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ON THE USE OF THE CONCEPT OF MODERNITY AND ITS PERVERSE EFFECTS IN DANCE¹

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To illustrate the prevalence of the moment over all temporal considerations, Montaigne has this expression, which though banal and tautological, is oh so fitting and meaningful in my eyes: “When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep.”² Actually, this reference to dance is not, for me, a coincidence: it aims, on the contrary, to show that this art of movement cannot be understood or *a fortiori* appreciated with the prospect of a succession that would carry us away toward a better future. As François Jullien writes, “The tautology signifies that I am careful not to anticipate. I do not go beyond the scope of the moment, neither by desire nor in thought. I coincide: when I dance, I dance, I am not doing anything other than what I am doing. I embrace this fact of dancing. Or, to say it in Montaigne’s terms: I do not ‘froth’ this moment up, I don’t ‘sound’ it out or ‘bend my reason to obtain it.’ I don’t ‘pin myself down’ with it or ‘grovel’ in it, but I ‘apply’ myself, I ‘sample the delights’ of it, I ‘insist’ on it.”³ In other words, the act of dancing is a singular moment that is not determined by its beginning and end, as interval and lapse of time; it distinguishes

¹ This is an excerpt of the chapter by the same title in Michel Bernard, *Généalogie du jugement artistique. suivi de Considérations intempestives sur les dérives actuelle de quelques arts* (Paris: Beauchesne, 2011). In this chapter, Bernard argues that “the concept of ‘modernity’ entirely occupies, runs through, and guides, inexorably it seems, the history of western thought.” Through an epistemological analysis, the philosopher seeks to elucidate and denunciate modernity’s “belief” and the “values it promotes.” The present text constitutes the second half of the chapter and focuses on dance’s singular relation to time, and its resistance to and reinvention of the category of modernity.

² Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 1246.

³ François Jullien, *Du temps. Éléments d’une philosophie de vivre* (Paris: Grasset, 2001), p. 153 and 115; Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, p. 1251.

itself exclusively through its quality, which is how it is like the seasons, as the Chinese say. Therefore, why do we have the desire to judge it according to and with the aid of the normative model of Occidental temporality, as a uni-linear, extensive, progressive, and serial process? Isn't this model, for that matter, starting to disintegrate and implode of its own accord in the very flow of our everyday life as the Italian novelist Antonio Tabucchi demonstrates? Whole pieces of ourselves are condemned to jetlag for life. "Time ages quickly," say the pre-Socratics,⁴ which is why it seems that artistic activity must not be comprehended and evaluated except as a qualitative experience, intensive and heterogeneous, and not as a so-called "progression" relative to the irreversible succession of the temporal arrow.

But if we are now no longer obliged to situate art and, in particular, dance in the framework of a progressive transition, it is advisable *a fortiori* to challenge the category of modernity and its different avatars that pretend to designate, characterize, and evaluate art and dance, and instead resort to another form of enunciation that emphasizes and reconstitutes this fundamentally qualitative experience of the artistic process itself. This process is, to my eyes, that of sensorial scanning, that is to say, the play immanent to the twofold mechanism of disjunction/conjunction carried out by the artist on the materialized and hybrid specter of the generalized chiasm of all our heterogeneous sensations. To do so, this new enunciation should restore a new way of playing with each of the seven principal modes of scanning that constitute the seven fundamental *sensorial tonalities*: picturality, plasticity, fragrance, taste, musicality, theatricality, and orchesality.⁵ Dance must be linked with the orchesality that underlies and drives it, and not solely with the history to which it belongs, even if this history weighs heavily in what it makes visible. This orchesality implies temporality of course. However the temporality of dance is not the one defined by the transitional and successive process mentioned above, but rather through the play of sensorial chiasms that are ceaselessly woven and unwoven by the fortuitous shifts in motor functions required by situational changes. In other words, each moment offers and models a distinct corporeity. This transformation or mutation of the corporal moments is carried out in dance (as I have repeated many times) according to four major characteristics: an undefined dynamic of metamorphosis, the random play of temporality's weaving and unweaving that was just mentioned, the more or less uneasy dialogue with gravitational force, and the unpredictable effects of the auto-affective impulse or, if you like, the irrepressible desire of corporeity to fold over onto itself or coincide with itself. Consequently, if I want to specify and designate a dance that I perceive, I cannot be satisfied with just bringing it back to the formal classification of *a priori* norms of modernity and post-modernity or *a fortiori* of premodernity, antimodernity, hypermodernity, or contemporaneity. We have to find a modality of enunciation that enables us to translate all at once these kinetic metamorphoses, temporal ruptures, gravitational variations, and auto-affective fantasies.

This is a difficult and, some will say, impossible task, since the use of these parameters is relative to the nature and length of artistic training received, which we traditionally call the transmission of techniques and styles. We already know that this training is not the same in the East as it is in the West—where tea-

⁴ Antonio Tabucchi, *Le temps vieillit vite* (Paris, Gallimard, 2009).

⁵ For more on the philosopher's definition of these different aesthetics and sensorial tonalities, see Bernard, *De la création chorégraphique* (Pantin: Centre national de la danse, 2001).

ching methods diverge according to nation and era. In France itself, the training is far from being homogeneous and Hubert Godard is certainly right to say that we will never understand anything about dance as long as we have not attempted to reconstitute a history of the learning of this art in our country. But a characterization of the taught and learned techniques using the single category of modernity and its derivatives does not enable us to shed light any better on the act of dancing such as is it given to us *hic et nunc*, including, first and foremost, the technique that most assumed, claimed, and made accessible the qualification “modern” in dance, that of Martha Graham.⁶ “One of the characteristics of this style,” Jacqueline Robinson rightly observes, is the breaking down of movement according to the contraction-release factor: the torso absorbs the passage from one pole to another. A “percussive” attack of the movement produces an intense vitality. Daily training includes a section on the floor, either lying, sitting, or kneeling, in order to give the torso more freedom and concentrated sensitivity, and to enable the spine to “blossom out of the pelvis and hips.” The second portion of the class is the barre, in which ballet exercises are executed with many variations. The third portion of the class is movement in space, meaning infinite sequences of all possible and imaginable movements. “Some technique details seem to be worth keeping: in the balance work, an extraordinary feeling of security is given, not only by the highly considered play of counterbalance and complementary tensions, but also by a pressure of the wrists, heels, even the top of the head, which seem to be pushing against and supported by the space.”⁷

It is undeniable that such technical training marks the bodies of the dancers who subject themselves to it, shaping them and predisposing them to certain motor configurations. Nevertheless, it does not suffice to characterize the act of dancing such as it is presented to us on a stage: it gives us, in fact, only an easy way to find our bearings, a rapid and superficial label of recognition. Dance cannot be summed up by only calling up its conditions and modalities of learning. The type of designation that I want to promote, as an alternative, would instead consist of liberating the eyes of the spectator from the requirements of identification commanded by the cultural, social, and institutional demand that, in my opinion, denatures the singular and unique process of the act of dancing *hic et nunc* while overlooking the sensorial work that gives rise to it and which it presupposes.

In fact, wanting to define an audience community based on what is seen, using the category of modernity and all of its avatars, may possibly have only one pedagogical virtue and even then merely a didactic one: it is a matter of each time relating one’s viewing experience to another through the misleading mechanism of recognition of supposed similarities. However, the work of artistic creation actually consists of shying away from living up to such expectations and, even more, of perturbing them by ingeniously and ironically playing on unpredictable conjunctions/disjunctions; in short, by using an unusual sensorial scanning. Mainstream discourses on the arts and its categorizations were proposed by journalistic critics anxious above all to render the arts accessible to a public eager to reduce or write off the confusion, embarrassment, or even unease caused by this unusual or strange dimension of the perceived work (the famous “*décept*” that Anne Cauquelin talks about in her *Petit traité d’art contemporain*)⁸ and thus referred them

⁶ In this regard, the American critic John Martin has been instrumental in the sacralization and popularization of “modern dance.” See John Martin, *The Modern Dance* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1933).

⁷ Jacqueline Robinson, *Une certaine idée de la danse. Réflexions au fil des jours* (Paris, Chiron, 1997), p. 33.

⁸ See chapter 1, in Anne Cauquelin, *Petit traité de l’art contemporain* (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

back to previous experiences. Of course, most artists demonstrate an extreme reserve, or even an incontrollable aversion, with regard to this sort of reaction and judgment: *a priori* they don't much like classification and, sometimes, are wary of all conceptualization that they consider to be denaturizing or a violation of the creative process. Nevertheless, they themselves often cannot help but have recourse to these forms of media categorization when they hear proclamations, like prophesies, of the originality of their process or their artistic work in "manifestos" or collective declarations. In other words, the power of critical discourse is much more insidious and virulent than we generally believe it to be: the best artistic intentions can in this way become trapped and disfigured in their very enunciation.

To avoid this pitfall, it seems to me necessary and urgent to, on the one hand, evacuate the formatted vocabulary of institutionalized and trivialized classification that uses the category of modernity and its derivatives, and, on the other hand, to stay focused on the sensorimotor work in the production of the dancing act. In other words, it is advisable, as Paul Valéry invites us to do, to rediscover the specificity of the artistic process: "The artist," he writes, "is he whose sensations develop, or rather who is sensitive to harmonics, to secondary consequences, to the developments of sensation. He who, on this path, will go back, reconstitute the spheres that exist, that link the raw sensation to the idea, to intelligence, and finally to the reconstructive action, is the one who is an artist but even more than that."⁹ Without a doubt, the way I see it, this is less an idea or an intelligence that must be revealed than the random fictionary projection that commands the innovative scanning; yet my approach belongs to the same direction: that of rediscovering the sensorial process in creation.

Now, this return to felt sensation is applicable above all to dance: it is done there on the stage *hic et nunc*, and imposes its presence to my gaze independent of any reference to a prerequisite knowledge that situates it in a history reconfigured according to the categories of modernity, postmodernity, hypermodernity, or even contemporaneity. If, in fact, as Giorgio Agamben rightly notes, the latter marks "a singular relation with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it"—in other words "through a disjunction and an anachronism," it enables one to "recognize the obscurity of the present" and break its "vertebrae"¹⁰—it is no less true that this subversion by "the contemporary" accomplishes itself in the act of sensing that is put into play by the artist, and that this category is therefore not enough to reveal the work in its strange dimension. In fact, most of the time commentators and historians content themselves with emphasizing, with the help of this category, the rupture produced by the artist's work rather than its radical specificity. This is what Jean-Yves Jouannais does, for example, when he turns to the concept of "idiocy" to signify the idea that so-called "contemporary" creation expresses itself as a resistance to conventional forms, to hallowed norms: it imposes its *idios*, the inalienable character of its singularity.¹¹ However, in doing so, he defines only the negativity of the contemporary, and not the positivity of its veritable and profound driving force. For example, one can say that Boris Charmatz, Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy, and many others have been hailed as "contemporary choreographers" because they don't

⁹ Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 948.

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?" in *What is an Apparatus and other essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 41, 47, 52.

¹¹ Jean-Yves Jouannais, *L'Idiotie, Art, vie, politique-méthode* (Paris: Beaux Arts Editions, 2003).

want to conform to a compositional and representative system accredited by and inherited from the dance tradition. But this qualification of “contemporary” in no way sheds light on the sensorial process that moves these choreographers and drives them to this refusal.

In reality, the fundamental error that underlies the characterization of dance by the so-called historical categories that constitute modernity—its different substitutes and its latest offshoot, that of “contemporaneity”—resides in the confusion with the simultaneous and hidden requirement of increased value and, through it, a secret hierarchization. As I have attempted to show, this demand dwells in and innervates all of our desires insofar as it determines our choices and, consequently, proposes value. The generic category of value circumscribes the function of desire at every given moment, in every given situation with regard to all of the preceding events, all of the exterior conditions (economic, social, political, and ideological) and, more radically, with the fictional dynamic of my sensations. Hence the difficulty of its use in the appreciation of an artistic work and *a fortiori* the sterility and inanity of the approach that pretends to be able to reduce that work to the sole criterion of its relation to a supposed modernity. Thus we recall the fundamental philosophical question: to what extent is it necessary and legitimate to want to assign a value to a production that calls itself “artistic?” In fact, usually such a question is eluded or judged to be superfluous and absurd by arguing that, to be precise, this type of production belongs to a history that obliges us to confront or compare it to others so that a public in search of reassuring bearings can understand it; in short, that increasing prestige is a necessary and legitimate way of putting works in relation. But doesn’t this forget the production process itself, the one that engendered them? In other words, before even giving oneself over to this little adventitious game of comparing, isn’t it advisable to interrogate ourselves about the way in which each work reveals its own process of increasing the value that is immanent and absolutely irreducible to it—as I have tried to establish above in outlining a genealogy of artistic judgment? The moment I attend, for example, a choreographic performance that captures my attention, it takes on value *in and of itself for me*. It interests me, in the etymological sense of the Latin verb *inter-esse*; that is, to insert itself in the immanent and singular dynamic of a twofold corporal historicity: that of my own corporeity with its ups and downs and its unique and inalienable affective trajectory, and that of the artist’s corporeity and of the sensorial scanning enacted by his work. Thus, the stated value means nothing other than the concordance, or even just the connection, between the conditions of my perception and the artist’s creative sensorial process. It does not therefore refer to any universal norm that would supposedly be “beautiful,” nor *a fortiori* to the requirements of a modernity to which the artistic work must necessarily be subjected, but rather exposes only the relativity, contingency, and complexity of an encounter between two modalities of perceptive management and, more exactly, of fictional projection. In other words, what defines and justifies the aesthetic value of a particular work in a given place and at a given moment are the conditions under which one system of sensorial production is linked to another system of sensorial production and, consequently, the possibility of their concordance even if this latter is, almost ironically, nothing but a misunderstanding—as is demonstrated by the untimely emotional reactions and the intellectual interpretations of spectators that are completely antinomic to the intentions announced by the creator of the piece.

¹² Letter of September 22, 2000, in Mathilde Monnier and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dehors la danse* (Lyon: Droz, 2001).

Nowadays, the dimension of the spectacle evidently occupies a prominent place in all of the arts (and in life in general!) to the point of overwhelming or masking the aesthetic specificity of the work presented. And yet, the very modalities of this spectacularity are far from being identical: as Jean-Luc Nancy notes in a letter to Mathilde Monnier, the relationship of dance to the stage is not the same as that of the theater, although it is more often than not the same stage. In fact, although theater started with the stage, dance has distinct and autonomous origins.¹² This is why we can interrogate the nature of the relationship of dance to the spectacle. Already in *De la création chorégraphique*,¹³ I strived to argue, on the one hand, that the stage derealized not only the corporeities that it was supposed to exhibit, but also the corporeity of the spectator who pretends to perceive them; and, on the other hand, that this very perception constitutes a permanent mechanism of fictionary projection that assimilates and appropriates the fictions proposed by the piece, even if it means to transform or amplify them. In other words, when a spectator goes to a performance, he or she is given a fictive reality to see, or more generally to feel, that stimulates his or her own fictionary power. The performance ends up enlarging, enriching, multiplying, or shattering this inherent power that we each have and, in the same movement, alters itself. There is thus in a way an immanence of the spectacular function within each corporeity that moreover reverberates and has repercussions both on its entire surface and in all of its acts: it constantly gives itself up to performing itself for itself, from one anatomical region to another, from one movement to another. But, of course, stage representation, through its socio-cultural finality, if not formats, at least formalizes, arranges, and reconfigures this immanent fictionary dynamic in order to better captivate the attention of the audience and arouse its emotion. It is still true, nevertheless, that the truly choreographic performance, unlike all the others, exhibits animate corporeities through a quasi-uninterrupted motor impulse that metamorphoses into an infinite diversity of shifts, movements, physiognomic expressions; in other words, into an incessant flow of more or less disorderly hybrid figures and evanescences, what I believed I should call “phantasmagorias,” which fictionalize them even more. In this way, the choreographic performance—because of its random and paradoxical action of construction and destruction, its disconcerting process of weaving and unweaving a temporality that pulverizes corporeity into a savage and unrestrained succession of instants (Merce Cunningham’s famous *events*)—not only renders any control over the duration of the performance impossible, but also reinforces the ontological derealization carried out by the stage dispositif, the dissolution of its form and its identity as produced by its imagistic mutation and, conjointly, the temporal disintegration of its apparent unity. From which, to my eyes, comes the vanity and occasional absurdity of the numerous current attempts to, out of a desire for embellishment or originality and because of the conventional submission to the demands of a supposed modernity, overload choreographic performances with a profusion of artifices and sophisticated technical means. This scenographic saturation certainly seduces the eyes and ears of the audience who give in to facile and entertaining effects of lighting magic, colors, pictorial or video images, sound or musical orchestrations, and *a fortiori* alluring, indulgent, or provocative scenes, but it masks or glosses over the specific, veritable, and underground character of the sensorial and fictionary work of choreographic creation.

¹³ Michel Bernard, *De la création chorégraphique* (Pantin: Centre national de la danse, 2001).

To sum up, as I have tried to demonstrate through this analysis, today dance seems to me to be suffering more than it is benefitting from its desire to bend itself to the normative and ambiguous criteria of the category of modernity and its multiple subterfuges. Much to the contrary of popular belief, the rediscovery of the random sensorimotor and fictionary process that engenders dance in a plurality of instants springing from the performances of dancers emphasizes the qualitative and fundamentally rebellious autonomy of this artistic experience. This is what Merce Cunningham seems to have understood and wanted to give voice to, in his own way, when he said: "In my performances, there is no symbolic, no psyche: everything that is seen has its meaning in the moment itself and the performance is nothing other than what one can see. The subject of dance, is dance itself."¹⁴

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¹⁴ Merce Cunningham, interview reproduced in *Libération*, July 18 2009, p. 3.