

SOME REFLECTIONS ABOUT SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF CHOREOGRAPHIES AND POST-MODERNISM¹

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I would like to share with you some thoughts about the purpose of semiotic analysis of choreographies and its use in the understanding of post-modern dance. I rely hereby heavily on the works of U.Eco and also on a recently edited book of S.Melrose.

Semiotics comprises descriptive and analytical procedures, leaning on linguistics. It focuses on the perception and reception of signs, and translates it in discursive definitions of relationships. It is this tendency to translate non-linguistic signs into linguistic ones that made us shift after a while to broader conceptions of semiotics. Indeed translation between natural languages is not a matter of transfer from one system's signifier to another. It always activates a complex relation between complex systems(including systems of values, ethos and attitude) and similar systems in the culture (G.Bateson 1977, S.Melrose 1994). What we cannot forget is that dance is an analogic language, that can only be approached by associations, images, comparisons and that the major function of theater lies in the blurring of logic, reasonable communication.

Attempting a semiotic approach of choreography, or any aesthetic text('), is to hope to clarify problems that traditional philosophical aesthetics has left unsolved. Typical of many philosophical aesthetic theories is that, rather than define the poetic message, they list the effects that any viewer of a work of art may feel. What differentiates the response of philosophical aesthetics from that of the layman, is the sophistication of rhetorical devices that anyway translate a number of truisms, like in the definition: " art is what produces an aesthetic effect".

According to Eco (1979), semiotics acts on a number of different levels:

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* text: in the meaning of a coexistence of many expressive codes, that superimpose many levels of signification

- a particular manipulation of the expression that releases(or is released by) a reassessment of the content
- an awareness of a process of code-changing, that frequently produces a new type of awareness of the world.

This insofar that the viewer- or addressee- is scrutinising and detecting the work repeatedly, and engages himself in a complex effort of interpretation. See table B.(Eco, 1972)

Table 1B : **MODEL OF THE DECODING PROCESS OF A CHOREOGRAPHY**

IDEOLOGY : choices of precise codes and subcodes
of onlooker .If arbitrary codes : **semantic noise**

MESSAGE: SIGNIFICANT FORM	RECEIVER	INTERPR MESSAGE
SYSTEM OF DIFFERENT SIGNIFIC. TO CHOOSE FROM	ONLOOKER. TRANSFORMS SIGNIFICATION OF MESSAGE ACCORDING TO HIS CODES	CAN BECOME NEW INFORMATION FOR OTHERS

REFERENCE-CODES OF THE RECEIVER

CAN PROVIDE ENRICHMENT OF PERCEPTION OR **SEMANTIC NOISE**

CODES- AND SUBCODES SYSTEM TO WHICH THE DESTINATOR REFERS

SUB-CODE 1	SUB-CODE 2	SUB-CODE 3	SUB-CODE 4
morphological considerations Ex.of arbitrary code	affective connot. to the subject	affective connot to the mvts, sound	cultural connot cult "fetichism"

If we choose today to speak about semiotics and post-modern dance, it is because choreographic creation is actually much influenced by semiotics and that a comprehension of semiotic devices can give us an insight into the choreographic process of P.Bausch, W.Forsythe or A.T.De Keersmaeker.

The aesthetic sender-the choreographer- will focus his attention on the viewer's possible reactions, so that **the work represents a network of diverse communicational acts with highly original responses.** To detect original and personal aesthetic codes is no easy matter, and can only be accomplished when they are highly standardised. The more a work submits to commercial influence, the more connected to previous experiences its codes will seem and will be recognizable. In the more radical inventions, the artist more or less bypasses the conventual perceptual model, and delves directly into the as yet unshaped perceptual continuum, mapping his perception while he organizes it. This model has been present at all great innovative moments of the arts. **We see here a violent proposal of new conventions and a major problem for the critic and the analyst.** I refer for this aspect to the interesting article of M.Franko (1996) about the difficulties of the critic John Martin after seeing for the first time " Dark Meadows" of Martha Graham in 1946.*

A message assumes an aesthetic function when it is ambiguous and self-focusing. Semiotically ambiguity must be defined as a mode of violating the rules of the codes. Some art critics speak of aesthetics as a violating of the norm. This does not make clear if the deviation is to be viewed in relation to the everyday norm or to poetically established ones. There are deviations of both.

Ambiguity is a very important device because it functions as a sort of introduction to the aesthetic experience, when, instead of producing disorder, it focuses the attention and urges to an interpretative effort. It incites one toward the discovery of an unexpected flexibility in the language one is dealing with. Ambiguity on the expression plane must involve a corresponding ambiguity on the content plane. A violation of norms on both the expression and the content plane obliges one to reconsider their correlation, which can no longer be foreseen by the usual codes. In this way, the work is self-focusing since it directs the attention of the viewer to its own shape. The work is open to multiple interpretations because the interactions of the context brings to life more and more meanings. **Through the close interrelationship between the message and the way it is conveyed, the spectator becomes aware of new possibilities and is compelled to rethink the whole language. By increasing one's knowledge of codes, the aesthetic message changes one's view of their history.**

First of all the comprehension of an aesthetic text is based on a dialectic between acceptance and repudiation of the codes of the artist and introduction and rejection of personal codes. If the viewer does not know what the rules of the artist are, he tries to extrapolate from the disconnected data of his aesthetic experience. He may believe that he is correctly interpreting what the choreographer meant or he may decide to test new interpretive possibilities. But in so doing he never wants to completely betray the choreographers' intentions.

* John Martin, Art- critic from 1927 to 1962 of the New York Times, was essential in the visibility and comprehension of the first generation of american modern dancers: M.Graham, D.Humphrey, C.Weidman, H.Tamiris.

So that **in interpretive reading of a work a dialectic between fidelity and inventive freedom is established.** On one hand he is induced by the relationships of the context to see the work exactly as it is intended, in an act of fidelity to the artist and the historical environment in which the work is shown. On the other hand, he seeks to draw excitement from the ambiguity of the message and to put suitable codes on the ambiguous codes.

In this dialectic between fidelity and inventiveness, two kinds of knowledge are generated:

- a combinational knowledge about the entire range of possibilities available within the given codes
- a historical knowledge about the circumstances, the codes and the norms of a given artistic period.

While modernism is principally preoccupied by transcending and universalizing the subjective experience according to original codes brought together in a given scheme and strives for authenticity, post-modernism practices assemblages motored by energetic force-fields: gathering, borrowing, quoting, decontextualising, refuting any single control in what is nonetheless an "aesthetic whole", because of the unifying force of the theater and the theatrical relationships. (Melrose, 1996). If modernism emphasized the specificity of the different arts, post-modernism likes to mix different disciplines. Since the eighties, we can count a number of interdisciplinary projects but also disparate strategies.

The term started to be used to define the evolution of dance in critical articles and essays in the middle of the seventies, while in the other arts it was propagated in the beginning of the sixties. The term situated a new generation of choreographers, some of them having participated in the Judson Church and Grand Union experiments in Greenwich Village (New York) in the sixties. Their creative strategies made use of chance and random devices and improvisation on visual scores, as well as on resolutions of tasks, role-games or the draw of the attention to minimalistic tasks in a multi-mediatic plethora and reject violently any theatrical effects. The vocabulary of the choreographers of the sixties defines itself by its democratic pluralism, the use of every-day movement, of children-games, of ballroom-dance, of ballet, of sports-movements and modern dance techniques.

Connections between choreographers and members of the artistic community resulted in coherent stylistic conceptions in the seventies, that is defined by M.Kirby (1974) "post-modern dance" and by S.Banes (1980,1993,1994) "analytical post-modern dance".. Some of the choreographers (S.Paxton; T.Brown, L.Childs, D.Gordon..) will concentrate on abstract forms in a minimalist way, others, like M.Monk or P.Bausch, will exploit theatrical metaphores.

**A QUASI-SURVEY OF SOME " MINIMALIST" TENDENCIES IN THE QUANTITATIVELY
MINIMAL DANCE ACTIVITY MIDST THE PLETHORA (Y.Rainer, 1974)**

Eliminate or Minimize

1. Phrasing
2. Development and climax
3. Variation : rhythm, shape, dynamics
4. Character
5. Performance
6. Variety: phases and the spatial field
7. Virtuoso feat and the fully extended body

Substitute

1. Energy equality and " found" movement
2. Equality of parts, repetition
3. Repetition or discrete events
4. Neutral performance
5. Task or tasklike activity
6. Singular action, event
7. Human scale or tone

Even if, like in modern dance, the productions are diverse, let us anyway attempt to find common characteristics or codes(M.Van der Linden, 1992)

Modern dance

- defined by the subject(reality as the artist sees it)
- linearity of the development
- performance is a finished product
- causal logic of the work intended to achieve a consensus
- intention of the artist is central
- creation of illusion

Post-modern dance

- defined by the object (reality is made of things in space and time)
- deconstruction
- presentation of a process
- communication of the work creates different meanings
- the form is in discussion: formal elements independant of each other and juxtaposed.
- no illusion. The signs don't become symbols.

In the eighties, the choreographers of the sixties go back to theatricality with the production of spectacular performances and multi-media collaborations. Examples: Lucinda Childs in collaboration with Sol Lewitt and the composer Philip Glass and/or: with Robert Wilson and P.Glass(" Einstein on the beach") ; T.Brown: collaboration R.Rauschenberg and the composer Laurie Anderson. A new generation of choreographers(B.T.Jones, K.Armitage, W.Forsythe) revolt against the ascetic puritanism of the elders, leans heavily on theatricality and political themes. A cultural pluralism is emphasized with the revelation of choreographers of different cultures, with multi-cultural companies , with Butoh and avant-garde japanese techniques, streetdance techniques, martial arts. **The interest of the spoken theater for the body since the seventies has altered the hegemony of logocentrism and brought forward a theater that is more movement oriented and dances that oppose the clarity of bodily communication with the ineffectiveness of words shown in the juxtaposition of different tongues or in the poor articulation of words.** What we mostly see now, in the spoken theater as well as in dance, are the different uses of energy in performance, like S.Melrose (1994) puts forward. Out of them all other developments- such as the production of "ideas" - develop . " Effective use of forceful energies leads to what a maximum of us will agree, at quite different moments and for different reasons, to experience as " an appropriate presentation" because we resonate with it." **More and more we see choreographers (among them A.T.De Keersmaeker, W.Forsythe) acting as " metteurs en scène", adding layers of significance to and orchestrating the energetic craftsmanship of their dancers , and following hereby the contrary direction of the analyst.** As A.Mnouchkine (1984) defines: the actor/metteur en scène(and choreographer: *my addition*) mediates potential knowledge through action, without being responsible for the uses of that knowledge. " The role of the analyst is to explain, while the role of the artist (.) is not at all to explicitate but to illuminate: the spectator has to be left something to discover. Emotional, philosophical, metaphysical, political resonances have to be produced, that each member of the audience, according to the needs and the level of each, is destined to receive and hereby the dancer/actor has to produce an essential balance between the components of his craft. The analysis takes place on a different rhythm and can enumerate its components.

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