is already accepting their separation. With that in mind, "the soul no longer builds a body" (as Schiller said), and neither does the body build a spirit.

To enlighten dancers about how their own corporeality works within a lesson, a workshop or a creation was a requirement which was the complete opposite of the secret and mechanistic approach to movement called for by intellectuals close to Nazi movements, such as Bode. Offering them the possibility to analyse their own dance within lessons and workshops, to discuss it, to put a name to what was happening, was totally opposed in all ways to an ideology that eliminated art criticism in 1936 and considered the conscience to be "a Jewish invention". Ending a model of thinking based on the inadequate body (which is currently still active in discussions about dance) was not a way of demonstrating a reactionary thought, and even less of participating in the implementation of a fascist body. Inventing new gestures, new perceptive dynamics was the basis of all the work of modern dancers and their ambitions, ambitions which were not limited to the call for a cultural revolution, even during the 1930s.

Indeed, in the absence of analysis of the practice and more particularly of the teaching practices themselves, there has been no proof so far that pressure from the ideological power or the dancers' initiatives in cultural dance policy modified the content itself of work on danced movement during modern dance lessons and workshops given between 1933 and 1938. If their dance practices had been modified from 1933 to 1936, they would have then had to sacrifice all their "*savoir-faire*", "*technique*" which had nothing in common with the content that Nazi ideology gave it. For Laban and Wigman, dance "*technique*" was not defined by the mastery of a gymnastic-like know-how and the development of automatisms in the completion of a gesture. On the contrary, it was keen to develop an expressive plasticity capable of reacting to stimulations from an intra- and extra-corporeal context. Virtuosity in dance was therefore presented as an ability to

⁶⁹ See Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Détienne, *Les Ruses de l'intelligence, la métis des grecs*, Paris, Champs Flammarion, 1974.

change the frame of reference (visual, auditory, tactile, kinaesthetic, affective and imaginary) from which a movement was produced. This experience of movement was defined by a large perceptive modulation, a capacity for projection and for fiction which was as much the product of work on feelings as it was an effect. This experience of movement also means that past achievements and knowledge were replayed and moved around. Consequently, the relation with the history of dance, its tradition, its repertoire needed to be constantly challenged with a new context. Modernity in dance cannot exist without reinventing its relation to the past⁷⁰. Moreover, this culture of movement as well as this conception of the history of dance had nothing in common with the magical pedagogical practices of the Nazi sympathizing managers of physical culture, who were concerned with stopping time for the coming millennium using tremendous mimetic obsession.

Indeed, the work to discover and pass on movement was accompanied by numerous spoken and written words that attempted to clarify all their production methods. This work on thinking offered dancers the tools, and therefore the possibility, to criticize the practice of their very masters, to know where they stood in relation to them. With this level of experience, the founders of contemporary dance did not take part in what T. Mann called "Saint-Guy's dance of fanaticism"⁷¹, even if they were won over as choreographers by its figures. Thus, technique was not a work separated from improvisation and composition: since the body is not simply a mechanical system, it is not necessary to "warm it up" but to develop a wakened corporeality. We do not therefore come to the studio to "take" a lesson, but to "cultivate our minds"⁷².

For a dancer, cultivating the mind means learning to identify the processes through which a gesture appears, and the technical and ideological models that define it. Therefore, what is at stake here is a conception of mimicry which is not the one defended by reactionary educators, but the belief that imitation is, for the teacher, an openness to others, and, for the student, an ability to receive. The educator does not hold the truth about gestures: he does not form the benchmark from which one or other path to movement will be dictated. And if there were a personality cult, this cult would by no means presume a cult of this personality's gestures⁷³. While there was order in the different schools of modern dance (particularly in Wigman's), this order did not imply in any way a disciplinary system as defined by Foucault in *Surveiller et Punir*. Movement education was not in fact reliant on an "anatomy-chronological" scheme, which, separating the body, gesture and time, fixes an agenda for the body in movement instead of listening to its rhythms, and which seeks the "placement" of its segments (head, shoulders, bust, pelvis, knees, feet) instead of working on the spaces that link them. This system, which also defines levels or "divisions", imposes a model of linear progression using successive phases that is even more powerful in that it claims to be more "natural" and "scientific"⁷⁴.

A complex conception of the body, of a non-disciplinary and academic technique, of non-alienating mimicry: three concepts, the content of which cannot be reconciled with those of Nazi ideologists. So even

⁷⁰ See Isabelle Launay, *A la recherche d'une danse moderne*, op.cit.

⁷¹ *Allocution allemande*, October 1930.

⁷² As expressed by Wilfride Piollet, intervention at the Department of Dance, Université Paris 8, 1998.

⁷³ See our analysis of Wigmanian teaching processes and the transmission of movement in *A la recherche d'une danse moderne*, op.cit., "la 'technique' de l'événement intérieur", p.188-201.

⁷⁴ Here we could carry out a historical criticism of dance pedagogy, using the analysis of the system of "disciplines" created by Foucault for prisons, hospitals, college and the army.

though they were participating in cultural propaganda, they were undermining this "bringing to heel" from the moment they began exploring (as a mere example) the countless qualities of the act of walking – work which spans the entire history of contemporary dance because it calls into question the one thing which is the most enshrined in our individual and collective history⁷⁵. In an atmosphere of extreme despair and anxiety faced with a "modern life" that only offered men the possibility of living "decedent experiences" (to use Benjamin's expression), giving a meaning to a lived experience was, from the beginning of the century, as we should remember, one of the essential issues of modernity in dance in the United States and in Europe. There was no answer to this anxiety shared by writers, philosophers and artists. So, saying that Laban and Wigman wanted to bring the people to the "*Erlebnis*" is not enough to claim that their corporal practices obeyed the same values as the regime⁷⁶. Do we need to stress that all movement experiences are not the same, despite, however, being part of an identical figure? Taking this diversity into consideration means not occulting the analysis of the "subjectivation processes"⁷⁷, these relations to the self which, beneath the surface, thwart the forms of knowledge as well as the forces of power. If "within himself, man is home to a history,⁷⁸" a history of his corporal practices, a place where the weight of an individual and collective history melts away, where a potential for gestures opens and closes, be they possible, forbidden or missing gestures⁷⁹, modifying this gestural order, opening up the field of effort also means hoping to tamper with the order of the body. While this ideal may be described in terms of the coming of a new man, in terms of regeneration in the face of modern degeneration, it has encountered deadlocks by clinging to myths escheated⁸⁰ by the power of a general tendency to rationality. In that respect, the limitations of Laban's or Wigman's theoretical discourse does not escape the limitations of thinking in their times.

So, we have not sought to "resolve contradictions" but to uphold them, as long as possible, to think through both the ideological magnetization and aesthetic gap of an experience. This is certainly an unstable position which does not aim to set up two columns (an asset, a liability), to say that this could counterbalance that, to clear or not this or that, but which strives to stay as close as possible to dance as an experience. A position which also emphasizes that ideology and utopia still work together, that there was not first a utopic dance limited to a given period, a golden age of modernity that was then betrayed

⁷⁵ Seeing the archive images (unfortunately not precisely dated), in *Monte Verita...*, *op.cit.*, showing mass dances where we can see both the enormous character of choreographed shapes, and the astonishing gestural quality of the twisting actions of the participants' bust, we are faced with a contradiction which we cannot resolve. It harshly indicates that the history of cultural policy, the history of choreographic institutions does not follow the same pace as the history of choreographic writing, its figures and its composition methods, which itself does not follow the same pace as the history of danced movement and corporal knowledge. Refusing to take these different durations into account means not thinking of history as being in movement.

⁷⁶ At the same period, communal ideology and cultural unanimity were also important in French theatre, especially for Copeau. Bringing the people together (designed by Copeau as the entire community regardless of the class to which the people belonged) in a theatre of union and regeneration, a people, like in Germany, subjected to an old process of the dissolution of rural social fabric, torn apart by the exodus, the defeat and the failure of the elite, was, according to Copeau, one of theatre's roles. Consequently, the anti-individualist and anti-market line held by Petain resounded favourably within the theatrical community. But although there are certainly areas of political convergence, the content is different. Indeed, by analysing to what extent, with strong support from the regime, we would be able to talk about art theatre as "collabos' theatre", "Marshals' theatre", "resistance theatre", S. Added takes much care and is very reserved on the application of ideological ideas in the analysis of the artistic field. A necessary precaution since his project is not to demystify or to judge, to clear the legendary figures of Dullin, Baty, Copeau. State support does not necessarily carry with it the promise of an official art form.

⁷⁷ As found in the expression used by Foucault in *L'Usage des plaisirs*.

⁷⁸ On the subject of Meyerson, J. P. Vernant, *op.cit.*, p.142.

⁷⁹ Hubert Godard, « Le geste manquant », *IO, Revue internationale de psychanalyse*, n°5, 1994.

⁸⁰ On this subject, refer to E. Bloch, *Héritage de ce temps*, Paris, Payot, 1978, p.14, and *Le Principe-Espérance*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p.471-472.

by the thirties and "perverted" by ideology. While this period of Nazism indicates how an avant-garde can take part in the development of authoritarian myths when it benefits materially and symbolically from it, paradoxically it also shows that modern dance still has active power today. Furthermore, the question of democracy and its visibility on stage as well as in the studio remains very present today in the field of dance. If we are currently studying this period and if a generation of artists is reflecting this interest in political questioning, it is not so much because it wants the historical "truth" to be restored but because it raises far-reaching, daily questions of today that affect the ideological functioning of production structures, it refers to the relations between artistic activity and State values (the organization and perverse effects of grants), to the idea of "public service" in dance, to the difficulty of finding a way around the terms of (over)exposure of work and avoiding market economy traps, to the criteria for the evaluation of work, the modelling of perception depending on the expectations of "the" audience, and above all, to crucial problems in dancer training which is finally what creates a large part of the difficulties and suffering experienced by dance in this country.

Translated from french by Helen Boulac

Isabelle LAUNAY

MUSIDANSE (E.A. 1572)

Équipe « Danse, geste et corporéité »

Université Paris 8 Saint-Denis



To quote from this article : Isabelle Launay, "Modern dance 'brought to heel' ?", [on line], Paris 8 Danse, www.danse.univ-paris8.fr, 2019 [1999]. Translated by Helen Boulac from: "La danse moderne 'mise au pas' ?", *Danse et utopie*, Mobiles n°1, Collection Arts 8, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1999, p. 73-106.

