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**OUTLINE OF
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Translated by Anna Pakes from Michel Bernard, « Esquisse d'une théorie de la perception du spectacle chorégraphique », in Michel Bernard, *De la création chorégraphique*, CND, Pantin, 2001, p. 205-213.
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OUTLINE OF A THEORY OF PER CEPTION OF CHOREOGRAPHIC PERFORMANCE¹

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What is it to perceive a choreographic performance? More specifically, what particular perceptual modalities are involved in perceiving dancing bodies within a given stage space, at a given time? These bodies' constant movement, their fleeting, multiple and unpredictable appearances and their complex, artfully coded figures prevent the uninitiated spectator from circumscribing, fixing, determining, identifying, understanding and immediately interpreting the content of what he perceives, as he does with other kinds of performance. Whatever spontaneous pleasure he experiences in the moment, the dance spectator is at something of a loss, not knowing what kind of perceptual approach to take. In other words, he is unsure how to distribute and organise his looking and listening relative to the succession of strange, fleeting impressions which strike him. Attending to a dance performance seems to require a perceptual strategy appropriate to the originality and singularity not just of the dancer's corporeal act, but also of the choreographic writing which orders that act and provides its guiding thread, determining its structure and giving it unity and coherence.

The equivocal term "perception" often gives rise to misunderstandings, however: as its etymology indicates, the term points not just to whatever affects my sense organs – to the sensory and affective impact of an external stimulus – but also to the cognitive content of this process, the percept or object that it allows us to identify, and, indeed, to the judgment, interpretation and subsequent evaluation to which it tends. In other words, the term unites and typically confuses at least three levels: the purely sensory and affective; the essentially cognitive; and the fundamentally evaluative or axiological.

¹ This essay is a condensed account of research conducted in 1990 and presented at greater length during a July 1991 seminar series, part of the joint University of Paris-VIII and University of Nice summer school, organised with support from the Festival de Chateaufallon.

Yet mostly, as evident in contemporary ordinary language as well as the discourse of the human sciences, the first level is sacrificed to the other two, even absorbed by them: the percept is reduced to the identified and evaluated object. And clearly, in the case of dance performance, the question that should detain us here concerns not once again the meanings and value of a given dance, but rather more radically how the performance itself is constituted as such by the work of our senses, more particularly how the sensory corporeality of the spectator apprehends the embodied material configuration of the staged performance in process, in order to transfigure it into a relatively unified and identifiable dance spectacle, which can then be described, analysed and evaluated.

In this sense, the different ways of thinking about perception proposed to date seem unable to respond to our question here: each, in its own way, is limited to a single facet of the perceptual process and is, to that extent, somewhat reductive, as well as making theoretical and epistemological assumptions that are debatable, at the very least. Seven key theoretical approaches to perception have been adopted during the last few decades, which we can usefully recall here:

- the *neuro-biological* approach, which accounts for the perceptual process purely in terms of the functioning of neuronal networks and their connective mechanisms;
- the *psychological* approach, which reduces perception as cognitive activity to an adaptive behaviour;
- the *phenomenological* approach which envisages perception as an existential relation with the world and a mode of intentionality;
- the *psychoanalytic* approach which studies the perceptual process only in its instinctual dimension, as the vector of libidinal intensities or as prop for desire;
- the *socio-anthropological* approach, only interested in perception as (a) a particular mode of collective adaptation to the environment, (b) a kind of ethnically specific relation to the world, (c) a type of intersubjective communication, or (d) a system of organising rules for the relations between social forces;
- the *pragmatic-linguistic* approach which analyses the act of perception via the character of its utterance (cf. J.L. Austin) and as exercise of power over the interlocutor;
- and finally Deleuze and Guattari's highly unusual *rhizomatic* or machinic approach, which treats perception as an untamed, aleatory process, or material branching of multiple, heterogeneous intensities emanating from our five senses.

In fact, the range of theoretical approaches is explained by the ambivalence and complexity of the phenomenon of perception itself, composed as it is of different levels, and involving distinct, even contrasting, dimensions or facets. In this sense, all perception is paradoxical as well as plural. Effectively, it appears and

functions only because of five basic distortions that constitute its essential driving force.

- The first is a fundamentally intrasensory distortion, immanent in all sensation: every act of seeing, hearing, touching and so on is simultaneously active and passive. Thus, every seeing subject is always also seen. The matter touched by the hand that touches makes it a hand that is in turn touched.

- The second "intersensory" distortion is more obvious since it is consequent on the range of senses. As Merleau-Ponty showed (and as I will further explain in what follows), each sense finds a response or some kind of cross-correspondence in the other four, a process which nonetheless causes perturbation, interference or confrontation between them.

- The third distortion, by contrast, is immanent not to sensation in the strict sense of an impression made on a given sense organ, but to perception in the traditional sense of spatio-temporally situated sensation, individuated by its object. This tension is located between the instinct or desire initiating or animating the sensation and its corresponding meaning as act and as object, indeed as perception in the conventional sense. Moreover, this is a threefold meaning because sensory reception is invested, despite itself, with both:

- (a) the meaning of the sensed object or of its apprehended environment;

- (b) the meaning of the act absorbed into the complex, singular web of my own history, in the more or less tightly woven fabric of my affective, intellectual and agential experience; and

- (c) the social and ideological meaning of this act and its object within a given cultural framework, both in terms of its current hierarchy of values, and in terms of the relational structure established by social stratification, that is, by distribution into the social groups or sub-groups in which I live (social class, race, sex, age, membership group, and so on).

The whole semantic play of denotation and connotation of the sensing act and its objective correlate accords more or less well with the intensity, ends and distribution of my drives here and now. In other words, it accords more or less with how I presently experience my relationship to the surrounding society, the different groups on which I depend, and, more radically, my relationship with my past, my personal history. Hence the possibility of underlying conflicts within each perception.

- The fourth apparent distortion is very commonly acknowledged within the event of each perception and derives from the third: this is a tension between perception's inherent meanings and the way we describe it, or our manner of speaking more generally. Customarily much emphasised, to the extent of becoming commonplace or stereotyped, this tension points to the ostensive rupture between perceptual and linguistic orders, between sensing and saying, perception and utterance. Moreover, this putative rupture operates at two levels at least: that of spoken language or utterance and that of written language or text, levels which appear distinct because:

- (a) speaking implies putting in play not just a given, socially characterised, linguistic code, but also a particular vocal practice which is eminently singular, if not in its required phonetic or articulatory structure, at least in the mode of its production; and

- (b) writing also assumes the employment of this code, but additionally a more or less personal usage of vocabulary, syntax, rhetoric, style, logic and, more fundamentally, gesture.

Yet it is not clear that either spoken utterance or written text are linked to the sensations generating them and which they are supposed faithfully to recreate.²

- Finally, the fifth distortion inherent in perception is between its cognitive or necessarily informational aim and its equally necessary, albeit variable, expressive effect. Every time I perceive something, I receive information about that object. But, simultaneously, this perception is shaped by the particular modalities which *ex-press* the instinctual dynamic of immanent and auto-affective differentiation that is distinctively mine, and which corresponds to my personal way of organising my corporeality, in my view determined by the material functioning of the voice. Clearly, all perception is paradoxical because it is simultaneously both active and passive, both mono- and poly-sensory, both instinctive and meaningful, both empirically lived and articulated, both informative and expressive, and, more radically, both individual and social, one and many.

Recognising this leads me to propose a model for the spectral analysis of perception which takes into account the ambivalence of its double synchronic and diachronic dimensions. First, in its synchronic dimension, every perception appears a consequence or serial combination of at least five key parameters: (1) a spatial field or framework; (2) the pattern of a visible, audible or tactile constellation, of a visual or sonic figure or form; (3) the emission of one or more signs, in other words, a semiotic relation; (4) the economic and thereby quantitative production of an energetic force or flux; and (5) the manifestation of a schema of expressive organisation. Second, in its diachronic dimension, perception involves the mutual interference of three basic temporal parameters: (1) *duration* as a totalisation of discrete instants; (2) *rhythm* which is organised into variable structures; and (3) *storyline* which traces its signifying continuity or diegetic dimension.

Of course, this double dimension and the different parameters or levels of approach are relative to both the conditions under which perception operates (the situation in which it happens) and the nature of the target in question (the object perceived). In the present case, then, we are concerned with the situation of the spectator confronted with a singular artistic object, dance. I do not think it necessary to reproduce here my detailed analysis of how theatrical performance functions, developed about ten years ago. I will merely emphasise, for our purposes, the particular ways in which dance operationalises or exploits theatrical performance, in other words, what distinguishes choreographic performance from other kinds. But it does seem important here to recall four characteristics through which I previously attempted to define the specificity of dance as an art form,³ namely:

- its dynamic of indefinite metamorphosis, movement's exhilaration at its own constant changes;

² The popular myth of a divorce between perception and speaking re-emerges here, a myth that I have attempted to deconstruct in one of my postgraduate seminar series at the University of Paris-VIII.

³ See my paper presented to the Colloque International de Lausanne in January 1990, and published in *La Danse, art du XXe siècle ? [Dance, a twentieth-century art?]* by Éditions Payot.

- the aleatory, paradoxical play which "weaves" and "unweaves" temporality: dance corporeality constantly dissolves and reconstitutes itself in the succession of moments, in the ungovernable flux of a lived duration that it seeks to render visible as singular, identifiable appearance. As Paul Val ry writes, "Instant engenders form, and form makes the instant visible";

- its stubborn defiance of gravity, or perhaps rather its constant, conflictual dialogue with the push and pull of the earth;

- finally, its auto-affective or auto-reflexive drive: in other words, the constitutive desire of all expressive (in the etymological sense) processes, of corporeality's return to and on itself, a desire which finds its template in vocalisation, of which every visible manifestation is merely the shadow cast by its invisible dynamic. Dance thus merely displays and orchestrates this virtual vocality, our corporeality's fantasmatic and fleshy musicality.

Focusing on these four distinctive traits of dance reveals that they necessarily inflect the spectator's mode of reception even insofar as they accentuate the complexity, mobility and diversity of (firstly) the temporal weft of what plays itself out onstage and (secondly) the spatial combination of forces and forms enacted. Notwithstanding contemporary efforts to merge the several performing arts and, more particularly, the manifest tendency of certain choreographic styles towards theatricalization (via the use of speech, narrative, expressive mime, costuming, props, and so on), dance is still characterised by the particular kind of reception it demands, born of the distinctive conditions and modes of choreographic reading and writing, which acknowledge an ambiguous relationship between dance corporeality's codes and meaning. In other words, for the dance spectator – as distinct from the audience member of all the other scenic arts – there is no matrix of intelligibility furnished by the hegemonic signifying work of play-text or dramatic scenario; rather, he must elaborate his own model of reading by choosing his own norms of perceptual connection.

I mention "perceptual connection" because, as Anton Ehrenzweig notes in *The Hidden Order of Art*, each perception is produced by a twofold prior "scanning", combining:

- intersensory scanning on the spectral band of heterogeneous sensible givens or *qualia* whereby each of us selects one or other series of sensory conjunctions (vision/audition/touch, for example);

- sensory scanning which privileges one sense over others. Thus, vision operates by sweeping a given visual field, my eye ranging at will over the stage space and focusing on one or other of its particular regions, to concentrate attention on either a body (sometimes one particular aspect of a body), an object or a device such as a lighting effect.

This twofold "scanning" operates according to explicit selection criteria of various different orders: visual, semiotic, pragmatic, poetic, and so on. But even once the double scanning has occurred, the dance performance still needs constructing at the level of the spectator's individual consciousness. For this to happen, the eye must structure and organise its sensory trajectory according to the play of dancers' corporeality in relation both to one another and to the whole stage space. This structuration and organisation

can happen at different levels depending on what is privileged by each spectator's individual motivation, be it conscious or unconscious. But this is an issue for the psychologist rather than the aesthete, who aims rather to elucidate perception of the choreographic process as such.

As we have seen, dance performance is a kind of "weaving" and "unweaving" of corporeal temporality or temporal corporeality within the spatial field. By "temporal corporeality", I mean not the individualised anatomical bodies of the dancers, or in some cases of actors, musicians and singers present on stage (for example, Luis Llach in Kilina Cremona's *Nuvol blanc*), but the web of sensory and motor materiality which links them together: in other words, the spectral band of this constellation of heterogeneous energetic intensities which appears, strikes my different senses and involves me. Indeed, this spectral band constitutes temporality through the way it emphasises what drives all time: difference and repetition. What I see, hear or touch unfolds and simultaneously autodestructs via the play of successive moments, at once identical in their emergence and different in their order of inscription, sensory quality, and affective and intellectual hue.

Dance performance is the aesthetic phenomenon which reveals and exploits the radical nature of this fundamental process of constituting time, analogous to the act of weaving and unweaving a cloth, illustrated by the story of the shroud woven by Penelope in Greek mythology, which I think offers the most pertinent and strongest image of the choreographic process. Thus, I suggest (to "spin" out this metaphor of weaving and unweaving) that we need, within the spatial parameters of the "frame" determined by twofold primordial scanning, to proceed by working our own "thread", one which does not necessarily correspond to that which intentionally governed or provided the basis for the choreographic project, but rather answers to the singularity of our own reception system, itself the fruit of a combined personal and social history. This thread is the concatenation, or rather temporal intertwining, of several "strands" which have no real autonomy but which, for the purposes of analysis, I must distinguish in order better to understand and illuminate the labour of shaping or aesthetic organisation that perception accomplishes. Thus, taking into account the different levels and facets of perception, we can distinguish the temporal intertwining of five main "threads" within the process of perceiving dance performance, namely:

- the *dynamic organisation* of space, in other words the distribution of lines of force of the dancers' movements which trace its specific mode of exploitation, a distribution that can be underlined and visualised by a tracing of floor patterns;
- a second, connected thread apparently constituted by the visual *structuration* of the performance, both "figural and figurative", the singular mode of emergence and isolated, relational or narrative play of "figures" in the pictorial and visual sense;
- a third – very important, even essential – thread of the *rhythmic structuring* and duration of the performance: that is, the organised configuration of temporally successive corporeal elements or danced phrases (travelling sequences, poses, attitudes, gestures), or the particular schema of repetition and differentiation selected by the choreography;

- a fourth thread, namely that of the performance's *signifying logic*: that is, the modes of appearance of one or several meanings born of the successive sequences. This is not necessarily a narrative logic but still only traces one kind of meaning-production, that of the storyline;

- finally, a fifth, indispensable thread which can intervene at different stages and overlay distinct forms, the thread of *dynamics* and *expressive tonality*: that is, the singular modes of visible and audible manifestations of instinctive, auto-affective production, at once the effects and the sources of emotions.

Of course, the temporal intertwining of these five threads is not enough to constitute the perceptual fabric of dance performance. It only does so when this temporal intertwining is doubly immersed in the wash or ebb and flow of light – that is, within a particular lighting structure – and in waves of sound, or rather in the play of a given musical structure, however minimal or rough it may be, even to the extent of the apparently silent, as John Cage has shown. But this intertwining of threads, the fabric thus immersed, is temporal, meaning that it operates on and with the help of different temporal levels and modes, of which I maintain there are five:

- first, the so-called *objective and measurable* duration of quantitative or clock-time: in other words, Time understood in terms of space (or Aristotelian Time);

- second, the *interior or subjectively lived* duration constituted by the singular thread of my remembered lived experience, by my personal history;

- third, the equally singular temporality of the sensory process of looking and hearing: that is, the way each of us organises what is visible and audible in order to grasp it, in other words the temporality of perceptual disengagement [*d brayage*];

- fourth, the *structural temporality* of the performance: that is, its rhythmic organisation as an essential component of its process of realisation;

- finally, the *referential temporality* of the event evoked or narrated, if indeed there is narration.

These are the various temporal modes that regulate how the perceptual fabric's various threads combine or knit together, inflecting or modulating their operations. Thus, for example, the importance or impact of the visual dimension can be accentuated by the force of remembered images channelled by the individual history of the spectator. Or indeed the intensity of a given expressive dynamic can colour the dance, imposing not just its own tone but also its rhythmic organisation on the whole performance, transforming its structural rhythm, spatio-visual configuration and meaning. In other words, the approach I am proposing does privilege any particular parameter, but rather underlines the temporal mode of how the five threads constituting the choreographic fabric are combined and interrelated. This is why, adopting a neologism coined by Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*,⁴ I am tempted to describe my approach as a *hyphopoetic* perception of dance performance, since the Greek word *hyphos* means fabric or spider's web.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, p. 64.

Thus, ultimately – and here is my conclusion – it seems that choreographic writing is always re-written in performance, not just by the play of interpretation, but by the spectator simply exercising perception. And by “rewritten” I mean to stress how the act of perception is already a form of virtual enunciation, as Fernando Pessoa seems to have understood when he claimed it was the radical driving force and essence of all poetic labour.

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