SELECTION OR MUTATION: PROBLEMS OF STRUCTURE AND DECIPHERABILITY IN RELATION TO THE ANALYSIS OF POSTMODERN DANCE WORKS*

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My title refers to a recent book by the Oxford Biological Scientist Richard Dawkins[1], in which he discusses Darwinian theory and argues that while species mutation is entirely random, the process by which one particular mutation might survive is entirely rule governed. In other words, while a species may offer multifarious mutational possibilities, its success as a surviving species will depend upon logical yet complex rules of selectivity. This seems to offer an analogy for choreographic practice, and in particular the choreography of current or postmodern works which court diversity and mutation to a more extreme degree than hitherto, and which in some cases appear almost willingly to defy understanding. This state of affairs raises obvious problems for the dance analyst, whose work entails the discovery of the patterns of selection which render current or postmodern dance works decipherable, against a context in which the act of 'making sense' of an art work in the first instance has been placed under considerable stress. Cunningham in particular, whether or not you would want to call him 'postmodern', is relevant as the instigator of chance procedures in dance, and his danceworks challenge the audience's perception in an extreme way. Yet a close examination of his dances reveal that their structures are anything but random and it is proposed that the identification of some of the significant elements within <u>his</u> work might serve to highlight the problems of decipherability within subsequent choreographers' work.

I will first of all examine briefly the background to the problem of selection and structure in relation to the analysis of postmodern dance works and the

implications of the diminution of the role of the choreographer in relation to current critical thinking. I will argue that, while the concept of meaning has broadened, structural logic has merely shifted its ground and the perception of significant elements within the dance work, though problematised in the postmodern age, is still of paramount importance to its understanding and value as artwork. The notion of dance as art here is taken to be crucial, because we perceive movement within an art context in a different way to that in which we perceive movement elsewhere.[2]

Postmodern artworks are characterised as eclectic, as employing the tools and visual references of contemporary technology, advertisement, and popular culture; and as reflecting the crisis in our understanding of our relation to a 'culturally constructed world' by recourse to: an intended loss of structural cohesion; a drawing upon of more personalised experience as subject matter; plus a sort of anarchic gameplaying as strategy with regards to its treatment. Three areas present themselves from the above analysis for consideration: structural logic; the subjective experience and 'gameplaying' all of which might be viewed in relation to Dawkins' selection and mutation analogy.

Lyotard[3] has argued that the <u>acceleration</u> in the proliferation of knowledge from the middle of the century, which is due to a shift from a mechanical to a technological age, together with the intensification of Capitalism which underpins the value systems of the West, have brought about a change to our current value systems, that is that the values of the Enlightenement of truth and justice have been abandoned and replaced with the values of efficiency and cost effectiveness. Lyotard argues that all of this constitutes a shift in our <u>condition</u>, and that we have thus entered a postmodern age. A look at the concerns of the Futurists in the 1910s raises some doubts over whether the crisis is new in quite the way he describes and certainly modernist artworks were concerned with the fragmentation of our experience in a way which is not dissimilar to the concerns of the present day. What has changed however is the modernist allegiance to coherence and decipherability. Modernists were concerned with making sense of the world however fragmented our experience of it was. There is now a widespread feeling that whatever sense can be made of artworks, can only be made within the realm of the individual subjective experience. In other words a different concept and value has been ascribed to the notion of 'meaning', the responsibility for which has been taken out of the hands of the artist and placed onto the individual perceiver with her fragmented experience.

If modernism gave us a new way of seeing, then the latter half of the twentieth century is concerned with a new way of meaning, and this problematises the role of the analyst and critic. Dance analysts have to concern themselves with what they perceive as significant within the structure of the dance work in order to record its salient features, and post-structuralist strategies, for example intertextual readings of dances which emphasise the multiplicity of the individual viewer's experience, render the relevance of the analytic procedure in relation to its means of verification and its appeal to public significance as problematic. For these reasons, I begin with the dance works of Merce Cunningham, because he

stands at the crossroads between modernist and postmodernist values in that he subverts the traditional conventions of structure and of movement, and to some extent shifts the burden of responsibility for the decipherment of dances from the choreographer to the viewer, whilst at the same time, I would argue, adhering to the normative values of modernism.

In the quartet taken from Changing Steps (1973)[4], Cunningham shows us movement which both explores and exploits traditional attitudes to weight, balance and partnering. Structurally, there is no easily detected development either dynamically or in repeated and developed motifs, no climaxes and resolutions, no narrative, no overt emotional commitment to aid 'reading'; spatially it is multifocussed; there are simultaneous and overlapping images and multifaceted movement. That Cunningham employs chance procedures during the structuring of his dances is well known, yet this does not imply the 'gameplaying' which it is sometimes taken to mean. For Cunningham, chance and gameplaying are devices that offer increased 'mutational' possibilities which would otherwise not have been available to him. Yet these procedures are subject to strict rules, as is immediately apparent from his notebooks, and far from it being the case that responsibility is taken out of the hands of the choreographer, the reverse is true; for in liberating himself from learnt or conventional patterns of behaviour and movement making, Cunningham actually excercises increased artistic control over the choreographic product. That the structural patterns are new and do not rely upon readily accessible cultural convention provides us with a challenge as to how his dances mean anything at all, particularly in light of the fact that the choreographer himself would seek to deny meaning in the ways in which the process of interpretation has been understood hitherto, but that is not to say that he denies us the logic of his dances, and neither does he deny his own ultimate accountability for them. Meaning then has shifted its ground in Cunningham works, as has the notion of structure. There is a further point to be made, and that is that while the responsibility for 'making sense' of the works is more fully on the audience, the responsibility for their coherence and legibility as artworks is apparent in Cunningham's decision making and his ultimate selection of what we see. This becomes clearer when a specific dance sequence is considered.

In Changing Steps Cunningham presents us with a series of sections, each exploring different movement problems and different movement and dancer relationships: thus steps are changed and exchanged. This idea is borne out by Cunningham's overall structural pattern, his 'large form' of solos, duets, trios, quartets, quintets and ensemble sections, the ordering or overlapping of which does not erode this agenda in any way, but rather enriches it, as our attention may be caught by simultaneous or overlapping sections which enable us directly to compare the focus and essence of each. In addition, we are forced to question whether what we are watching is for example indeed a duet or two simultaneous solos and thus forced to re-examine some basic dance concepts. Cunningham's 'changing steps' then explores the range of movement and structuring possibilities within dance and questions the criteria we have previously established. These

ideas would be confirmed by his general aesthetic concerning dance and artworks in general.

In the quartet itself, weight giving and taking and partnering are explored from the slightest touch to begin with, developed to extreme indulgence, and this results in a variety of falls, leans, pivots, extensions, countertensions and balances. Support is given and taken by a variety of body parts and by interchangeing partners. Different pivotal points are explored which sometimes leads to humerous moments as when the tips of the toes of one dancer are manipulated by another to be used for locomotion to arrive at a place where a new pivotal point is presented, and back again. There is humour too in the movements' unpredictability: just as the precariousness of balance is established as an idea, then the female dancers are left in perfect balance while the men dodge between them in a non too gainly way in order to swap partners.

Structural coherence comes about in two ways: temporally it is governed by the exploration of a central idea, the idea of testing partnering through different body parts and so on, and it is this which leads to the movements' unpredictability. At phrase level, phrases are stressed in a nonhierarchical way; that they are rendered coherent is due to the sense made of them by the performers themselves, and the collaboration between performer and choreographer is at all times evident and acknowledged by Cunningham. Spatially, Cunningham conforms to an artist's sense of formal sculptural space, where the whole video frame is the picture in which the dancers present four dimensional action in space and time. In addition, and perhaps of paramount rather than periferal importance, the use of humour adds a humanity to the piece, a sense of 'dada' which invokes a whole different set of criteria to that of movement exploration alone. The context of location and visual environment increases the parameters in which we are to view all of this in its use of outside moving inside, dance floor laid upon uneven grass. The final coup de theatre of the dancers interrupting and overlapping with another section, of moving beyond and back into the frame which has now found a new focus of attention, lends a humanity to the observing eye. Thus the humanity of the dancers, the humanity of the camera eye and the relationship between it and us, the audience, is invoked.

Cunningham's structural logic is in evidence in terms of the exploration and development of ideas concerning the wider questions of dance as art, rather than of movement devices alone, and these ideas in challenging accepted notions of what constitutes a dance event, challenge the spectator's sense of the relationship between mind and body, between dancer and dance.[5] In employing chance procedures, Cunningham disturbs any easy sense of what constitutes development in dance (both ours and his own) but he does not deny us the centrality and importance of the governing ideas to which all parts of his dance relate. His chance procedures may be seen as experiments in mutation, but Cunningham selects from these many possibilities to ensure the success of the dance as artwork. That we are clearly invited to view the dance within the context of a previous performance and rehearsal (the film shifts between footage of at least three separate

events) emphasises the significance of these aspects: the role of the dancer, the context of the work, plus Cunningham's own relationship to it.

Cunningham's <u>Changing Steps</u> then, raises profound philosophical questions about our conception of dance as an art event in terms of its content, its structure and its materials, the dancers, and within the dance Cunningham clearly displays his attitude to each. Moreover, this critical dimension is <u>internal</u> to the dance's form.

Within some recent postmodern danceworks there appears to be an increasing tendency to court diversity for its own sake and to defy structural coherence as a way of reflecting the fragmentation of our experience of the world. It is as a consequence difficult to make sense of these dances in anything other than a subjective and arbitrary way, and this leads to difficulties in terms of the ways in which we are to value them as artworks.

The Art Historian Paul Crowther distinguishes between two different postmodernisms, and this may throw some light on the problem. Crowther (1993)[6] identifies two strands within the visual arts. The first strand: is what he calls 'critical super-realism and critical neo-expressionism' and these contain a truly deconstructive dimension, that is they employ a similar strategy to that which informs post-structuralist approaches to discourse in general.

However, a second strand of 'uncritical super-realism and uncritical neo-expressionism' may be detected in some later works he argues, which meet the market demand fostered by the former styles, and which employ the same visual strategies but which do not question the status quo at any basic level. This is made possible because we have become so adept at the quick assimilation of the superficialities of style. However, poststructuralist criticism is unable to distinguish between the two types of postmodernism, notes Crowther, because of our uneasy relationship with notions of 'value'. In other words it is easy to appear to be deconstructive, whilst in fact conforming totally to establishment values and our rejection of the 'grand narratives' of the Enlightenment, that is the rejection of a commitment to truth and justice, leaves us without criteria to be able to distinguish between what is <u>truly</u> questioning and what is not. The use of irony then, may display a deep understanding and critique of the elements upon which it depends, or it may be superficial and in actuality reinforce these elements whilst <u>pretending</u> to expose and critique them.[7]

William Forsythe is self consciously interested in deconstruction - he sees classical ballet as a language, and his mission to subvert the governing codes of that language, by decontextualising it.[8] He is interested in Laban's structuralist analysis of movement, and has worked on Laban's choreutics, which he subverts by shifting the axes of the body to present new centres of balance. So he is self consciously postmodernist, deconstructionist, post-stucturalist This is interesting from an academic point of view, and certainly commands attention. That he owes an explicit debt to Cunningham, as well as to Balanchine, has been acknowledged by critics and is apparent in both his structural and movement experimentation.

Forsythe's <u>Herman Schmerman</u>[9] displays many of the characteristics of postmodern dance works: there is a loss of linear narrative, in favour of tantalising

snippets of a relationship: a prod in the back, seering glances, dependence and independence, competition. There is reference to contemporary culture: the score is electronic, though expressionistic; costumes are by Versace; the stage has an obstruction which the dancers have to step over, so that illusion and theatrical device are foregrounded in some way.

Style is eclectic in that the technical concerns of ballet are intermingled with pedestrian movement, and gesture: runs, kicks, prods and shoves. The formal concerns of ballet are also acknowledged and rejected: he subverts the notion of extroversion, in terms of the use of the body and focus; virtuosity comes unexpectedly, and elaborate preparation is followed by a 'throw away' move.

The dance refers to its own history, Jordan talks of:

> New York City Ballet features - the dropped wrists and free-hipped battements and much Balanchinian pointe-tendu, accompanied by sharp semaphoric changes of the arms.[10]

In the duet, he allows us few readily discernible units. He loosely follows the pattern: adagio, male solo, female solo, coda; there are repeated motifs: the standing facing each other in confrontation, a 'tap dance', developpe rond de jamb, arm swings, supports with various parts of the body. But the smaller units of the dance are difficult to make sense of, there are no climaxes, but rather 'intensifications of texture' as Fischer notes[11], for example there is a tension inherent in the score which is intensified by rushes of dance movement between notes or between dissonant chords. Or we have a shift between an introverted partnering relationship and a more dramatic, more presentational, more extrovert statement. An example of this is to be found in a moment just before the solos, when he supports her in arabesque, leaves her on balance and for a brief exquisite moment they respond equally to the accompaniment. But at the end, we are left dangling, as the final moment sees a supported and traditionally presented pirouette. It begins and the lights immediately dim and the curtain comes down. End of dance. Clearly the resolution is meant to be denied us, just as Cunningham denies us the satisfaction of any easy relationship between movement and accompaniment, or predictably developed movement phrases. On the face of it, then, Forsythe appears to be continuing the project first developed by Cunningham and Balanchine.

Servos says

> The attitude it [the choreography] displays towards the world is one of reason, hence philosophical. The fact that no precise conclusions are offered still remains one of Forsythe's best qualities.[12]

Servos clearly wishes to invoke representations of the world as important to the dance's value, and these are evident within the dance in terms of a

'postmodern' personal relationship of angst and uncertainty consequent upon problematised gender roles. Forsythe's movement is fascinating and tantalising at times, particularly in the way in which he challenges the technical capabilities of his dancers, and the ways in which he incorporates non-dance gesture into technically based sequences. However, there is a world of difference between Servos' notion of 'no precise conclusions' and the notion that 'anything goes' within choreographic structure, and this perhaps leads us to the nub of the problem within the analysis of postmodern dances. If Forsythe's attitude to choreography is truly one of reason, then the governing ideas which determine choreographic structure should be transparent, albeit challenging, in a sense other than just the presentation of mutational exploration, which gives us an amorphous tangle of tantalising possibilies, but little more. In Crowther's terms, the critical and deconstructive dimension is apparent, but Forsythe <u>overloads</u> us with eclecticism and imagery and this connects with the viewer 'at the level of private and arbitrary association'.[13]

Forsythe problematises structural logic within <u>Herman Schmerman</u> in ways which are never fully resolved, giving us fragmented movement phrases as metaphors for fragmented identities and personal relationships. This might well conform to a postmodern model which cannot be valued by modernist criteria. However, Crowther contends that it is nevertheless important to be able to distinguish between that which is truly critical of the status quo, and that which is not. Maybe it doesn't matter, and many would argue this case. But if that is true, then the implications in terms of our conception of the nature, status and function of artworks in general and danceworks in particular need to be more fully considered. Perhaps the criteria which might be applied and which might be helpful in this debate are to do with a need to foreground the context of the choreographer to a greater extent, his attitude to the dance as artwork, plus his attitude to the dancer as collaborator and embodied mind.

Notes

[1] Richard Dawkins, *Climbing Mount Improbable* London: Penguin, 1996

[2] This difference is highlighted by Graham McFee and David Best, and hinges upon the difference between movement in which the intention to communicate something is embodied, and movement in which there is no specific intention to communicate. See Graham McFee, *Understanding Dance*, London: Routledge, 1992, p.242-245; David Best, *Philosophy and Human Movement*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978, pp.138-162

[3] Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Anwering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984 pp.71-82

[4] <u>Changing Steps</u>, Merce Cunningham, 1973, reproduced for video 1989, accompaniment: <u>Cartridge Music</u>, John Cage, 1960, design Elliot Caplan

[5] Susan Foster drew our attention to this in *Reading Dancing*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986

[6] Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, pp 184-192; In a broadly similar way, Hal Foster distinguishes between a 'postmodernism of resistance and a postmodernism of reaction'. For Foster, a postmodernism of resistance is one which questions

the prevailing cultural codes and practices, while a postmodernism of reaction is one which merely exploits them, while showing the same surface features and characteristics. see Hal Foster, 'Postmodernism: A Preface' in *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto Press, 1985, p.*x*

[7] A related notion is provided by Frederic Jameson, who makes a distinction between parody and pastiche within art works, where parody presupposes a deep understanding of the unique original style set against the context of the modernist project, and pastiche denies any such normative values. He says:

> Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor.

Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in Hal Foster ed., *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto Press, 1985, p. 114

[8] The notion of dance as language is itself a problematic one, for while it is helpful to compare systems of communication, it diminishes the notion of dance as art, and may fail to acknowledge the very different ways in which movement communicates within an art context, compared to a non-art context.

[9] Herman Schmerman, William Forsythe, 1992, music, Thom Willems, costumes: Gianni Versace, dancers: Sylvie Guillem, Adam Cooper.

[10] Stephanie Jordan, 'William Forsythe in Paris', *Dance Theatre Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, Autumn, 1991, p 38

[11] Eva-Elisabeth Fischer, 'The Appearance of Reality', *Ballett International*, vol. 13, no. 5, 1990, p24

[12] Norbert Servos, 'The World Topsy-Turvy', *Ballett International*, vol. 8, no. 8, 1985, p.24

[13] Crowther, 1993, p. 190