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The Body Aesthetic

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ABSTRACT. This article is concerned with dance from an aesthetic perspective e.g it looks at dance, alongside painting and sculpture, as a form of art that might be addressed by way of aesthetic categories. Specifically it examines the tension between the sensible and the idea which is at the core of aesthetic thought in the case of dance: how are we to understand the art of dance as a unique configuration of the sensible and the intelligible – with the human body as the sensible fabric, and the ideas that it conveys as the intelligible form? How is the medium, the human body, or more accurately the subject herself, both a phenomenological “lived body” and an “aesthetic object”? This paper attempts to address these questions.

1. Introduction

This article is concerned with dance from an aesthetic perspective e.g it looks at dance, alongside painting and sculpture, as a form of art that might be addressed by way of aesthetic categories. Yet dance, unlike painting or sculpture, does not easily and automatically align with classical aesthetic conceptions, those of the likes of Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer and others. Nor does it easily yield to contemporary theories of art whose paradigmatic object is plastic art. As an art form, dance has its origins in a unique medium: the human body and its movements, a lived body rather than

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inanimate matter such as the painter's canvas or the sculptor's marble. Perhaps this is why dance as a genre, until fairly recently, has been largely ignored by philosophy in general and by aesthetics in particular. As dance brings forth a new set of questions that go beyond what is commonly discussed in aesthetics and philosophy of art. It brings forth the question of the body as a problem that needs to be addressed prior to any attempt to address dance as an aesthetic phenomenon.

Interestingly despite Kant's assertion in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* that the human body is the ideal of beauty and the only form - the archetype (*Urbild*) - suitable to serve as a symbol of moral freedom (§17), aesthetic thought, Kant's included, was hardly ever concerned with the body nor with the question of dance. If we examine the history of philosophy, we see that for Kant it was the beauty of the wild flower or the sublimity of the ocean which served as the paradigmatic objects for aesthetic appreciation. For Nietzsche it was the Pre-Socratic Tragedy or Wagner's operas; for Heidegger it was Trakl's poems or a painting by Van Gogh. In any of these classic texts dealing with art and aesthetics, we will not find an acknowledgment of the unique status of dance or find a discussion of dance in aesthetic terms.²

² Unlike other philosophers mentioned here, Nietzsche does give an account of the distinctness of dance, specifically in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, however dance is not discussed in an aesthetic context. More on this see Claudia Crawford, (1998), "Nietzsche's

Perhaps this is not surprising. After all, until the start of the 20th century, dance – like the body – was considered as a dimension of human experience which, despite being essential to an individual’s existence, is not what designates her humanity. It was rather the mind reflected in the primacy of Descartes’ *Cogito*, which the philosophical subject was to be identified. Dance – thought of as the art form farthest away from language, from conceptual thinking, from philosophy – was left on the margins of philosophical discourse, if not pushed out altogether. However, dance’s status changed as a consequence of the rising prominence of the body in 20th century philosophy. And with the emergence of 20th-century philosophy of the body a new philosophical interest in dance emerges, and philosophers such as Alain Badiou (2005), Jean-Luc Nancy (2005), Agamben (2000) and others, as well as critical theorists and performance studies scholars such as Andre Lepecki (2005), turn to address the question of dance. The possibility of thinking the body not through the constraint of the Cartesian *res extensa* but through the phenomenological lived body or the ontological body, beginning with Merleau-Ponty, onwards to Nancy in *Corpus* (2008) – to mention just two of the major landmarks, allow us for the first time, philosophically, to pose the question of the body in dance and the question of dance as an aesthetic event.

Dionysian arts: dance, song and silence”. In *Nietzsche, Philosophy and the Arts*, pp. 310-342. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

In this paper I will seek to think dance from an aesthetic perspective, that is, to examine dance in terms and categories drawn from aesthetic thought and to see whether dance can be addressed using these approaches, or whether it is necessary to introduce certain modifications in order to accommodate dance, and if so, what kind of modifications. Furthermore, I argue that the change in the status of the body in 20th century philosophy is directly linked to the novel interest of philosophers in the question of dance.

2. Aesthetics as a Relation between Two Incommensurable Elements: The Sensible and the Intelligible

Aesthetics, as Rancière puts it at the beginning of his book *Aisthesis* (2011), has “for two centuries been the name for the category designating the sensible fabric and the intelligible form of what we call ‘art’” (p.x). Rancière sees the particularity of aesthetics as that which designates for us, over the last two centuries, or since Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the sensible fabric and the intelligible form of what we call art. And just to make this definition more tangible, I’ll take a few representative examples: Kant, Nietzsche and Heidegger, and examine very briefly how this sensible-intelligible thesis underlies their thought.

According to Henry Allison (2001), the question of the relationship between the sensible and the supersensible, what is commonly designated as

“the nature-freedom problem” is the leitmotiv of Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (p.201). Kant’s point of departure in this Critique is the question whether the “the great gulf” (*grosse kluft*) between the sensible and the supersensible, so that “no transition (*übergang*) is possible”, could be bridged, as “it should [*soll*] be at least possible to conceive [such union] without contradiction” (KU §II, 5:175) in a way that the two legislations along with their respective faculties coexist in one and the same subject. And it is the power of judgment which provides the mediating concept between the concept of freedom and the concepts of nature and which “makes possible the transition from the purely theoretical to the purely practical” (KU §IX, 5:196). If Kant is the founding father of aesthetics than this act of foundation originates in a motivation to think the sensible and the intelligible together. And to do so with respect to three territories: nature, the work of art, and the human subject (the sensible-intelligible in the subject). Other examples include Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* wherein art is thought as a dialectic product of a struggle between two antagonistic forces, the Apollonian, which represents the intelligible form, and the Dionysian, which represents the sensible fabric, while subsequently in Heidegger’s *The Origin of the Work of Art*, the work of art originates in a conflict between two oppositional ontological “forces”, World and Earth, which designate respectively matter and the world of meanings.

So the question is how should we translate this aesthetic principle –

that a work of art is a gathering together and a bringing into view of these two antagonistic elements – into a work of dance? Can we understand dance in terms of this unique configuration between the sensible fabric and the intelligible form? Is it possible for the relationships between matter and idea outlined by Kant, Nietzsche and Heidegger to find expression in the relationship between the body of the dancer and the mind? How does the human body – or more accurately the subject herself, who is the medium in a work of dance – remain both a phenomenological “lived body” and an “aesthetic object”?

To address these questions, I’ll begin with a first interpretation of this unique relationship between the sensible and the intelligible in art, and I will do so by way of Kant.

3. Kant and Nancy: Art and Signification

Given the vast scope of this question, I will address it in preliminary terms using Kant’s fundamental distinction in the Third Critique between reflective judgments and determining-cognitive judgments (“x is beautiful” vs. “y is a chair”) and the relationship between the sensible and the intelligible each of these judgments embodies.

Prior to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant has been concerned mainly with determining cognitive judgments, whether in an

epistemological context (the first Critique) or in the context of moral judgment (the second Critique). These two types of determining judgments involve the subsumption of a particular under a pre-existing rule or a concept, thereby creating a mental representation (*Vorstellung*) of the object, in the former case, or deciding whether a certain maxim is in accordance with the structure of the moral law, in the latter case. However in the Third Critique, Kant is called on to address a certain "marginal case" and thereby to define a new function of the power of judgment. In the case of the aesthetic object cognition encounters an object that cannot be subsumed under a concept or a rule, as "there can be no rule in accordance with which someone could be compelled to acknowledge something as beautiful" (§8, 5: 215). Beauty obeys no a priori law and hence, it cannot be conceptually determined. In fact, Kant argues that when we judge an object to be beautiful, we cannot explain it by resting on conceptual grounds, since no a priori concept mediates between sensibility and the understanding such as in the case of determining judgments (§6).

The aesthetic object thus presents us with a problem of representation as the sensible intuitions cannot be subsumed under a law of the understanding for the formation of a mental representation. And without the addition of concepts, the object, so represented, is, strictly speaking, indeterminate. Kant does not claim that aesthetic judgment, such as "this is beautiful" or "that is sublime", does not produce knowledge, rather he

claims that the sort of knowledge gained from this types of judgments - “cognition in general” (*Erkenntnis überhaupt*) - is certainly not a form of metaphysical knowledge, as being conceptually indeterminate aesthetic judgment does not broaden our cognition (§9). Aesthetic judgments such as “this is beautiful” or “that is sublime” do not broaden our cognition like determinant judgments, but nevertheless they are not without sense. In a more contemporary formulation, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that “art makes sense outside of sense” (2005, p.20). Art makes sense in a different way and in a different register than the process of signifying. In fact, it is just the opposite. Nancy traces the artist’s motivation precisely in the desire to escape the closure and the determination of conceptual signification. To liberate the sensible from the sovereignty of the incorporeal mental representation, to expose the excess of sensibility, and consequently to think about other forms and modes of knowledge – such as “touching” (see *The Muses*, 1994) – rather than cognition of an object. I quote from Nancy:

A sentence makes sense when it is complete and conveys meaning. For example, “the earth is round”, this makes sense. The desire to escape (*sortir*) sense is a desire to break free from this accomplishment, from this closure (*bouclage*) of sense, “the earth is round” and I spin with it. Sense makes things stop, and we stop with it. Sense – how shall I put it? – is not exactly death, it is more of a petrification. (2005, pp.20-21, my translation)

When examining the unique relationship between the sensible fabric and the intelligible form in art, we see in art a desire to make sense out of sense, that is, to make sense by breaking free from the closure and determination of signification. That's why in a different context and not entirely dissociated from the question at hand, Nancy can ask: "how then are we to touch the body rather than signify it?" (2008, p.9). This is the same question with regard to the aesthetic object: how are we to access this object rather than signify it? So, this analogy, only sketched here very briefly, already brings us closer to thinking dance from an aesthetic perspective. So, let me now turn to dance specifically.

4. Dance and Signification

In her book on dance in the period of the Third Reich, Laure Guilbert claims that in Nazi Germany dance was the last form of art declared degenerative by the German censors. That's because the German authorities found it difficult to read messages and meanings in the dancers' movement. This was in contrast to painting or sculpture, forms of art to which they were accustomed and whose meanings they could more readily decipher (See Nancy and Monnier, 2005, pp.24-5). The body in dance is not a "signifying body"; rather, it is an aesthetic body, a body that expresses itself not by way of encoded – conceptually determined - movements, but through sense

outside of sense. This form of expression incarnates the unique relationship between the sensible fabric (the movements) and the intelligible form (sense) in a gesture that is only ever a gesture towards meaning, never reaching completion, never coming to a closure and conceptual determination.

In a conversation on dance and philosophy held between Jean-Luc Nancy and French choreographer Mathilde Monnier, published in the volume *Alliterations* (2005), Monnier refers to Nancy's claim that the "body is the place through which sense slips away (*le corps, c'est le lieu par ou le sens s'échappe*)". Dance is very close to this idea, she argues, "being an art that works to hold (*retenir*) the slipping away of movement in the body and at the same time to give sense to what seems to slip away" [...] "I have the impression that my work as a choreographer and dancer, is, first of all, to hold sense in its slipping away or to have movement make sense, while sense slips away" (p.18).

Monnier reads Nancy's claim that the body is the place through which sense slips away, into the field of dance. The body, like Kant's aesthetic object, is an object which cannot be reduced to a mere mental representation, a mere mental construct. In both cases, whether we are addressing the body or the aesthetic object, we are confronted with the slipping away of sense. In dance, these two territories, the body and art, merge, thereby creating a paradigmatic aesthetic event.

To better understand the meaning of the aesthetic body, I will pose it against the signifying body which according to Nancy (2008) is the “whole corpus of philosophical, theological, psychoanalytic, and semiological bodies – incarnates one thing only: the absolute contradiction of not being able to be a body without being the body of a spirit, which disembodies it” (p.69).

Nancy points to the inherent “conflict” between the corporeal and the incorporeal, and the fundamental contradiction embodied in their union. Once we approach the body through the signifier, we turn it into a mental abstraction, a signifying body. In that moment it is the body which slips away, “a body saturated with signification. And hence no more body” (p.23). Once we approach the body through the determination and the closure of sense, we disembody it as we turn it into an idea. And this is exactly what aesthetic judgment suspends, this is what the body resists in dance. That’s why according to Nancy, the body can only come into being when it ruptures, disturbs, and intrudes upon sense, rather than being subsumed under a concept, in Kant’s terminology, or signified in more contemporary terms. Only then do the material in a work of art, or in this case, the body in dance, is brought into presence and is made patent.

5. Heidegger and the Thingness of the Body

Heidegger begins *The Origin of the Work of Art* (2002 [1950]) with a discussion of the “thingly” character of art:

works are as naturally present as things. The picture hangs on the wall like a hunting weapon or a hat. A painting – for example, Van Gogh’s portrayal of a pair of peasant shoes – travels from one exhibition to another. Works are shipped like coal from the Ruhr or logs from the Black Forest. During the war Hölderlin’s hymns were packed in the soldier’s knapsack along with the cleaning equipment. Beethoven’s quartets lie in the publisher’s storeroom like potatoes in a cellar (p.3).

The “thingly” character of the work of art is also apparent in dance, the body in dance is subjected to the Laws of Gravity like a sack of apples. Yet, unlike those “things” Heidegger mentions – the hat, the logs from the black forest etc. – a work of art is not exhausted in its thingliness. In Heideggerian terms, a work of art is of a different being, it exists differently than those instrumental objects - “ready-to-hand” in Heidegger’s terminology - things we see and encounter through their usefulness, the hat for wearing and the handle to open the door. In a piece of equipment, the material tends to disappear in its utility and serviceability: no one thinks about the steel when the knife cuts well or the axe is effective. The material is all the more

suitable the more it disappears into the equipment-Being of the equipment.

However, this is not what happens with a work of art. The sculptor may use stone in the same way in which the mason may use it, Heidegger claims, yet “the sculptor does not use it up. The painter, too, uses colors like every craftsman: yet here, too, the colors are not used up, but rather begin to shine forth” [...] “rock comes to bear, metals come to shine and glimmer, colors come to glow, tones begin to sound and words to speak” (p.32).

The same could be applied to dance. In our everyday life, we tend not to notice our body since it disappears into its usefulness, so to speak, it carries us from one place to the other, we dress it, nourish it, use it for exercise, look at it in the mirror but we hardly ever see it; dance makes the body visible, shine and glimmer, through movements that are not instrumental, movements which serve no external purpose, making patent its visibility.

To conclude, the consideration of dance through an aesthetic prism is a task which requires acknowledging the uniqueness of the medium. Aesthetic thought which was conceived with an eye to other types of objects is not irrelevant to an aesthetics of dance however certain theoretical modifications required, specifically taking into consideration the problematization of the body.

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