

Miszellen | Thinking Motion in Dance. On A-Human Mimetic Potential

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“The body is thinking”¹: This proposition, which seems to represent one major postulate of contemporary theoretical dance discourse, is also the title and subject of an essay written by former Forsythe Company member Dana Caspersen. In this essay, the author asks herself this question and tries to demonstrate how the body thinks:

Dancers develop a very keen proprioceptive ability that enables them both to sense and to imagine their bodies with a high degree of exactness. The kinesphere is the space that the body’s movement occupies. Taking in information within this sphere involves sensing the body where it cannot be seen, you cannot see your shoulder blade, but you can sense where it is in space and in relationship to the rest of your body. This ability of the body to create an internal image of itself also allows for the possibility that the body can create an image of itself where it does not exist. [...] We have the sense that our proprioceptive field has expanded to include the space that our bodies do not actually occupy.²

Following on from this confrontation with the question of how it might be possible to actually grasp the dancing body’s specific mode of thinking, the search for an understanding that might add another quality to analyses like this could lead *beyond* the term of proprioception that Caspersen refers to. Maybe this search

¹ Caspersen, Dana: “The Body is Thinking”. https://walkerart.org/magazine/the-body-is-thinking-the-body-is-thinking-by-dana-caspersen#_blank from March 9, 2007.

² Ibid.

could depart from another term that is more likely to be familiar from the context of theater than specific to the field of dance: *mimesis*.

At first glance, this turn toward the concept of mimesis seems to lack motivation, since it usually merely connotes imitation. But by focusing on that promising *other* quality that the term bears, the path could lead to a writer we would not initially associate with the field of dance: Walter Benjamin. His essay “On the Mimetic Faculty” provides us with just a small hint of the mimetic potential inherent to dance, but these references are enough to open our minds up to the trace of the *magical* character of this specific mimetic quality, as Benjamin describes it.³ Understood in this way, dance is a virtual medium with the “[...] phylogenetic significance of the mimetic faculty.”⁴

Benjamin’s approach to dance, when applying his understanding of mimesis to it (before moving his focus to language as part of the mimetic faculty), suggests us also to think of dance as an ancient pre-language. This kind of an ‘improper’ language, which represents a mimesis that performs connections between objects of “nonsensuous similarity”⁵ is taken by him to be the oldest function dance can possess.⁶ The magical function of dance could be the junction that will bring us closer to the chance to develop a new attribute for the term mimesis in relation to dance.⁷ What Benjamin sees as the ancient, magical essence of dance constitutes a desire to create similarities through a process of mimesis that even includes the mimetic processing of what we would call the a-human. As Benjamin writes: “We must assume in principal that in the remote past the processes considered imitable included those in the sky. In dance, on other cultic occasions, such imitation could be produced, such similarity dealt with.”⁸

Continuing the search for a term that could enable a further understanding of the dancing/thinking body, applying another reading of theoretical texts leads back to our

³ Cf. Benjamin, Walter: “On the Mimetic Faculty”, in: W.B.: *Selected Writings. Vol. 2: 1931-1934*. Ed. by Michael W. Jennings/Howard Eiland/Gary Smith, transl. by Rodney Livingstone et al. Cambridge/London 1999, pp. 720-722.

⁴ Ibid, p. 720

⁵ Ibid., p. 722.

⁶ Cf. ibid. p. 721.

⁷ Cf. ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

starting point of contemporary dance, that is, to a contemporary examination of dance and those actually performing it. Susan Leigh-Foster's *Choreographing Empathy* and by José Gil and André Lepecki's "Paradoxical Body" – both contributions to contemporary theoretical discourse on the dancing body as a *thinking* body – provide further interesting junctions within this discourse that can help us to reevaluate the term mimesis for/in dance.

The perhaps unjustified impression that this term might be a neglected one with regard to its contemporary application in dance stands in opposition to Benjamin's appreciation of it, especially when applied to dance: Mimesis in the Benjaminian sense does not seem to carry the danger of meaning only the qualities of imitating or copying, rather, it is a practice of assembling "nonsensuous similarities", which is surprisingly appropriate for approaching the thinking body in dance. This understanding of mimesis as potential and as the dancing body's specific mode of thinking, viewing it as mimesis of the a-human is worth further examination. Analyzing the concept and phenomenon of *kinesthetic empathy* as an assumed ideal mode for these mimetic actions is one way to transfer the Benjaminian term of mimesis into the field of dance theory.

Starting from Benjamin's proposal of a mimetic practice that is drawn to creating "nonsensuous similarities" and thus connecting phenomena and structures that go beyond inter-human relations, we could view the empathetic affinity of the dancing body to the a-human as the *magical essence* of dance itself. His understanding of dance as a language *before* language exposes it to the assumption that dance, just like language, is itself of an a-human quality as a human device and bearer of nonsensuous similarities.⁹

The desire to merge with or move into another being or even another a-human structure is something that can be attributed to empathy. As Leigh-Foster describes in *Choreographing Empathy*, the roots of the term empathy lead back to an attempt to coin a term that could be used to describe the connection recipients have with artworks when they are drawn into contemplation. This mode of contemplative reception can be understood as an oscillation between two causalities: Either the recipient is

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*

overwhelmed by the pull of his or her object of contemplation and becomes attached to it, or an active decision is made to *move* into the object by assimilating its structure into his or her own body. The term empathy, which we conventionally use in the sense of describing inter-human relations, originates in aesthetic discourse and was thus created to describe a human relation to the a-human.¹⁰ Equating the concept of empathy with that of sympathy, which exclusively describes inter-human relations, seems to reflect an anthropocentric desire to exclude the *other* from the possibility of relating through. Considered in this way, it is not just the a-human that is restricted from becoming 'human' by the exclusive character of sympathy. Humans have also been victims of the legacy of empathy since its infiltration by the connotations originally associated with sympathy. Leigh-Foster presents this paradox using the example of colonization. Colonizers measured colonized people's levels of 'humaneness' by referring to their own ability to feel empathy towards the colonized *other*. But another factor in colonial oppression was either ascertaining or denying the quality of being empathetic as something that made a 'savage' more civilized and thus more 'human'. By attesting a lack of empathy to them, humans could be turned into a-human objects of oppression, just as the need to identify in an empathetic way with an object or an animal is embedded within an anthropocentric mode of humanization.¹¹

With regard to dance, the reference to assimilating the quality of an object into one's own body when talking about empathy leads to the phenomenon of *kinesthesia*. This term describes a mode of *interoception* conceived as the movement-perception of our own muscular apparatus from within. It must be clearly differentiated from the sense of tactile perception – related to it as a "sixth sense" – which manifests a distinction between the inside (the body) and the outside (space).¹² Kinesthetic empathy can thus be understood as naming what Caspersen might understand as "thinking [something] into our bodies"¹³. The muscles' motoric arousal when thinking about movement and connecting empathetically to the outside is an important part of what Caspersen describes. Thus, we should avoid differentiating between *motoric* and *mental* or body

¹⁰ Cf. Leigh-Foster, Susan: *Choreographing Empathy. Kinesthesia in Performance*. Abingdon 2011, pp. 10-11.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.* pp. 147-154.

¹² Cf. *ibid.* pp. 6-10.

¹³ Cf. Caspersen 2007.

and mind, as they represent two qualities of one and the same process: *the body is thinking*.

The presumption that this sense works mostly without what we would call conscious perception or control would potentially turn dancers into those, who are able to explore, practice and observe how to enter a state of contemplative bodily introversion and thus have the opportunity to feel the sensation of congruency with a body that we feel kinaesthetically connected to as 'ours'. One important feature of practicing *kinesthesia* is gaining awareness of the *virtuality* that lies within each movement and the thinking that leads to its final display. Before we actually perform a movement on the outside, there is always the crucial point at which the actual decision to perform precisely this specific movement is made. The question of where this decision is both initially and ultimately made becomes obsolete if we relate it to the holistic concept of a thinking body. Gil and Lepecki see this crucial moment of decision-making not necessarily as a point of exclusion, but as a moment of potentiality, where the dancing/thinking body virtually multiplies itself.¹⁴ This virtual potency opens up a space that could be considered the scope of impact, which can be affected by *kinesthetic empathy*. This space, of *kinesthetic empathy* is interfused with *virtual bodies*, each presenting and actually being the potential of a movement. By deciding upon one of them, the dancer appropriates this *auratic* space and turns it into an actual space. The "space of the body"¹⁵, as Gil and Lepecki refer to it in "Paradoxical Body", is paradoxical as well, as it is both a virtual space and a space that is always performed to become an actual one. This extension of the dancing body through awareness of the "space of the body" as the space of its impact can thus be viewed as a fragile, continuously collapsing and re-emerging *aura* in between the *interior space* (the inside of the body, penetrated by *kinesthetic*sensation) and the exterior space of the outside world (penetrated by empathetic desire).¹⁶ The space of the body as an extension of the body thus takes us back to Caspersen's description of the thinking of the dancing body as the "[...] ability of the body to create an internal image of itself

¹⁴ Cf. Gil, José/Lepecki, André: "Paradoxical Body", in: *TDR: The Drama Review* 50:4 (2006), pp. 21-35.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 22.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*

[that] also allows for the possibility that the body can create an image of itself where it does not exist.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Caspersen 2007.

Referenzen

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