

Reframing of contemporary dance

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Abstract: *The inventiveness in the matter of dance techniques and esthetics are due to reconsideration of the fundamentals of choreographic art. Influenced by oriental philosophies, by the industrial progress, or by the terror and wars, postmodern dance used the basic human emotions like fear, cowardice and resistance in front of destiny, to reframing the technique, the sense and the significance of dance movements. The human body transcends from the hyper-organic ballet body to the abstract body, from the negation of the flesh to the technological body in contemporary dance performances. Many of the contemporary choreographers strongly believe that success is determined by the capacity to adjust to the unforeseen, and composing dances under the charm of the unexpected. Free associations of steps, swinging between symmetry and asymmetry of movements are characteristics of the new dance forms. In the newest dance performances, the dancer shall fill the stage emptiness with his/her physical yet spiritual presence.*

Keywords: *spatial and physical experiments; algorithmic choreography; multimedia dance performance; interdisciplinary communication; polyphonic and counterpointed artistic dialogue;*

1. Dance performance between classic and modern

Innovations of non-verbal theatrical art, more or less spectacular, causing a total re-evaluation of ballet performance, at the beginning of 21st century. Movement's vocabulary, music pattern, scenography and psychological content of a ballet were reformed according to the new audience's expectations. In classic and romantic period, including neo-classical and neo-romantic esthetic extensions, choreography was composed after a music score, but gradually, dance movements and choreographic material become more significant for a ballet composition. Innovation corroborated by expressivity and accessibility becomes the prime concept of a dance composition.

The modern audience perceive ballet representation as a getaway to a compensatory universe because of the illusory vision of the stage configuration. The perfection of technical devices and multimedia influences, as well the art of dance and the artistry of ballet dancers, enchant and captivate the spectators.

Nowadays, a ballet representation traditionally based upon a romantic love story, with fantastic or exotic characters and with dream's world inserts, is completed by a definite technique of movement and gesture. Thus, dance creation is intimately related to the other complementary arts like music and visual arts. Expressivity of content and theme of contemporary ballet performances gave in, sometimes, to virtuosity and to outstanding dancers' body technique. Although, the choreographers who remain faithful to this genre, are convinced that ballet performance is a synthesis of all arts, an artistic phenomenon capable to shape mind and conscience of modern individuals.

Rearranging ballet steps and movements in new sequences give them new significance according to the new aesthetics and to the audience's expectations. Thus, the masterpieces of

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classical ballets are reinterpreted today and the ballet technique is now more acrobatic and claims virtuosity. The power of suggestion and the symbolism as well as the rhythm and the dynamic of the scenic image of these restored ballets make possible the merging of the choreographer's and the audience's imagination. Reflecting the spiritual universe of the contemporary man, the ballet performance lives through its faithful spectators. Contemporary choreographers which proposed their own and completely different perspective on ballet masterpieces like: *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Nutcracker*, *Romeo and Juliet*, are Maurice Béjart, Matz Ek, Angelin Preljocaj, John Neumeier, and the list could be continued.

2. The new perspective of expressiveness

In modernism, the choreographers returned to the idea of a dance performance as a syncretic theatrical form, which reunited the artistic force of music, dance, literature and visual art. Through that symbolic force of art, the audience would have the experience of a living ritual close to the artists.

Modern dance performance stressed the idea that a choreography is build-up of a subtle juxtaposition of music and gesture creating a warm and intimate atmosphere, induced as well by the other elements of a representation: lights, scenery, costumes, script.² The way they are used, the meaning and the importance of every complementary element in a dance performance depend on the choreographer's style and his/her artistic intentions.

The mid-20th century choreographers' force of inspiration established new dance styles and moving techniques.

The inventiveness in the matter of dance techniques and esthetics are due to reconsideration of the fundamentals of choreographic art. Influenced by oriental philosophies, by the industrial progress, or by the terror and wars, modern dance used the basic human emotions like fear, cowardice, courage and resistance in front of destiny, to reframe the technique, the sense and the significance of dance movements. The bare feet of the modern dancer support all the falls and recoveries and, the transfer of the weight and energy, the kneeling, the squatting are incorporated in dance and thus became the source of inspiration for the new generation of choreographers regarding dance vocabulary.

If a ballet performance created the illusion of dancer's imponderability and effortless moving, the modern dance performance exposed precisely the effort, the stimulus and the propulsive force of dance movements. For modern choreographers, dance movement is cyclic – starts from an initial moment, continues to its climax or breaking point, ending to a final moment – *contraction and release; fall and recovery*.³ José Limón or Martha Graham's dance language could be incomprehensible for balletomania audience, but for the modern spectators it becomes an extension in imaginary world of natural human actions and moves.

Modern choreographies overlap more than one sense of a scenic action which is cleansed and, in the same time, modern dance techniques restored the essential details of human particularities. On one hand, choreographic gesture is determined by the emotional impulse; on the other hand, dance technique and spectacular style are influenced by the greatest dramatists and theatre directors of the time.

In this respect, the German choreographer Pina Bausch is considered the creator of the hybrid genre of *tanztheater* (dance-theatre) with a strong dramatic character, and she was

² Ciobanu, Maia. 1999. „Ambiguitatea textului muzical în spectacolul coregrafic” [The ambiguity of musical text in choreographic performance]. Revista *Muzica*, nr.4/ 1999, p. 25.

³ Modern choreographers – José Limón and Martha Graham – created an original dance vocabulary, initiating a school of modern dance technique which has been continuing to study till nowadays.

criticized by the ballet fans for apparent giving up of dance movements. Her performances combined dance and theatre means of expression, influencing the performative arts by the end of 20th century. After Pina Bausch, all the specific elements of a dance performance – body, space, movement, representation – was reconsidered. She discovered a new significance of space and of movement, in her dance performances she told the story of a mankind who cannot communicate, and, as a creator, she became the conscience of a decaying Europe.⁴

In post-war Europe and USA, different artistic art movements were succeeding and they influenced the art of dance in terms of technique and style. Expressionism, neoclassicism, constructivism, abstractionism, jazz and musical-hall, pop art movement, all have correspondences with modern dance creations of Roland Petit, Maurice Béjart, Kurt Jooss, or Jerome Robbins.

The revolutionary choreographer Merce Cunningham created a stylized body language based on natural movements inspired from classical ballet. Avoidance of emotion from dance performance will be continuing in the postmodern choreography by his followers who consider human body a mere object in relation with time and space. “Chance operation” technique in dance composition influenced many choreographers for whom dance is an art of ephemeral.

For Cunningham’s adepts, a dance performance should be based on the idea to capture attention through the esthetic value of the dance, and its emotional force would be revealed by the conceptualization of the human body, which becomes a social and anthropological pattern.

The development and generalization of information and communication technologies have determined the digitalizing of the contemporary dancer’s body. Cunningham developed a computerized dance composition tool – the computer – programmed his dance performances by the means of the dancers’ avatars, facilitated the process of creation and dance design. Using *software* for generating *animated-graphics* translated into dance ideas, Cunningham had a great contribution in expanding creativity of dance performance. In this respect, “the *software DanceForms* could model and animate the human form, allowing Cunningham to visualize sequences and phrases of dance on screen, which he would then translate to a dancer's body.”⁵

The human body transcends from the hyper-organic ballet body to the abstract body, from the negation of the flesh to the technological body. The graphic algorithms of *DanceForms* are structured on three major sections, helping the creation of new dance movements: *legs*, *head/torso* and *arms*. The dancers’ digital avatars are exposed to various physical experiments in order to extend and coordinate all moving possibilities of all body parts. By means of computer programming, a choreographer could exploit, as well, new ways of relationship between dance partners, experimenting a new concept of visual scenography. Computerized dance composition created a new dance vocabulary, a new and condensed body language that amazed the audience and the dancers, too.

The postmodern American dance technique was consolidating between 1970 and 2000 through provocative experiments which defy all the rules of consecrated theatrical dance genres. Dance compositions were based on improvisation, place and time of performance are unexpected, everything is moved to the “unconventional”, the declared intention is to get closed to the “general public”.⁶ Representatives for this true revolution of a dance performance who tried to understand and artistic articulate the chaos of postmodern society are: William Forsythe, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs.

⁴ Ginot, Isabelle and Michel, Marcelle. 2011. *Dansul în secolul XX* [Dance in 20th century]. București: Editura Art, pp. 181-185.

⁵ Merce Cunningham. “The Innovator”. <https://www.mercecunningham.org/about/merce-cunningham/> Retrieved April, 15, 2022.

⁶ Strauss, Marc Raymond and Nadel, Myron Howard. 2012. *Looking at Contemporary Dance: A Guide for the Internet Age*. Dance Horizons Book. NJ: Princeton Book Company.

For instance, Forsythe encouraged critical analysis of creation, of dance composition and militated for personal modification inside a dance work according to what the choreographer named “anatomical representation”, “isometry” and “body techniques”.⁷ Three aspects of Forsythe approach are using in dance composition even today:

- Using ingeniously spatial transformations to generate new dance movements;
- Space and body shall be controlled by the dancers’ mind;
- The acts of drawing and dancing are intertwined.

Through abstract and algorithmic choreography, through destructed body movements, Forsythe creates a new methodology of dance composition. His scientific point of view inside the art of choreography left behind all cultural and artistic hindrance. William Forsythe opened in 2013 a *Motion Bank*⁸, a *library of movements*, sharing with every dancer and choreographer his methodology of dance composition that enables artists to discover new ways to evolve.

3. The strategy of unpredictability

While in the nineties dance performance was considered a cross-border form of theatre, free of spoken language, the new generation of choreographers decline the idea of the dancer as a mirror of humanity. Stromberg’s assertion “the only thing the audience took home when they leave the theatre is their own coat”⁹ is often cited as a definition of the choreographic creation of the last decade.

How radical contemporary dance really is?

Many of the contemporary choreographers strongly believe that success is determined by the capacity to adjust to the unforeseen, composing dances under the charm of the unexpected. Free associations of steps, symbolic gestures, swinging between symmetry and asymmetry of movements are some of the characteristics of the new dance forms. In the newest dance performances, the dancer shall fill the stage emptiness with his/her physical yet spiritual presence.

In a dance performance there are a multitude of moving codes (beginning with gestures, continuing with specific steps and finished with mimic), all of them coexist in a plastic ambiance where the accent could be sometimes on the light or scenery, other time on the visual effects, and always music and rhythmic patterns give it structure and dynamism.

Contemporary dance performance lives through its stage image, as it always did. The stage image excludes the importance of one of its components over the others. Like in ancient Greek theatre, today dance performance is a mixture of music, dance, and words - anyone of them could have the leading role, according to what the choreographer wants to stress in a moment or other.

The latest contemporary dance performances are concerning of the present moment, denying any history. They always require the new, that is creating things that never exist before and avoiding any choreographic repertoire. Contemporary dance critics could only admit the diversity of styles and proclaim the ephemeral the major feature of present dance creations.

Wandering among so many and so different places of contemporary choreography, I discovered that not matter if body language and dance technique are symbolic, emotional or abstract, the choreographer always intend to communicate, to express himself/herself within the limits of his/her cultural background. Anyway, the art of contemporary choreographers

⁷ Forsythe, William. 1999. “Dance Geometry”. *Performing Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, volume 4, Issue 2, pages 64-71, published online: 5 Aug. 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.1999.10871671>

⁸ *The Motion Bank* was a project started in 2010 and ended in December 2013 with public presentation, and the bank has begun its online archives with an interactive website: <http://motionbank.org/de/content/forschung.html> Retrieved April, 19, 2022.

⁹ Apud Hutcheon, Linda. 2002. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Oxfordshire, England, UK: Routledge, p. 29.

creates a parallel reality aiming no more to be a photocopy of the reality, as modern choreographers did. Today, in a dance performance the dancers strive to find their own way to express themselves and work together with the choreographer to convey a meaningful message to the audience.

Choreographers as Crystal Pite, Wayne McGregor, Ohad Naharin are some of the most important and some of the most original figures of contemporary dance, but I think they have in common the belief that dance is a living art which has to be always transformed in order to preserve its vitality. Their choreographic concepts are considered innovative just because they let their dancers “to give life” to the choreographer’s ideas, and they allow the audience more freedom to interpret at will their dance pieces.

Furthermore, today a dance performance is very much influenced by digital technologies, so dance fundamentals – body, space, movement – are redesigned emphasizing reality, identity and transformations of the actual world.

Multimedia dance performances are habitual in the last decade. Combining dance and visual art techniques, it aimed the dancers practicing in “reading” dance in relation not only to history and society, but also to technology and the virtual environment. Through such experiments, each dancer had to find his/her own answer to the physical, mental, intellectual and communication challenges, embodied in an act of artistic creation influenced by the video projections. Technically, a multimedia choreographic performance can be seen as a release of dancers from formality and in this regard the body must be reanalyzed because it is thus subject to “rules” or digital standards and must outline ideas to resonate with the public.

An interactive multimedia dance performance changes the perspective of directing and interpretation. Projected images of the visual scenery have the power to change the dance movements and the perspective for both the performers, the visual artists and the audience, transforming the dance performance into a multisensorial experience. Some of these unusual tasks involve close collaboration between choreographer and visual artists. Creating dance means in this case working closely with digital visual environment. Discovering the “imaginary” partner represented by the video projection and getting acquainted with the new scenic concept, is a really challenge for the dancer who needs to be versatile and in control all the time. The choreography and visual creation process of a multimedia dance performance explore and discover a common flow of projected image and dance for transforming the stage into a specific space in which new means of expression are experimented.

The role of multimedia in a dance performance had become a common place in the era of digitalization and need of interactivity. Targeting high technical and artistic performance of dancers started a challenging process because of the restrictive conditions induced by visual scenography (the sudden changes in light and limited dance space), but this new stage environment has to be seen as a new normal situation and thus technology has been seen as additional tool for dance composition.

Focusing on the connection between dance and digitally visual technique, the choreographer’s challenge is to find out how a dancer could use different body movements in a digitally visual environment to represent ideas and emotions through outstanding artistic images. Today, choreographers are aware that the current audience’s expectations are to be amazed.

4. Conclusions and outlook

At the beginning of this new millennium, choreographers want to give back the prestige and vigor and magic of the dance. While composing and designing a contemporary dance performance there are some special challenges for the choreographer as well as for the dancers. The body language should reveal a coherent connection between body movement and musical score as always, but a varied sequence of actions of non-verbal communication between dance partners and between performers and the audience has been reframing.

Being extended and transformed through technology, scenic space offers the feeling of freedom to both performers and audience. Choreographic gesture and movement are powered by visual scenography in an expressive manner inducing affective load to scenic image.

Classic professional development of a dancer slowly loses its popularity and functionality, digital technologies being accessed more frequently. The dancer is forced, in many ways, to grow up earlier today. There are so many fields present in modern dance performance so that the dancer should have complex and diverse knowledge about psychology, history, literature, aesthetics, philosophy, even politics. Because of the visual impact over the theatrical image of a dance performance, dancer should have fine arts culture that should complete an indispensable musical culture. Collaboration between visual artists and dancers led to development of creativity and interdisciplinary communication, so contemporary choreographers are looking not only for a professionally accomplished dancer but for dedication, too.

Nowadays, a dance performance has to be conceived as a polyphonic and counterpointed dialogue. Although the “voices” (music – dance – visual arts) are individuated and superposed concurrently, the choreographer tries to create a harmonious but also novel and inciting scenic imagery by coordinating them.

All new genres and various styles of contemporary choreography ultimately show the human body experience related to space in a fascinating overlapping with music and with new digital visual techniques. With every step, with every motion, contemporary dance performance is just a path in an inward journey of self-knowledge.

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