

Modernism. The Relationship between Dance and the Film Industry

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Abstract: *François Delsarte's theories of recognizing the body's expressive potential, through the body-mind relationship, provided the tools for adapting the human gesture to new expressive demands. Dancing is a clear way of expressing corporeality, beyond words. Modern dance, with its pioneers Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, and Ruth St. Denis, brings forth the idea of using dance as an expressive force, independent of the other arts. This type of modern dance will inspire the film industry with new movements, different from the familiar day-to-day.*

The relationship between dance and film emerges in the late 19th century, when artists start to focus on urbanism, industrialization and technology, transposed into body movements. Each of the two artistic branches is complex in itself. The fact that they have achieved a way of working together creates a new sphere of possibilities.

Key-words: *bodily expression systems; modern dance; cinema*

1. Introduction

Beyond its functional style definition, language is a prerequisite of communication itself. It is well-established that dance – as a nonverbal form of communication – precedes all other forms of communication. Be it spontaneous expression or conceptualisation, dance has been, throughout humanity's cultural and spiritual evolution, a way to communicate through specific codes and languages.

The end of the 19th century finds European civilisation enthralled with exploring a new artistic language, in which both the artist-creator and the spectator try to find themselves in a very real and authentic way, in terms of time and space, in the representation of the world. The dynamic society bringing forth „La Belle Epoque” encounters dance, and indeed all performing arts, in a state of traditionalist stagnation. The splendour of the classic Romantic ballet and its focus on correct form and technique, stifling expressivity, did no longer meet the demands of the audience. In order to reclaim itself, dance had to reinvent itself, exploring areas beyond the antiquated institution of the Opera, itself a prisoner of old patterns and traditions.

2. The Context in which the Modern Dance Emerge

The technological advancements of early 20th century – electricity, the photographic studies of motion, the new psychology and medical practices, the novel theories of an evolved body and self-awareness – sparked an era of innovation and revitalization in the world of dance.

The quest of harmonizing the physical and the spiritual, the unshackling from the traditionalist constraints, the need to “feel” and communicate spontaneously (through a bodily aesthetics that captures the authenticity of human expression), all these have made 20th century dance into a form which, beyond its quality of being an aesthetic product, is a subtle concept with a stirring philosophical magnificence.

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Modern dance has grown into a philosophy of corporeality, grounded in elaborate movement theories and systems. For the uninitiated, the names of *François Delsarte*, keen examiner of the relationship between emotion and gesture, and *Emile Jacques Dalcroze*, who focused on the study of the relationship between movement and music, will be lost in the sea of aesthetic speculation flooding late 19th century. If Delsarte's method left a fundamental mark on the philosophy and aesthetics of dance in the United States, Dalcroze's approach found appreciation in Europe, being successfully applied by stage directors such as Adolphe Appia, Max Reinhardt, Leopold Jessner, and choreographers Uday Shankar, Mary Rambert, and Mary Wigman.

The emerging context of European dance is as ambiguous as it is spectacular. By and large, history has chosen to register the fascination generated by the "pioneers" of the genre – Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, who dazed early 20th century European audiences with their movement techniques "denuded" of all classical ballet convention, or the legendary Vaslav Nijinski, who "reinvented" dance with the *en dedans* movement of the legs. Each of these "rebels", driven by assorted philosophies, has, in his or her own way, contributed to the implementation of a new concept in the art of dance, one centred on the common goal of liberating the body and its means of expression. These artists have truly found the way to decipher the "secret of the origins" proposed by Artaud. They triggered a conceptual reform in which this new body language would mark all performance areas of the era, manifesting a spellbinding emotional energy.

This initiatic quest was strongly informed by the revolutionary ideas of American culture. Its key driving "spirits", untainted by secular traditionalism, were searching for the "roots" to help define their identity. This approach in defining art, building on the Oriental model "*as the model of a theatre which has preserved its energies of an effective language due to its connection to the body*"², predates all other European approaches. Capitalizing on the diverse theoretical works dedicated to Oriental culture and philosophy, as well as the adoption of specific techniques from traditional Oriental theatre, has given dance – and, consequently, the entire Western theatre world – a spatial, energetic, colourful, emotion-rich language, turning it into "stage poetry".

The *modern dance* approach to the relationship corporeality – movement – expressivity has paved the way for new means of expression within all performing arts. "*The reforming rebels of 20th century*"³, as Eugenio Barba refers to Artaud, Stanislavski, Grotowski, Meyerhold, Craig and Brecht, have understood the need for a new theatre system, endowed with a language deeply connected to the body, a physical language of gestures and signs. In Barba's view, the new theatre is "*a theatre which dances*"⁴ and asserts the organic relationship between the two arts, theatre and dance.

The emergence of modern dance as a new theatrical form, at the beginning of the 20th century, ushered in a whole new era of innovation and revitalisation of entertainment. The new dance thus becomes not only the facilitator of intercultural connection in the Modernist period, but its very embodiment.

² Borie, Monique. 2004. *Antonin Artaud. Teatrul și întoarcerea la origini [Antonin Artaud. Theatre and the Return to the Origins]*. Translated by Ileana Literra. Iași/Bucharest: Polirom/Unitext Publishing House, p. 408.

³ Barba, Eugenio. 2003. *O canoe de hârtie [The Paper Canoe]*. Bucharest: Unitext Publishing House, pp. 24 - 26.

⁴ Borie, Monique. *Antonin Artaud*, p. 408. *Le théâtre qui danse* is also the title of one of the most important editions of the *Bouffonneries* magazine, no. 22 - 23, dedicated to theatre anthropology.

3. The Gesture, a New Conceptual Approach

Among the various bodily techniques of the past century⁵, the system developed by François Delsarte was the most influential. It provided the tools for translating human gestures into new forms of expressivity. Delsarte's legacy is rich, complex and versatile, and a benchmark for 20th century performing arts. His main area of interest was corporeal expression, *being the first to conduct ample research on the movements, gestures and expressions of the human body*⁶.

Delsarte asserts there is a connection between our inner life and our body's movements. His research stems from the need to optimize physical performance and bodily expressivity, through a recovery of the natural in the movements of the human body. The goal of his research was to discover, and, subsequently, teach to those interested in the performing arts, a manner of working built on scientific principles of expression. A critical stage in his scientific approach, Delsarte valued highly *the process of observing* the "unconscious", natural behaviour of the physiology of the human body, searching to uncover the expressive variety of human gesture. This phase was, in his view, a key element of the cognitive process facilitating a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of expression.

Once set in motion, Delsartism will reach American land in the second half of the 19th century, reshaping the whole American perspective on modern dance and cinema. Delsarte's principles, his emphasis on physicality and gesture, the poses and successions he proposed would play a major role in the development of modern dance and, moreover, of "motion pictures".

Ruth St. Denis also played a crucial part⁷ in promoting this approach to corporeality, starting from the gesture and moving to poses in succession. At the *Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts*, she developed a learning method that would be used by both dancers and silent film actors.

4. The Concept of Movement as Poses in Succession and Its Relationship with Cinema

The emergence of *modern dance* incites new paradigms for exploring and defining corporeality. Patrick Bensard, film director and manager of the *Cinémathèque de la danse* in Paris, wrote⁸ that it is no coincidence that modern dance and cinema emerged at the same time, that the Lumière Brothers turned on their camera mesmerised by Loie Fuller's swirling skirts.

The beginnings of the dance – cinema relationship can be traced back to the birth of cinema. Both are rich and complex arts. Their coalescing has opened up a whole new realm of possibilities. It is important to note that classical ballet played a rather insignificant part in the process⁹, the star being the "new dance", modern dance, which, as the Symbolists would proclaim, is able to convey the unique expressivity of ordinary, day-to-day life without any recourse to words.

⁵ The other bodily movement systems contemporary with Delsarte's are: Jacques Dalcroze's and Rodolf Steiner's *eurhythmics*, the American physician Dudley Sargent's *fitness programme*, the *Alexander technique* developed by Matthias Alexander, and Bess Mensendieck's *Mensendieck system*.

⁶ Barba, Eugenio, and Nicola Savarese. 2008. *L'Énergie qui danse. Dictionnaire d'anthropologie théâtrale*. Montpellier: L'Entretemps, p. 167.

⁷ Shelton, Suzanne. 1981. *St. Denis: A Biography of the Divine Dancer*. Austin TX: University of Texas Press.

⁸ Bargues, Michèle, and Anne Coutinot (eds). 1988. *Impressions Danse Catalogue*. Paris: Georges Pompidou Centre.

⁹ Cinema's influence on dance is also apparent in the *Ballets Russes*. The *Ballets Russes'* encounter with Futurism inspired choreographers to use film techniques.

As film gained momentum, the two arts – dance and cinema – continued to influence each other, borrowing and adapting specific techniques from one another. Dance kept making an appearance on the silver screen, so much so that a film would often become a *danced film*, whereas cinema, in its own turn, introduced its techniques to the dance world.

The cinematic process becomes a succession of choreographed stances, as both choreography and cinema focus on bodies in motion and their relationship to space and time. Both cultivate bodily capacities for creation and communication and bring forward new types of expressivity, carefully integrated within the given settings and narrative.

Gilles Deleuze has advanced the idea that early 20th century dance and the birth of cinema share a common need of embodying the movement paradigm of the Modernist era. He writes: “It is an interesting coincidence that cinema emerges as philosophy is trying to conceptualise movement.”¹⁰ Inspired by Henri Bergson, Deleuze will identify a connection between the new movement paradigm engendered by modern dance and the developing art of motion pictures.

Erin Brannigan¹¹, in her work *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image*, explores in minute detail the position of dance within the larger context of contemporary arts and its relationship with the other art forms. She provides several examples of practices resulting from the “imprints” left on cinema by choreography:

- *Close-up*, zooming in on a particular segment of the body;
- *Minimalism*, as an experimentation of the essence of creativity;
- *Gesture*, as a concept of transverse framing.

Correspondingly, in dance choreography, cinema’s new means of expression open up new paths of manifestation for bodily language:

- Borrowing from the different types of editing techniques used by film has impacted the new dance and allowed for more abstract means of expression – the *non-figurative* dance;
- A reshaping of the director-choreographer’s philosophy through cinematic approach has taken place, in terms of both narrative structure and form of expression;
- In *contemporary dance*, and in the language of all performing arts nowadays, we encounter a multitude of terms borrowed from cinema, such as *slow motion*, *freeze* or *black-out*.

5. Conclusion

Dance and cinema nowadays have inspired the creation of a distinct visual genre, the *multimedia show*. In 1924, short pieces of avant-garde film were inserted in *Ballets Suédois*’s *Relâche*¹² ballet, in the spirit of the Dadaist movement. *Ballets Suédois*¹³ produced shows which

¹⁰ Deleuze, Gilles. 1995. *Negotiations: 1972-1990*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 57.

¹¹ Brannigan, Erin. 2011. *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 3.

¹² The title was deemed a Dadaist practical joke, *relâche* being the French term used on posters to signify that a show is cancelled or the theatre is closed. The first show was indeed cancelled, due to the illness of Jean Börlin, principal dancer, choreographer and artistic director of *Ballets Suédois*.

¹³ *Ballets Suédois*, Swedish dance ensemble setting up rich transcultural productions emblematic for interwar Europe’s avant-garde performing arts scene. The company worked with the best artists in Paris for the creation of original stories, amazing settings and mesmerising music: the poets Blaise Cendrars, Paul Claudel, Jean Cocteau

redefined the terms of post-war European imaginary, by combining the different forms of „dance, drama, painting, poetry and music with acrobatics, circus, film and pantomime”¹⁴.

The concept of working in a multidisciplinary manner, implementing multidisciplinary forms, has become widespread in our modern culture. The interweaving of multiple art forms - visual arts, musical composition, film and dance – has created a new language, serving artists and their purpose of materializing their visions. Audio-video *performance* has fully emerged in our lives, both as individuals and as a society.

Following along this path, many choreographers have subsequently used this new type of performance: Trisha Brown, Hans Van Manen, Pina Bausch, William Forsythe.

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and Ricciotti Canudo; the composers Auric, Honegger, Milhaud, Cole Porter, Poulenc and Satie; and artists such as de Chirico, Fernand Léger and Francis Picabia.

¹⁴ Au, Susan. 2012. *Ballet and Modern Dance*. London: Thames and Hudson World of Art, p. 112.

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