# DANCE, RHYTHM, AND SOCIAL SPACE

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ABSTRACT. Does contemporary phenomenology envision movement in space as a displacement from a point A to a point B? Is there something more at stake in the movement of our bodies, that cannot be reduced to this type of displacement? What happens when several bodies move together, like in dance practices of all kinds? The paper questions the role of repetitive movements in the institution of places we inhabit and the importance of the places we find ourselves to be for the way we move in space. Starting from the philosophical reflections on the Museum of Dance initiated by the French choreograph Boris Charmatz and through analysis of the American choreograph Wendy Woodson's work, the paper aims to shed light on the double dimension of repetitive movements, as they install us in space and as they alienate us from ourselves. The purpose of the paper is to reflect on a phenomenology of rhythm that helps articulate an aesthetic perspective on movement entailing social and political incidences.

**Keywords**: movement, body, space, dance, aesthetics

**RÉSUMÉ.** La phénoménologie contemporaine envisage-t-elle le mouvement dans l'espace comme un déplacement d'un point de l'espace vers l'autre ? Y a-t-il autre chose qui se joue dans le mouvement de notre corps, qui ne relève pas de ce type de déplacement? A partir des réflexions développées autour du Musée de la dance du chorégraphe français Boris Charmatz et du travail de la chorégraphe américaine Wendy Woodson, nous interrogerons le rôle des mouvements répétitifs dans la constitution des lieux que nous fréquentons, ainsi que l'incidence de ces lieux sur notre manière de nous mouvoir. En prenant appui sur la phénoménologie esthétique de Henri Maldiney, nous en mettrons en évidence, dans un deuxième temps, la dimension rythmique. Notre intention est de souligner la dimension sociale et politique des mouvements que nous effectuons dans l'espace, par-delà (et à travers) leur dimension esthétique.

Mots-clés: mouvement, corps, espace, danse, esthétique

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### 1. Introduction: A Museum of Dance

I was given the opportunity of a first contact with the idea of a museum of dance through an event organized in October 2018 at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. Taking as a starting point the evidence that « something happens when everybody moves », the organizers of this event envisioned gathering dancers and visitors in performances whose objective was to present dance as a social ritual we can all observe and recreate together, as a mode of resistance to the ongoing social norms and as enacted embodiment of an aspiration constantly migrating from the individual to the collective. The possibility of such a migration – which is differently challenged in each culture – turned out to be at the heart of this dance experiment.

The project of a museum of dance is continuing the work started by the French choreographer Boris Charmatz, first at Rennes, in France, where his company is based, then in London and New York City, where dance performances were presented as a "nomad museum" that can be transported pretty everywhere, giving rise each time to unique gatherings of people. The only condition for such a museum to exist is to be performed with one's own body in a public space. Boris Charmatz describes dance as a "mental space" that can be invested by everyone, open for inhabitation to all those who enter it, who can therefore modify it and transfer it as they wish. That is to say that rather than determining itself as a specific practice or as a minority art, dance is a way to deal with spatiality that can be transformed in unpredictable ways by all those who take part to it.

An example of a similar attempt to bring dance into public spaces can be found in the film Wim Wenders made on the work of the German choreographer Pina Bausch, where one can see dancers from the Wuppertal Tanz Theater performing in the streets of Wuppertal, in an open field or in an abandoned factory. But in Charmatz' work, dance is not only to be displaced from theater scenes to open spaces such as natural sites or urban environment. Dance is to be performed together with those who pass by, involving them all in an unexpected manner, passively or actively. The focus here is not so much on changing the background of the dance performance as it is on its effects on those who are exposed to it.

At the core of the museum of dance, one finds the body understood as source of movement and sensitive impression, open to unforeseen ways of feeling and self-exposure. In interviews, Charmatz describes dance as a *vehicle*, as a medium that allows a direct access to bodily movement, wherever it is performed, indulging a change of perspective on the way our presence is offered to others and on the way we perceive their presence as well. This change of perspective is needed because this access is usually hindered by the social practices we are

engaged in, including bodily habits that inhibit sharing movement and mutual exposure, as well as they inhibit the very possibility of questioning the way we move and interact. As a consequence, dance is understood and practiced as a means for revealing the social alienation we are all caught in, inviting each participant to seek a way out of it through new bodily interactions.

How can dance contribute to a critical approach of social alienation? In Charmatz's view, dance is a medium that allows a permeability of bodies in a world in which we are more and more efficiently separated from each other and isolated from the collective, "only some encounters being as signs from a life that is more intense, that has not been really lived"<sup>2</sup>. With Charmatz' words, "dance allows us to question what we are doing together in a public space"<sup>3</sup>. In order to provide the opportunity of this questioning, the museum of dance exposes living gestures on which the dancers are continually working, gestures to which the spectators can join freely, becoming performers themselves. The place of this volatile museum is each time different in order to constantly recreate the relationship with a an audience that is never the same. This relationship thus appears to depend not only on the gestures that are actively performed but also on the multiple passivities involved. Sleep, hypnotic states of mind, daydreaming, inattentiveness are examples of such passive participations to dance, enlarging the sphere of meaning conferred to what Charmatz calls "the mental space"<sup>4</sup>.

In the following, I would like to explore this idea of a mental space that can be reconfigured through dance. This paper aims at opening a philosophical reflection on the conditions of possibility of dancing spaces understood as opportunities to modify public spaces, by exploring the experience of repeating everyday gestures in such a way that they become objects of a sustained attention and reflection on the movements we *usually* make together. Transferring dance movements from stage to public squares and to streets opens the possibility of such an attention and reflection, to which phenomenology is invited to contribute with its own descriptions and understanding. Moreover, the idea I would like to explore is that the repetition at stake in dancing is reproducing the repetition of our habitual gestures, making them visible in a way that leaves room for critical inquiry and participative creativity.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Guy Debord, "Critique de la séparation" in *Oeuvres*, Gallimard/Quarto, 2006, p. 545 (my translation).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Cf. October 2016 interview for the French television (minute 2:45) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ua0653yerR4&t=9s. See also the presentation of the Tate Museum of Dance, May 2015: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ixN B-STVU&t=37s

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ua0653yerR4&t=9s (minute 4:47-4:49))

I will start with a phenomenological analysis of bodily rhythm understood as core of our sense of spatiality and as a tool for social connection. In the next section, I will explore the relationship between attention and repetition understood as components of social exchange, as well as the double nature of the repetition involved in social reproduction. I will end with a reflection on the possibility of an archive of gestures whose aim is to exhume the unicity of the performative movements that create a social space.

# 2. Rhythm as Origin of Space

By inviting new acts of mutual perception and of self-perception, the museum of dance functions as a temporary archive of movements meant to impact our everyday interactions. From repeated bodily movements shared by a small group of people to large groups of people making different movements<sup>5</sup>, the purpose of such a nomad dance archive is to be exposed, observed and carried over through practices and reflections that can possibly change our lives and our modes of thinking. Our hypothesis in the following analysis is that unforeseeable spatial change is constantly made possible by the fact that, in their very own ways, all living bodies dance when they meet other bodies – without necessarily being aware of the possibilities opened and expressed by their dance.

As Nicolas Abraham showed in his phenomenology of rhythm<sup>6</sup>, a consciousness becomes itself rhythmizing when it is able to anticipate a recurrence in its essential mode. But dance is not only a matter of anticipation – it is mainly a matter of encounter with the others and with our own body, when it is reflecting on the possibilities of its spatial movement. In order to understand the way in which this encounter is operated, a further inquiry into the genesis of rhythm is required. In his 1967 text, "The Aesthetics of Rhythms", Henri Maldiney describes rhythm as a movement that orients our experience of space<sup>7</sup>, being constantly originated and renewed by the pulsations of our heart and by our breathing. The inspirations and the expirations guiding the pencil of the Chinese masters in their practice of painting and of Japanese masters of calligraphy show the effectiveness of a bodily blow which is reflected as soon as it is expressed, inscribing itself in space like a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> As for example in Boris Charmatz' creation "Dix-mille gestes" during which a large group of dancers performs ten thousand gestures that are all different from each other, the rule being that nobody would do the same gesture in the same time.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> See N. Abraham, *Rhythms. On the Work, Translation, and Psychoanalysis*, Collected and presented by N. T. Rand and M. Torok, Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 77.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> H. Maldiney, "L'esthétique des rythmes" (1967) in Id., *Regard, parole, espace*, L'âge d'homme, 1973, p. 147-172.

dance. More profoundly hidden in the body, the systoles and the diastoles of our heart are miraculously constant venues and retreats through which we encounter the world spatially. Following Maldiney, the alternation of systoles and diastoles is grounded in the "critical moment" of their imminent separation — whose prolonged spacing would mean we are dead. A phenomenological investigation on the significance of this critical moment in which rhythm is rooted allows us to move from immediate sensitive certainty toward a wider truth of our experience. In this perspective, the rhythmicity of our movements reminds us that being alive is a matter of a continuous survival whose durability is never guaranteed.

How do we step from intimate certainty to a truth that can be shared and transmitted further? One way to answer this Hegelian question is to explore the register of visible creations of art, in their strive to decant being from non-being – and, inversely, non-being from being. Meditating on this strive in his film Sunless (1983), Chris Marker evokes the moment when "poetry will be made by everyone" as related to "the handwriting each of us will use to compose their own list of things that quicken the heart (des choses qui font battre le coeur) – to offer or to erase"9. The possibility of the museum of dance seems to stand between this offer and this erasure of everyone's very own list of things that quicken the heart, as something graciously given together with the specter of its disappearing. In this sense, dance can be compared to the handwriting each of us would be using in critical moments of separation – from ourselves and from the other – , in order to catch what matters the most, in order to obstinately list those things that are increasing the beat of one's heart. More precisely, dance is catching the evanescent link between bodies in space, recreating space as the site of an encounter that matters the most, when everything else would be lost.

Referring to clinical (psychiatric) cases of those for which moving in space is a challenge and a perilous adventure<sup>10</sup>, Henri Maldiney analyzes bodily rhythm as an organization principle for our most basic sense of space. Expanded in paintings<sup>11</sup> and inhibited in depression and melancholia, spatiality appears to be configured *through* our bodily movements instead of simply containing them or preceding them. Rather than a container, space is a dynamic horizon continuously emerging from our movements, as a limit that protects and sustains them in their search of connection with other movements carried by other bodies. The structure of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165 sq.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JamGQOhCe k

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> See H. Maldiney "L'existence en question dans la dépression et la mélancolie" in *Penser l'homme et la folie*, Millon, 1991, pp. 83-115.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> See also H. Maldiney *Ouvrir le rien. L'art nu*, Encre Marine, 2010.

horizon brought to light by Husserlian analysis<sup>12</sup> is described by Maldiney as sustaining bodily perception and movement in their operativity, becoming visible only when it is lacking – as in depressive or melancholic positions in which suddenly one cannot move by fear to fail in those sides of their perception where the horizon has, as it were, withdrawn.

In the light of these phenomenological descriptions, we are now better equipped to answer our initial question: "How can dance contribute to a critical approach of social alienation?" Following Maldiney's clinical observations, dance could be seen as a way to restore fragmented and missing horizons of our experience through collective movement. When the horizon is lacking in one's depressive fragile positioning, that would mean that other bodies would "hold the world" for them, creating space in which it is possible to move together. Rather than playing as random variations of actual movements, the possibilities exposed in dancing would then have as a consequence original ways of social gathering. By enhancing mutual sensitivity, they would function as mediums of desire and curiosity, as vehicles for transference and solidarity.

When they are brought to our awareness, the movements we initiate in the proximity of other people provide opportunities to question the way we participate to social relationships in particular and to public space in general. Dance performances can then be seen as ways to raise both mutual awareness and self-awareness to bodily possibilities through which social change is introduced and sustained toward increased solidarity and mutual support. In the following section, I will explore the conditions of possibility and impossibility of this social change.

### 3. Attention and Repetition

When considered in its multiple social dimensions, the movement of a living body is subject to contemplation and to contamination – which brings forth the question of how dance performances can effectively transform public spaces, with their implicit and their explicit rules of gathering and separation. How can dance modify the invisible frontiers and the build-in boundaries mapping our public space and our mental spaces? The hypothesis I would like to examine is that, more than simply affecting those who happen to pass in a given public space, dance is meant to work on possibilities of gathering that were not seen before dancing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> See our paper "The Relation between Space and Imagination in Husserl's Phenomenology" in the *International Yearbook for Hermeneutics*, 2015, pp. 104-115.

started. It is so because rather than being a consequence of overthought possibilities, bodily movement is itself the condition of possibility for an alternative sociality, less subject to separation and more open to unprecedented connections.

In this regard, dance seems to function as an alternative to touch: repeating the same movements together, those who dance create connections that are meant to last beyond their performance, in the bodily memory and imagination of those who danced. In the same way in which professional dancers remember the set of movements composing a sequence of their performance, being able therefore to perform it again and again, at another scale (but with the same insistence) all dancers would remember their gestures and repeat them in other contexts, as possibilities of movement inscribed in their bodies. A dynamic archive is thus created from which fragments can always be brought to light, developed and cultivated as new social rituals.

The museum of dance is composed by an ensemble of gestures offered to the view of those who happen to pass in public spaces of all sorts. In order to be practiced in such gracious ways, these gestures are worked on and carried by bodies who dance, creating a work of art whose presence is temporary but nevertheless lasting, fragile yet surprisingly perennial. The reason for which dance can be experienced as a museum is that despite the fugacity of the gestures engaged in such a performance, something is obstinately "holding on" in the dancing bodies, insisting and persisting beyond their momentary show. Through movements repeated by several persons present in a space, something that lasts is introduced in the temporality of the bodies participating at the performance, inviting them to transgress their individual boundaries and to explore their mutual porosity. In their unique temporality, they are also invited to carry the dance with them and beyond themselves, toward other horizons of their experience to come and toward different spaces where dance might neither be expected nor welcomed.

Therefore, the purpose of the museum of dance goes beyond a mere contribution to common aesthetics – its purpose is to draw a *political attention*<sup>13</sup> to our own presence in public spaces and to the presence of others, and eventually to the way co-presence of moving and dancing is enacted together. In his 1996 creation focusing on attention (*Aatt-enen-tionon*), Boris Charmatz is isolating three dancers on three different layers of a tour, in such a way that they cannot touch or see each other. Nevertheless, when watching the dance performance, their solitary movements appear to create an ensemble. What this creation seems

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> See N. Grandjean and A. Loute (dir.) *Valeurs de l'attention. Perspectives éthiques, politiques et épistémologiques,* Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2019.

to suggest is that engaging with movement is already in itself the source of a connection that is affirmed beyond visible and invisible frontiers. Moreover, dancing allows a permeability of bodies, transgressing their individual confinement and their social disconnection.

Three dimensions of experience seem to be required in order for such a political attention to emerge (1) observing groups of people, (2) dancing or moving by ourselves, and (3) reflecting on the movements we do together, despite the numerous aspects of our life what separate us. Surprisingly enough, these three dimensions echo the position adopted by those who engage in a phenomenological description, being (1) actively and passively immersed in their everyday life, (2) consciously bestowing the meaning providing liveliness to this life, and (3) the transcendental spectator reflecting on this intentional constitution of meaning<sup>14</sup>. But if phenomenologists are to be considered as dancers in their own way, their dance is happening in a spatiality that deserves further examination.

Having worked for several years on dance gestures and collaborating with Boris Charmatz on his project of a museum of dance, Romain Bigé is exploring<sup>15</sup> phenomenological perspectives in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Erwin Straus and Jan Patočka, in order to understand the way in which dance can transform phenomenological accounts of bodily movements and space. The main idea one can find in Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Erwin Straus is that subjective movements become possible as emerging from the depth of the horizon on the background of which they are projected. In order for a subject to be considered as moving, the world has to be profound — and it is maybe because of the world being profound, and even abyssal, that we move ourselves *toward* it and not only *into* it. This is to stress what we stated earlier with Maldiney, that rather than being a container, space is a dimension of our presence to the world, continuously shaped and modified by our movements. But Bigé's purpose goes further than that, by reflecting on movement as being different from mere displacement — this difference being the point on which dance "has something to teach to phenomenology".

In order to explain what is at stake in the difference between movement and displacement, Bigé is referring to the 2012 work of the American choreographer Wendy Woodson "(re)place". In this creation, gestures invented by the five dancers present on scene are reproduced by all the others, and repeated in such a way that they become anonymous. The performance is a mediation on the way in which gestures of each of us are continuously borrowed by others and disseminated in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> See Eugen Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation: The Idea of a Transcendental Theory of Method*, Indiana University Press, 1995.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Romain Bigé "Ce que la phénoménologie peut apprendre de la dance. Straus, Merleau-Ponty, Patocka" in Recherche en Danse <en ligne>, 5, 2016: https://journals.openedition.org/danse/1394#tocto2n6

social interactions, dissolving our ownership on them and making them available for unpredictable modifications. The consequence of such a continuous transfer of gestures is the possible substitution of each subject with another – based on the alienation of their unicity and of their ownership on their modes of productivity and social functioning. As a result of this social alienation, in order to achieve a task, several individuals would fit, becoming all replaceable if they work in the same space and time. This means that places can render individuals replaceable, even if each body constitutes the place it occupies in its own manner, by its way of moving, by its habits and its rituals. This is also to say that despite of the fact that we create the space through movement – as we showed with Maldiney –, space is also the oppressing dimension resulting from gatherings of bodies, provided that they accomplish the same gestures, again and again. More precisely, producing a gesture in the social sphere is always the object of a possible reproduction through which ownership and unicity are negated. In the Marxist perspective that is implicit here, this reproduction of human activity is called reification<sup>16</sup>.

Drawing upon the contradiction lying in the heart of every repetition of gestures, Wendy Woodson works on different meanings of repetition, opposing to the repetition that reifies a repetition that opens an unpredictable future for social interaction. In order to understand how the oppressive repetition aligning all bodies as if they were the same operates, another repetition has to be made visible, through which we install ourselves in space and transform it in our own way. In the first sequence of *(re)place* one can hear: "Oh for God's sake you're so predictable. // I thought you'd never say it. // What? // That I'm predictable, that you can depend on me, // you can count on me to do the same thing, over and over // and I can hold down the place, that's what I do best, // yes, but... // Someone else can do it just as well" 17.

Replacing *versus* "holding down the place"— when analyzing this tension, Romain Bigé opposes the "identical reiteration" (*réitération à l'identique*) such as a task anyone can mimic, reifying our gestures, to a "fundamental iteration" (*itération fondamentale*) through which we repeat our initial movement *toward* (more) space. This latter never entails the repetition of the "same", since what is repeated is a movement of commencement that configures the space as a whole. As a consequence of this analysis, mere reproduction ("identical reiteration") and recommencing ("fundamental iteration") seem to be the two poles of repetition dance is exploring, orienting us from reifying movements toward liberating movements that recreate space each time anew.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> See Lucien Goldmann, "La Réification" in *Recherches dialectiques*, Gallimard/nrf, 1959, pp. 64-106.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Cf. Romain Bigé, "Ce que la phénoménologie peut apprendre de la dance", art. cit., p. 36, footnote 43.

## 4. The Repetition of the Unique: Nostalgia and Grace

In order to better understand the fundamental iteration toward which we are oriented when we dance together, I will conclude by referring to an excerpt of Smoke, the 1995 film by Wyne Wang and Paul Auster, where Harvey Keitel plays the role of Auggie, the owner of a small tobacco shop in Brooklyn who shows to one of his clients his album of nearly 4000 photos, all taken at the same time of the day, every day, at the same place: at the corner of his tobacco shop. Looking at the photos is at the beginning boring for his client, who sees no important difference between them ("they are all the same"). But the contemplation of this repetitive pictures changes its significance all of the sudden when he recognizes on one of them his wife Ellen who died several years ago. The picture shows his wife passing in the street in her way to work: a moment like any other at the beginning of an ordinary day. But in the light of her loss, being able to revisit that moment when looking at the picture allows her partner to see a small fragment of her life revived, as if it were present, as if she were still alive. The picture of Ellen passing in front of the tobacco shop on her way to work becomes then a precious archive preserving that ordinary movement beyond her loss. Moreover, Ellen's disappearance confers to the archive of her ordinary gestures its sublime value, summarized by her partner while looking at the picture: "nicely gone".

The impressive archive of what happens at the same moment of the day, every day, at the same place is what Auggie considers as being his life's work, which is actually his true work hidden behind his daily work in the tobacco shop. The commonplace character of this museum of movements becomes extraordinary in the light of the obstinate gesture executing the same ritual of photographing a place every day, during several years. The only ambition of this enterprise is the constitution of an archive of day-to-day living in a particular place — the kind of place nobody would bother to photograph or even to notice as having something of its own. Resulting from the repetition of the same gesture of catching an instant of the movement happening spontaneously in the same (otherwise) ordinary place, this archive gains its value in time, when those ordinary moments have been forgotten, when the place has changed, when people have disappeared.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that such an obstinate willingness to archive ordinary gestures is motivated by pure nostalgia. Auggie's art is not meant to keep a record of traces nor to cultivate attachment to past. Rather, as noticed by Constantin Constantius in his meditations on true repetition, it aims at cultivating a repetition that is "the daily bread that satisfies with blessing" <sup>18</sup>:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Constantin Constantius [Sören Kierkegaard], Repetition in Sören Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling. Repetition, Ed. H. V. Hong and E. V. Hong (Kierkegaard's Writings VI), Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 132.

Indeed, what would life be if there were no repetition? Who could want to be a tablet on which time writes something new every instant or to be a memorial volume of the past? Who could want to be susceptible to every fleeting thing, the novel, which always enervatingly diverts the soul anew? If God himself had not willed repetition, the world would not have come into existence. Either he would have followed the superficial plans of hope or he would have retracted everything and preserved it in recollection. This he did not do. Therefore, the world continues, and it continues because it is a repetition. Repetition—that is actuality and the earnestness of existence. 19

Far from replacing each other, the different profiles of those who pass in front of the Auggie's camera are preserved in their unicity – be them dead or still alive, unknown people whose existence is perceived as indifferent or very dear ones, whose presence is cherished uppermost. As they float in the collective memory of the living and in Auggie's archive of daily gestures, their unicity seems to be made of grace, as if they were dancing, happy to be where they are, together with everyone else.

This reflection on the unique value of Auggie's archive sheds light on the idea of a museum of dance I started with, and more specifically on Romain Bigé's phenomenological thesis of a fundamental iteration hidden in the heart of every alienating repetition. Despite its apparent absurdity, such an archive of everyday gestures is a means to reach the unicity of every movement that opens a space that is shared, stressing in the same time its fragility and its ephemeral character. Transmitted through nomad museums and through social rituals of all sorts, dance is nothing else than such an archive itself, to be carried and exposed over and over again, in order to bring us close to each other and back to ourselves.

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