8. Physical and aesthetic properties in dance

Julia Beauquel

Introduction

Dance as art has been philosophically characterized as involving the natural expressiveness of human movements. But while some authors find the defense of expressiveness essential, others claim that it is not relevant to the understanding of dance and favour instead a focus on style, a supposedly more significant artistic feature.[1]

This paper is an attempt to provide an alternative account to both these positions, with the first (namely, that the dancers are supposed to convey emotions to us by their naturally expressive movements) seeming too naturalistic and the second (that dance only consists in the performance of complicated gestures of a certain style) overly stylistic.

The aim here is to consider the bodily movements neither from the perspective of spectators 'naively' attributing some *naturally expressive* properties to a dance, nor from the point of view of dancers whose main intention is to correctly perform a set of specific technical gestures. As we will see, dance cannot be properly analyzed by means of concepts implying a radical bifurcation of nature and culture, or of the audience's appreciation and the artists' intention.

Firstly, I will show that, as tempting as it seems to a philosopher of dance, insofar as the medium of the art form is the human body in movement, the notion of natural expressiveness is not unanimously accepted. Further thinkers have repudiated it for its misleading comparison with our common expressive behaviour. This essay will raise two objections to the empiricist implications of an aesthetic theory of dance appreciation focused upon the notion of natural expressiveness. First, such a theory seems indifferent to the cognitive aspects of aesthetic appreciation. It reduces our experience of dance to direct perception. Second, this perspective implies anti-realist, or at least relativist views according to which expressive properties are not real or objective, but subjective and relative to the individuals who perceive them.

Secondly, I will urge that the style approach, in overestimating the intentional and conventional features of dance, is not a relevant alternative to natural expressiveness. Again, two objections will be developed. On the

---

1 Joseph Margolis (1981) invokes the idea of natural expressiveness. A response to his paper is given by Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge (1983).

one hand, I will criticize the identification of style with technique and the neglect of both the meaning of dance and the expressiveness of the human body in favour of a strong interest in the dancer's intention to correctly execute the movements. On the other hand, I will claim that such a sharp distinction between the dancers' 'technical intentions' and the spectators' attributions of expressive properties to dance works is untenable.

This last objection will be deepened with the idea that a correct understanding of expression in dance cannot be based on a conception of intention as an internal mental state causing physical actions independent of a context. Such a view is not only unable to explain the dancer's expressive actions, but is also inadequate to the reality of many choreographers' creative processes. Expression is less the acting out of some inner mental life than the execution and composition of spontaneous and deliberate gestures that relate and respond to partially constraining contextual elements. As I will maintain, a growing tendency in the dance world is to create the dance work from a 'first performance' engaging one or several dancers. Many choreographers, such as Pina Bausch or Emanuel Gat, use the movement as a starting point: the definite theme, meaning, and structure of their works do not always precede, but progressively *emerge from the actions* performed in the studio. The analysis of choreographic expression should describe different kinds of movements involved in dancing and acknowledge their decisive role as well as the fact that they are not all as intentional or active as we think they are.

This essay moves away from the fruitless opposition between natural expressiveness and style. The focus will be on the physical dimension of human movement, suggesting that it obeys natural laws and thus cannot be considered purely artifactual, conventional, or even intentional. My examination of the art form does not deny the artistic significance of the various existing dance styles, both for the dancers who master them and the spectators who appreciate and identify them. There surely are important differences between a classical ballet like *Sleeping Beauty*, choreographed by Marius Petipa and first performed at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg, in 1890, and Pina Bausch's version of *The Rite of Spring* (1975) or *Points in Space* by Merce Cunningham (1986),[2] in terms of corporeal sensations as well as in terms of visual perception. Indeed, throughout history, the sense of space and the use of weight vary greatly from one dance style to another. This essay simply emphasizes that danced movements, preeminently with regard to their stylistic categorization, are the expression of our human nature, *viz.*, movements that manifest the dispositions and capacities of a specific type of body. Allowing a different approach to expression in dance,

---

2 Clips of both the Bausch and the Cunningham works are, at the time of writing, available at http://www.youtube.com.

the notions of 'capacity' and 'disposition' are related to the philosophical problem of agency, and belong more generally to action theory.

Agency is the capacity of an agent to act in the world. Action theory, or philosophy of action, considers the nature and definition of action and agency, in particular, examining their relation to mental states: for instance, is an action necessarily *caused* by an intention? Are the expressive bodily movements of a dancer entirely active and intentional? A relevant understanding of dance, we will maintain, is an anticausalistic and externalist account that consists in recognizing that the movements are not strictly products of agency or effects of internal states and personal intentions. Rather, danced movements are contextual interactions that involve a measure of passivity and responsiveness, both on the physical and the aesthetic levels of description.

Finally, a discussion of aesthetic realism will complete my argument about the close relation of corporeal, contextual and aesthetic properties, maintaining that an adequate analysis of dance has to include all of them. The purpose of such an account is to defend an idea of continuity between natural and danced movements, in showing how physical and aesthetic or expressive properties of dance work together. This argument uses a logical and descriptive relation of 'supervenience' between these two types of properties, with a view to defending a realist conception of dance. Asserting that expressive properties such as 'passionate' or 'reserved' supervene on physical properties of movement means that the former depend on the latter, co-vary with them but are not conceptually reducible to them. Even though he did not use this term, such an idea has its origin in the work of Frank Sibley (2001).

Within this framework, what it means to have an appropriate aesthetic experience of a dance work is to be able to perceive and properly identify some physical properties as expressive thanks to a set of cognitive elements concerning its general context of production, including stylistic considerations. The audience does not perceive the expressive properties directly, but rather attributes them to the work on the basis of physical aspects that can cognitively be related to a context. For instance, when a spectator talks about an ethereal choreography or a tempestuous dance, it is in virtue of physical qualities enlightened by the knowledge of features allowing a differentiation between a classical and a modern style. Thus, a strictly empiricist account centered on the notion of natural expressiveness appears to be as misleading as a very strong contextualism excluding expressiveness in favour of style: generally, a correct understanding of this art implies both perceptual and cognitive faculties, both emotional and intellectual factors. Expressive and stylistic properties do not exclude one another. So the dichotomy of natural expressiveness and style is mistaken.

Natural expressiveness

Contrary to classical *expression* theories, the concept of *expressiveness* enables us to describe dance from an external perspective, without having to deal with the problem of the emotions and intentions, either real or hypothetical, of the dancer or choreographer. Speaking about the elegant, melancholic, soulful or joyful gestures of a dance consists in attributing to it some expressive properties that do not imply a reference to the artists' mental states. But the idea of a natural expressiveness has been criticized, mainly for its 'natural' connotation according to which the interaction between dancer and audience derives from our 'everyday expressive behavioural interaction' (Armelagos and Sirridge 1977, p.16). As Armelagos and Sirridge explain, the strong temptation to analyze dance in terms of natural expressiveness derives from the fact that 'the performer's body as a medium or instrument has a much more direct connection with the perceived artwork than in the other performing arts, for at least a part of what the dancer physically does is the most essential component of what the spectator perceives as the artwork with its characteristic expressive qualities' (1983, p.301). Such a view is compatible with an empiricist account of aesthetic experience in which sensation and direct perception play a primary role: our appreciation of dance is considered immediate, autonomous, non-conceptual. Created in order to generate a satisfying aesthetic experience, dance works are evaluated independently of their context of production; they are not 'over intellectualized'.

The limits of natural expressiveness

A first objection to an empiricist analysis of 'natural expressiveness' in dance concerns its inappropriate reduction of aesthetic appreciation to direct perception. As an art, dance does not stand on the same plane with ordinary expressive communication; such an explanation significantly impoverishes its artistic status by failing to account for the cognitive dimension of aesthetic experience. An adequate appreciation of dance's expressive properties requires at least minimal background information about the art form, its history, creative processes, techniques, styles, meaningful contents, and so on. Defended by Jerrold Levinson (for example, 2007) among others, this argument concerns not only the audience's appreciation, but also the dancer's practice. In ballerina Alicia Alonso's opinion, 'When you dance *Giselle*, whether you are a *corps de ballet* or a soloist or prima ballerina or *premier danseur*, you should know all about it. You should read and research the most you can about it, so you can portray the style and believe in what you are dancing' (in Newman 1998, p.59).

Secondly, this conception has relativist and subjectivist implications.

Being objects of immediate experience, expressive properties are not related to a relevant contextual and cognitive background: consequently, dance appreciation can consist in the attribution of *any* property to the works, depending on who experiences them. The aesthetic content, meaning and value of a choreographic work are subjective projections, relative to the perceiver. If the aesthetic judgment and properties are relative, then the works of art lack objective value and communicable meaning: such a view cannot warrant the claim that any interpretation of a dance is more correct than any other. On the contrary, the contextualism implies that our experience, whatever it is, is appropriate.

The style approach

Hence, 'There is no place in dance theory for (...) the notion of 'natural expressiveness" as Armelagos and Sirridge claim (1983, p.307). This natural expressivism does not reflect the reality of dance as art, which is best described in terms of style, roughly defined as 'the dynamic system of kinaesthetic motivation and movement ideals which guide the performer' in his performance (302). (For instance, in classical ballet, these ideals are line and fluidity.) According to the advocates of this approach, the fact that 'classical ballet has long been considered deeply expressive of a certain (...) range of emotions and feelings' has *nothing* to do with what a ballet dancer really does: she concentrates on the correct execution of the steps and on staying in line. Actually, 'a soloist is more interested in dancing *Giselle* brilliantly than in expressing sadness' (1977, p.15)[3].

Admittedly, a philosophical interest in dance as art must take into account the technical and stylistic aspects of the medium. These features play a part in dance appreciation. Identifying dance with the spontaneous and immediate performing of movements totally devoid of elaboration is a misconception. Should we conclude that dance styles and natural expressiveness are necessarily are incompatible?

Two problems with the style approach

Despite its merits, the style approach encounters at least two major problems. One is that it tends to minimize *both* the importance of the *meaning* of dance *and* the *expressiveness* of the human body, identifying dance styles with pure technique and dancers with some kind of efficient machines. About performances of *Giselle*, dancer Alonso says: 'Today when you see a company, you notice (...) that one of the most difficult things for them is to

---

3 First performed in Paris in 1841, *Giselle* is a Romantic ballet originally choreographed by Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot, then re-choreographed by Marius Petipa for the Imperial Ballet.

believe in what they are doing when they do it' (in Newman 1998, p.59). Another dancer, Nora Kaye, discussing her attitude to some of the roles in the traditional repertoire, deplores this denial or underestimation of the role of affection and emotion in dance execution and aesthetic appreciation: 'you concentrate on your technique, your line (...) I wanted something with a little more emotion and not just steps' (in Newman 1998, p.58). If the performing of a dance merely consists in a correct execution, rather than in any kind of expressiveness, then the audience should pay attention to the way dancers succeed in achieving through the steps the movement ideals of a specific style. A spectator should be interested in watching how line and fluidity are exhibited, and remain indifferent as to the expressive, emotional and meaningful aspects of a particular dance.

However, a satisfying analysis of dance cannot totally neglect the empirical aspect of aesthetic appreciation or discredit the role of emotions in the identification of expressive properties and the understanding of dance meaning. Here is how Alonso describes the role of Giselle: 'In act I, when she comes out of the door, Giselle is life itself! (...) Slowly (...) you begin to understand that she is not just like all the other women, that there is something different on her, something more fragile. (...) It should make the audience hold their breath looking at her' (Newman 1998, p.59). As the *Black Swan*[4] movie reminds us, dance is not just about technique, control and perfection, but also involves a capacity to communicate a meaning by exemplifying various expressive qualities - even though this process has nothing to do with the expression of some emotions felt literally (it is often a mistake to identify the emotion *expressed* with the emotion *felt* by this or that dancer). Surely, Nina's character is more interested in dancing brilliantly than in expressing the properties that must be manifest in her performance. But that is precisely why she is unable – at least, at the beginning – to perform the Black Swan part. And, I will maintain, any interpretation engages a disposition to be affected and to react to a context, which sometimes involves a passive use of the body and could well be seen as a form of *natural* expressiveness proper to each performer. This point will be addressed in what follows.

A second problem with the stylistic view is the internal/external distinction it draws. Maintaining that the attribution of a natural expressiveness to a dancer is not relevant insofar as she is centered on performing some correct steps unduly reduces dance to the description of its 'internal' part. Such a distinction between the activity of a dancer and the effects of her dance does not seem adequate to the art form. Notably, it seems to leave a mysterious chasm between the dancer's world and the spectator's. It neglects the expressive effects of the dancing body in virtue of an explanation focused on

---

4 Film directed by Darren Aronofsky, 2010.

the dancer's intentions (her activity, concentration and correction-seeking). Why would there be a radical dichotomy between what dance 'truly' is (some actions viewed from the perspective of a performing dancer) and what is only a deceptive appearance (these actions naively perceived as 'naturally expressive' by the spectators)? This philosophical study of dance seeks to include both what a dancer does (experienced dance) and what a spectator perceives (perceived dance).

Against two dichotomies: interiority/exteriority, style/expressiveness

Dance cannot be properly analyzed on the basis of a dichotomy of interiority and exteriority. A dancer performs gestures that are designed for an audience. These movements are intended to be shown: from dance learning to ballet rehearsals, they are constantly improved thanks to a person who teaches, observes and corrects them. The recognition that they are to be viewed is a presupposition of dancers' gestures being performed the way they are. A major part of dancers' practice consists in adjusting, thanks to an observing eye, their gestures to what will be the perceived effects of a work. The intentions conveyed in a dance are not independent of this eye; rather they are shaped by it. Thus, dance really ends up embodying an observer's directions and corrections, directions and corrections that are made with a view to the dance's being observed by an audience. The fact that observers help build the movement justifies the adoption of an externalist approach to expressive properties: these properties are extrinsic to the dancer; they are relational. In other words, they characterize the dance works but depend on the viewer's responses. The properties of *Giselle*, for instance, are those of gestures both as they are intentionally performed and as they are perceived.

Consequently, dancing *Giselle* brilliantly (the technique and style) and expressing sadness (the expressiveness and meaning) should not be considered two separate things. The first might be a way to do the second. One dance can fall under several correct descriptions, given by a dancer, a choreographer, a tutor, or a spectator: descriptions in terms of technical, intentional, stylistic, aesthetic and meaningful properties. Even if a dancer had no idea about the meaning of her execution, the action of correctly performing the gestures of *Giselle*'s choreography (the 'intentional' action, without observation), and the action of expressing sadness (the action observed and described as 'sad' by an observer who is able to perceive this property) are one and the same. Dance is not limited to dancers' intentionality or to their own description of what they do. The content that dancers manifest is largely impersonal. The important point is that there is someone, sometimes someone other than the artist, who is able to describe

the action by highlighting its rationale. As Jerrold Levinson maintains: 'What an artist's work means (...), may very well be clearer to well-placed others than to him or her' (Levinson 2007, p.7).

Expression and the problematic relation between intention and action

A philosophical examination of dance shows that a conception of expression in which artists' intentions (those of dancers as well as those of choreographers) are considered internal mental states causing their actions independent of context, is untenable.

First, it does not reflect the reality of creative processes. Certainly, 'it is important to do justice to the connection between a work of art and its creator' as Graham McFee (1992, p.209) claims. But it is a mistake to believe that the movements of a dance only are the acting-out and the manifestation of mental states that a choreographer or dancer has the intention to express. The creative methods of Pina Bausch show that dance is not the result of prior, entirely determined intentions imposed on dancers by choreographers. Underlying both the importance of action and the collective aspect of creation, the famous choreographer confides: 'I cannot come and say: 'Here is what we will do'. (...) I like feeling that we are in the process without really knowing how we got there. There is no beginning. (...) I like us to move forward in the same direction rather than being followed.' (Bausch 2009). The work is progressively composed through the dancers' actions and the choreographer's selections. Dance works are very often created out of a series of individual or collective performances. Also invalidating the view of dance as a mere physical effect of some pre-existing intentional content, choreographer Emanuel Gat declares: 'I am not going to do a piece about the war in the Middle East but I will go inside a choreographic process that, if it has a strong inner logic, will reflect on so many other things' (Gat 2012).

Second, many issues that are raised by the notion of expression derive from our tendency to conceive it as a purely *intentional* and *active* process even though it is not. A danced movement can be intentionally passive (released, weighty), or unintentionally active, as when we run out of fear, by reflex. A dancer can convey expressive properties *without intending* to do so. In life in general, we routinely attribute expressive qualities to people who do not intend to have them. A joyful way of walking, the lassitude of a posture, a warm way of being, the sombre or radiant look of a face are not always the object of an expressive intention. The fact that these attitudes manifest the corresponding mental states does not imply that the people concerned actually *intend* to express and transmit them to an observer or an interlocutor.

Similarly, not every expressive property conveyed by dancers is the fruit of an intention. McFee explains: 'The artist's intentions are not, or not necessarily, things he actually or explicitly thought or intended: that is to say, the implicit intentions, thoughts, ideas (unconscious ones) must be respected' (1992, p.209). As Merce Cunningham himself said, anything the human body does is expressive, even when it is not infused with intention and emotion. As an example, a piece like Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*,[5] which aims at being devoid of emotion, hierarchy, repetition, and any form of emphasis conveys a 'touching, upright girls-college seriousness', according to critic Joan Acocella (1990, p.13). Thus, even if we accept the thesis that dancers only care about their execution's correctness (rather than their interpretation's rightness), this does not justify the exclusion of their expressiveness.

An expressive property can be the symptom of a specific corporeal constitution or the manifestation of a distinctive temperament. A willowy body with long muscles will not produce the exact same effects as a smaller and very toned body; and it is likely that, with similar intentions, a dancer with an impulsive and nervous temperament dances very differently from a calm, or even lethargic personality. As we will see, 'our intentional actions are *not always as active as we think* they are' (De Sousa 1987, p.11). Of course, a dancer initiates, performs and ends her movements whenever she decides to. But falls, turns, jumps, or runs and other movements involve a physical dimension of weight and inertia that is not entirely under her control. Later, I will highlight the inextricable combination of activity and passivity that constitutes dance.

Conative and cognitive orientations

For now, the idea that expression is not a strictly active, subjective or projective phenomenon can be deepened by the distinction drawn between the 'conative' and the cognitive 'direction of fit'.

This distinction can be illustrated by a question raised by Plato about the nature of piety: do we desire X because X is desirable, or do we consider X desirable simply because we desire it? Roughly, the first alternative is objectivist (the desire depends on a property of the object). This is the cognitive orientation, characterized by a 'mind-to-world' direction of fit. The second alternative is subjectivist (the desire depends on the subject). This conative orientation is the opposite: it consists in a 'world-to-mind' direction of fit. We will or desire what does not yet exist, and our desire is satisfied if the world provides what we want.

---

5 First performed on January 10, 1966 at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village by David Gordon, Steve Paxton and Rainer herself.

Here, I maintain that expression in dance combines and manifests both directions of fit. Through movement, dancers both express subjective characteristics and respond to objective elements, such as musical properties. As spectators, we generally expect more than seeing dancers conscientiously rehearsing a habitual sequence of steps. We enjoy being able to identify how they respond to each other and how they relate to a context. We are particularly touched when a dancer lets herself go or surprises herself. These remarks apply equally to technique, creation, and interpretation.

Therefore, rather than analyzing expression in dance as a causal relation between an internal intention (for instance, to correctly perform some gestures) and a physical action ('wrongly' perceived by the audience as expressive), a conception of the art form should take into account the dancers' interaction with the context of a work that constraints and influences their movements. As an organisation of some more or less active and intentional relations to the specific context of a work, dance includes a measure of passivity and receptivity that should not be neglected. A relevant approach to expression may be inspired by ideas such as those defended by Elizabeth Anscombe in her book *Intention* (2002), where she argues that we should replace the causal explanation of the relation of intention to action with an observation of the conditions under which our actions' descriptions are intentional. Here, the description we suggest employs the notions of capacities and dispositions, as well as the categories of activity and passivity.

Reconciling different perspectives

To sum up, a stylistic or conventionalist account of dance is no more acceptable than an empiricist or naturalist view. As we have seen, the emphasis on natural expressiveness reduces dance experience to relative appreciations or judgements of taste, whereas the focus upon style and dancers' practice and intentionality tends to ignore the expressiveness of the dancing body. Considering dance as the natural performing of expressive movements offered to immediate subjective and sensible experience or exaggerating the importance of stylistic aspects by putting aside the impact of corporeal expressiveness upon our perception and emotions seem equally inappropriate.

Furthermore, style and expressivity should not be set against each other on the basis of what is intentionally and consciously controlled by a dancer and what is not, or what is active and what is passive in her dance. The distinction between what is intentional and what is not, if it is too hastily conceived as a distinction between what is conscious, voluntary, active or controlled on the one hand and what is unconscious, involuntary, passive

or uncontrolled on the other hand is an obstacle on the path to dance understanding.

We could content ourselves with the idea that there is no point in matching the natural expressiveness approach against the style approach. After all, these views complement each other, dealing with the description of one phenomenon from different perspectives: the spectator's point of view, in terms of movements' expressiveness, and the dancer's point of view focused on rightly performing some sophisticated movements. But such a distinction between experienced and perceived dance can also leave us unsatisfied: there seems an obligation to explain how the expressive properties and the stylistic aspects relate to each other, keeping in mind that dance is neither a purely natural expression, nor a pure set of stylistic conventions.

A more appropriate and fruitful approach to dance analysis is to consider the nature of the movements themselves, setting aside the aesthetic intentions of both those who perform them and those who attribute expressive properties to them. I suggest an explanation that is not purely aesthetic; it is borrowed from action theory. It consists in examining dance in terms of active and passive movements. This conception which first accommodates physical movements, then aesthetic qualities should allow us to clarify the way in which dancers' natural expressiveness and choreographic styles can be reconciled. This raises the question what dance does and how it does it.

Dance and action theory

In a (2002) paper about 'agency' and 'patiency' (i.e., the quality of being passive, or the condition of being acted upon by another) in nature, Mikael M. Karlsson briefly presents Fred Dretske's (1988) theory of action as a rare attempt to distinguish between active and passive movements without appealing to the notion of intention. Here, my question is whether such a theory, dealing with natural movements *in general,* can clarify the somewhat mysterious notion of natural expressiveness and provide us with a way to analyze dance as a set of physical movements without having to deal with the choreographer's or dancer's intention and the audience's appreciation.

Dretske's distinction between what a subject does and what happens to it is not based upon a contrast between what is intentional and what is not, but upon a distinction between internal and external causes of movement. On the one hand, agency concerns everything a subject does, even involuntarily. It is the agent's behaviour. The location of the movement's cause is internal (for instance: trembling, coughing, crying, blushing, inhaling, exhaling). On the other hand, a subject is acted upon, or has something happen to it when something external moves it, in other words when the location of the movement's cause is external to the subject (for instance, being bitten by a dog).

Of course, philosophical inquiry into dance should not reduce this art form to an activity devoid of intention. The aim is simply to focus, at least initially, on a movement's basic properties. For it is far from obvious that every movement in a dance is intentional. And after all, dancers are natural beings; their properly human capacities and technical, artistic abilities, as developed as they are, never totally eliminate the effects of nature on their bodies and movements. Rather, these danced movements can be conceived, in a sense, as the expression of a nature that is realized to some degree.

Unfortunately, Dretske's distinction between agency and patiency on the basis of a distinction between internal and external causes of change leads to counterexamples: according to Dretske's theory, Karlsson asserts, some 'paradigm cases of *having something happen to one* rather than of *doing something* (namely, we *suffer* hair loss and are *victims* of heart attacks and epileptic fits)' just because they are *internally caused*, count as things that a person *does*, not things that she undergoes (Karlsson 2002, pp.62-3).

Applying this to dance, a dancer who performed the wrong steps or lost her balance not because of an external event but because she is in bad shape or has a cramp (i.e. an *internal* cause) would be considered the *agent* of her movement. Is it right to classify this movement – that would commonly be considered accidental – in the same category as the correctly performed actions? In this conception, some unpredicted and uncontrollable movements, because they have an internal cause, count as a dancer's actions. But as cases like the awkward movement caused by a cramp show, a dancer is not the agent of every internally caused movement any more than the bald man is the agent of his hair loss. This conception exaggerates the role of the agent's activity, failing to account for the intrinsic passive phenomenon (such as hair loss, epileptic fits, unpredicted movements caused by a pain).

These problematic examples show the contestable character, notably concerning dance, of an account that distinguishes between *agency* and *patiency* on the basis of a distinction between some *internal* and *external* causes of movement.

Active and passive powers

Nonetheless, thanks to the notion of passive powers, it is possible to improve this conception in order to make it relevant for an analysis of dance. Karlsson defines a passive power as 'a power of something to be affected by something else in a certain way' (2002, p.54). The examples he uses to illustrate this are those of a splinter of iron attracted by a magnet, a football kicked by a footballer and a field mouse carried off by an owl. Whereas the magnet, the player and the owl are agents, the movements of the splinter, the football and the field mouse are passive. Karlsson writes: 'they do not act, but are

acted upon; being attracted, kicked and carried off are evidently not things that they *do*, but things that *happen* to them' (Karlsson 2002, p.63). The major difference with Dretske's theory is that this power of being affected is *intrinsic* (or *internal*) to these things or beings. The attraction of the splinter by the magnet depends on a passive power of the iron, a property of this material: its susceptibility to being attracted by the magnet (a property that neither copper nor aluminum possesses). Yet we cannot, as Dretske would, speak about a *behaviour* of the splinter, the mouse and the ball. Karlsson asserts: '*agency* should not be attributed on the basis of the exercise of a *passive* power'. It would be paradoxical. And he continues: 'a subject *acts* or *does something*, as opposed to *being acted upon* or *having something happen to it*, insofar as its motion is brought about by the exercise of an *active* power: a power to do rather than to be affected, an *ability* rather than a *susceptibility*' (2002, p.64).

To a large extent, dance consists in the *experience* and *manifestation* of our active and passive intrinsic powers. Let us consider the dancer's body as having both active properties like those of the magnet, owl and footballer and passive properties like those of the iron splinter, the mouse and the ball: her movements that derive from active powers are similar to the action of the magnet, the kick of the footballer and the movement of the owl catching its prey, whereas her movements derived from passive powers are similar to those of the iron splinter attracted by the magnet, the mouse carried off by its predator, and the ball.

What fascinates us in dance seems to partake of its power to exemplify, at a high level of complexity, such a mix of activity and passivity. Every movement that yields to the force of gravity exhibits passivity: as an example, the fact of coming down on the floor after a leap does not seem attributable to an activity of the dancer's body; her dangling arm movements obeying her chest rotations do not seem more active. Most of the bodily movements that are mainly due to weight or inertia are attributable to a form of passivity rather than an activity. Thus, when a dancer lets herself fall, even if she decided to do so and if she demonstrates an ability to fall, the fall itself is a 'letting-go' rather than a 'doing': the dancer lets the natural movement of her weight go. No intention, will or decision to let her self go can make this abandon entirely active. The most a dancer can 'do' in such a released movement is to train her self to partially control the fall. In other words, no human being is the *agent* of her body's attraction by gravity. Thus, in every movement due to the body's weight or inertia (the off-balance, falls, bounces, spins) the dancer experiences a passivity that she learns to partially control but that she cannot quite seize. This is what Aristotle calls *nature*: *the motion whose source is intrinsic to the thing but that is not derived from the thing itself*. Through this type of movement, the dancer *exemplifies* and *manifests* this

nature that does not belong to her and yet characterizes her. A dancer's passive movements just depend on a disposition of her body.

If this is correct, the concepts of activity and passivity are relevant for the purpose of understanding natural as well as danced movements, provided that one does not distinguish them on the basis of Dretske's internal/external contrast. They show that it is not absurd, as some think it is, to speak of a form of *natural* expressiveness of danced movements, which consists in using weight and energy in an active way, but also in a passive manner. To understand this, it is neither necessary to examine the dancers' emotions, nor to wonder about what comes under the intention to correctly perform the movements of a given dance style or what is part of a dancer's natural expressiveness instead. Dance literally exemplifies our bodily capacities and susceptibilities.

Aesthetic implications

So far, I have examined dance in terms of some of its physical properties; I can now consider the aesthetic level. The use of active and passive powers may help to explain some major differences between dance techniques and styles. Depending on the importance that they attach to these powers, these techniques and styles produce some movements that *feel* very different to the dancers and *look* very different to the spectators. Put simply, classical dance technique largely privileges the learning and mastery of active powers; the active, risen-up and controlled movements continuously escape from weight, in a tireless fight against gravity. These extremely active body movements are particularly appropriate to the expression or 'exemplification' of light themes, literally as well as figuratively. Catherine Z. Elgin thus writes: 'Classical ballet (...) literally exemplifies properties such as grace, delicacy, and beauty; and metaphorically exemplifies properties such as love and longing, weightlessness and ethereality' (2010, p.86). As Nelson Goodman explained, the exemplification of a property P means that P is both instantiated and referred to (Goodman 1976; see also Elgin 1996, pp.170-183). In other words, a dance exemplifies lightness and joy when it possesses *and* draws attention to these properties.

When dancers came to think of the expressive power of classical dance as limited, they progressively introduced opposing tendencies of movement in attributing a greater importance to the exemplification of passive powers by using weight in a released manner[6]. An example provided by Elgin is

---

6 Armelagos and Sirridge (1977, p.21) claim: 'We might, then, suppose that dancers have rejected traditional ballet because they have disliked or been unable to tolerate the limitations on expressive potential which they saw reflected in the usual choice of subject matter'.

Martha Graham's works, insofar as they 'literally exemplify that the body of the dancer has a certain weight – that it is subject to literal as well as metaphorical gravity (...) [They] metaphorically exemplify psychological properties such as grief, regret, horror and hope' (Elgin 2010, p.86). Thus, modern, postmodern and contemporary techniques and styles appeared with all the new properties they express, literally as well as metaphorically related to gravity. So dance can be the object of various aesthetic descriptions: we speak highly of the graceful, elegant and ethereal classical style or admire the intensity of an impetuous contemporary style.

This very sketchy portrayal simply aims to show how physical properties can generate various sorts of aesthetic properties (expressive then stylistic). The nature of dance aesthetic properties partly depends on a measured use of active and passive powers of physical movement.

The important point is that this use is not strictly physical, but also aesthetic. In addition to the active/passive use of weight and inertia, either in resisting gravity or on the contrary giving in to it, dancers can let themselves be affected and guided by the music, or can act against it in various ways. Many choreographers and dancers' creations still derive from and depend upon musical works: their improvised movements as well as their compositions are closely related to the musical properties that inspire them. This is particularly obvious in Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker's works since 1980 and, for instance, in Mark Morris's *Mozart Dances* (2006).[7] Thus soft and joyful or sad and plaintive music has the power to infuse the danced movements with its nuanced rhythmical and melodic properties. Its power is even stronger, since music does not only affect the movement qualities, but determines the movements themselves, as Noël Carroll and Margaret Moore claim (Carroll and Moore 2010). In some dances indeed, the turns, arm movements, leaps and many other gestures are the embodiment or reflection of some musical movements. In these cases, it seems appropriate to describe dance as deriving from passive powers: dance exemplifies a power to be affected by music. But dance, of course, can also act in contrast to a melody, or simply be totally independent of it, as it is shown by many pieces by Cunningham and John Cage.

Impenetrable and porous dances

I suggest a distinction between some 'impenetrable' and some 'porous' dances, depending on whether the active or passive movements prevail. This distinction is not a mere conceptual exercise but aims to point out some very

---

7 A clip of *Rosas Danst Rosas* (1983), filmed by Thierry de Mey, the composer, and an interview with Mark Morris, plus rehearsal footage of *Mozart Dances* are (at the time of writing) available on http://youtube.com

different tendencies that can be discerned in dance works and revealed by
the dancer's testimonies.

The impenetrable tendency is to dance in an extremely active way. The
movement is first. The dancer claims that she does not have time to interpret,
'it goes too fast'. The mere performance of the gestures demands all the focus.
The purpose is *the correctness* of the performance: 'impenetrable dancers'
concentrate on the rigor and precision of the executed steps, in sum on the
technical virtuosity of the performance.

As for the 'porous' tendency, it consists in performing the movement in
an open way, as a manifestation of what affects us. The movement is second;
it is a response to something else. The purpose here is *the rightness* of the
performance: the right response to this 'something'. The 'porous dancers'
focus on the quality of the choreography and the will to serve something
else; a melody, some emotional properties, in short a meaning conveyed by
the movements.

'Supervenience' and aesthetic realism

My explanation of dance in terms of active and passive powers that are
literally and metaphorically employed intends to support the thesis that
dance appreciation and understanding imply both *the perception of physical
properties* of corporeal movement and *the identification of stylistic properties*.
This way of combining the physicality of dance with its aesthetic features is
compatible with a realist account using the logical relation of supervenience
to describe the dependence of aesthetic properties upon physical properties.[8]
This description of the way in which we are in relation to the choreographic
works allows us to maintain that these two types of properties are neither
radically distinct nor identical: aesthetic properties supervene upon the
basic or physical properties, co-vary with them, but are not conceptually
reducible to them. A vigorous, harmonious or smooth dance is what it is
in virtue of other properties that are not aesthetic, upon which it depends,
with which it covaries, but to which it is not reduced.

Dance cannot be properly reduced to physical movements and gestures.
It is made of corporeal and intentional actions possessing properties that
characterize it as an art form and can be adequately perceived. Aesthetic
properties of dance supervene not only on physical properties but also
on contextual properties such as those of choreographic vocabularies,
styles, techniques, creation processes, artistic evolutions, and so on. Our
attribution of aesthetic properties does not derive from purely subjective
impressions: speaking about dance, we refer to real features. These
characteristics are physical, spatial, formal, structural and contextual

8 For such a conception, see particularly Pouivet (2006) and (2010).

(cognitive, intentional, historical, cultural).

Aesthetic realism has two major advantages. First, acknowledging the normativity of aesthetic experience, it does not reduce dance to physical bodies in motion. The content and meaning of dance works depend upon physical as well as stylistic properties. Second, it shows that aesthetic properties are not determined by subjective projections, experiences or reactions. They are real (the dance works possess them) and relational (related to human intentions and to a context). That we can say why we attribute certain properties to a dance does not imply that we can attribute to it *any* property depending upon our own subjective experience. We cannot adequately attribute just any kind of property to any choreographic work. Dance is not condemned to relativism of appreciation but is a reality that can be the object of an actual knowledge. We can learn to appreciate it correctly. An appropriate aesthetic experience including both the cognitive and the perceptive or emotional aspects of dance is possible.

Conclusion

Certainly, aesthetic realism is not nowadays the most prevailing conception in the art world, especially concerning dance. The corporeal dimension of the art form, its stylistic diversity and variety of content, combined with the fact that many choreographic works are not narrative may explain why subjectivism is dominant in the dance world. Dance is an art form that is apparently impenetrable, or seems on the contrary immediately accessible, in a 'non-cognitive mode'.

But there is no reason to think that we cannot learn to understand dance, to develop a capacity to perceive its real properties and refer to them adequately in making right and reliable judgements. Dance as art includes movements and gestures that we can learn to identify; and it comprises works that are excellent, good, mediocre, poor, clear or confused, memorable or insignificant.

This does not mean that we must renounce our perceptual and emotional faculties in favour of conventional information or knowledge of things like stylistic elements. The opposition of style and expressiveness is mistaken: there is no incompatibility, but rather a continuity relating these notions. It is not necessary to make a choice between a view of dance as a set of bodily movements perceived by spectators as naturally expressive on the one hand and, on the other hand, an analysis of this choreographic art as a set of stylistic gestures performed by dancers principally preoccupied with the perfection of their technique.

Of course, classical dance, which is extremely codified, lends itself to a stylistic approach, whereas contemporary dance may seem or be described by its practitioners as more natural. But an explanation of dance in terms of

active and passive powers highlights that generally, in every dance style, the movements exemplify the actions and passivity of the natural beings that we are. They exemplify the capacities and dispositions of a certain type of body; the body that constitutes us as human beings. This is what dancers do, and what spectators see. On different levels (basic or physical, and aesthetic), we act and undergo what surrounds us; we are able to react and respond in various nuanced ways, in a more or less appropriate manner. In any case, the wide diversity of danced movements is the expression *par excellence* of our complex nature.

References

Acocella, Joan. 'Imagining Dance', *Dance Ink*, 1:2, December, 1990.

Anscombe, G. E. M. *L'intention*, translated into French by M. Maurice, C. Michon, Paris: Gallimard, 2002.

Aristote. *La Métaphysique*, translated into French by J. Tricot, Paris: Vrin. Tome I, 1991, and Tome II, 2000.

Armelagos, Adina and Mary Sirridge. 'The In's and Out's of Dance: Expression as an Aspect of Style', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 36:1, 1977, pp.15-24.

Armelagos, Adina and Mary Sirridge. 'The Role of "Natural Expressiveness" in Explaining Dance', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 41:3, 1983, pp.301-307.

Bausch, Pina. In *Hommage à Pina Bausch*, revue *Danser*, 2009.

Beauquel, Julia and Roger Pouivet (eds.). *Philosophie de la danse*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes II, collection Aesthetica, 2010.

Beauquel, Julia. 'Le mouvement et l'émotion', *in* Beauquel Julia and Roger Pouivet (eds.), 2010, pp.65-77.

Carroll, Noël and Margaret Moore. 'La communication kinesthésique, par la danse, avec la musique', in Beauquel Julia and Roger Pouivet , 2010, pp.99-114.

Carter, Alexandra (ed.). *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 1998.

Cunningham, Merce and Jacqueline Lesschaeve. 'Torse: There Are No Fixed Points in Space', in Carter, Alexandra (ed.), 1998, pp.29-34.

Cunningham, Merce. 'L'art impermanent (1955)', in Ginot, Isabella and Marcelle Michel (eds.), *La danse au XX^è siècle*, Paris, Larousse, 2002.

De Sousa ,Ronald. *The Rationality of Emotion*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987.

Dretske, Fred. *Explaining Behavior: Reasons in a World of Causes*, Cambridge,

MA: MIT Press, 1988.

Elgin, Catherine Z. *Considered Judgment*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996.

Elgin, Catherine Z. 'L'exemplification et la danse', in Beauquel, Julia and Roger Pouivet (eds.), 2010, pp.81-98.

Farjeon, Annabel. 'Choreographers: Dancing For De Valois and Ashton', in Carter, Alexandra (ed.), 1998, pp.23-28.

Gat Emanuel. 'Playing Games: The Choreographic Process', Sadler's Wells, London's Dance House website, 2012, http://www.sadlerswells.com/page/screen/1162333620001#.

Goodman, Nelson. *Languages of Art*, second edition. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976.

Hilton, Rebecca and Bryan Smith. 'A Dancing Consciousness', in Carter, Alexandra (ed.) 1998, pp.72-80.

Jeyasingh, Shobana. 'Imaginary Homelands: Creating A New Dance Language', in Carter, Alexandra (ed.), 1998, pp.46-52.

Karlsson, Mikael M. 'Agency and Patiency: Back to Nature?' in *Philosophical Explorations*, Volume V (I), 2002, pp.59-81.

Karlsson, Mikael M. 'Les lapins pourraient-ils danser?' in Beauquel, Julia and Roger Pouivet (eds.), 2010, pp.45-64.

Levinson, Jerrold. 'Aesthetic Contextualism', *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*, 4:3, December, 2007.

Margolis, Joseph. 'The Autographic Nature of the Dance', in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 39:4, 1981, pp.419-427.

McFee, Graham. *Understanding Dance*, London, Routledge, 1992.

Newman, Barbara. 'Dancers Talking About Performance', in Carter, Alexandra (ed.), 1998, pp.57-65.

Pouivet, Roger. 'Survenances', in *Critique*, 575 (April), 1995, pp.227-249.

Pouivet, Roger. 'On the Cognitive Functioning of Aesthetic Emotions', *Leonardo*, 33:1, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000, pp.49-53.

Pouivet, Roger. *Le réalisme esthétique*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006.

Pouivet, Roger. *L'ontologie de l'œuvre d'art : Essais d'art et de philosophie*, second edition, Paris: Vrin, 2010.

Schmidt-Garre, Jan (ed.). *You Don't Do Anything, You Just Let It Evolve*, Documentary on Sergiu Celibidache, Paris Media Production, co-prod. ZDF, 2005.

Servos, Norbert. 'Pina Bausch: Dance and Emancipation', in Carter, Alexandra (ed.), 1998, pp.36-45.

Sheppard, Anne. *Aesthetics, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Sibley, Frank. 'Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic (1965)', *Approach to Aesthetics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, pp.33-51.