

EDYTA KUZIAN

## CONTEMPORARY DANCE AS MODERNIST ART

Dance has a very broad spectrum of styles and uses. In this paper, I consider dance as a kind of art performance, which uses the body as its distinctive medium. My focus is on which dance genres best realize the ambition of treating the body as its central medium.

My central claim is that contemporary dance radically breaks away from the other forms of dance and makes ordinary movements visible. In this respect, I also argue, only contemporary dance is fully *modernist*, in something like Clement Greenberg's sense: it makes explicit the medium-specific essence of dance as an artform, doing what only dance can do—revealing the body in movement. To be sure, other forms of dance, from classical to modern, also use the body in their performances; however, I argue that only contemporary dance draws self-consciously on the embodied nature of the dancer in a modernist sense. If the artistic medium of dance—the body in movement—has inherent aesthetic qualities, then the job of dance aesthetics is to provide a framework for clarifying the medium-specific elements and limits of dance.

My overall argument has two steps. I first clarify the notion of modernism. Second, I argue that for dance to be a modernist art, it must consider the moving body as an art in itself. To support this idea, I offer a reading of the history of dance, which shows that its developments and revolutions successively refine the appreciation of bodily movement alone as the focus of its practice. As I will show, this development culminates with contemporary dance.

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## 1. MODERNISM

Let me start by saying how I understand the modernism. I use Clement Greenberg's account of modernism in art, according to which art is modernist in the sense of being immanently self-critical. This idea can be illustrated by Greenberg's discussion of the history of painting.

The Old Masters of the Renaissance, Greenberg tells us, "had dissembled the medium [the flatness, or two-dimensionality of canvas], using art to conceal art" (GREENBERG 1961, 3). Pre-modernist painters' approach to painting came from without, in their way of imposing three-dimensionality onto the flat surface. Modernist painters conversely saw the flatness of the medium as a challenge distinctive of painting, not a limitation of it. By remaining faithful to and reflecting on the nature of the medium, they use "art to call attention to art" (GREENBERG 1961, 3). The way art can achieve an immanent, modernist, and self-critical attitude is through the use of its distinctive medium, which constitutes the artwork. We can use Greenberg's discussion of the history of painting as a guide to what would it mean for dance to be modernist. He says,

It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered 'pure,' and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. 'Purity' meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance. Realistic, illusionist art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting — the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment — were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Modernist painting has come to regard these same limitations as positive factors that are to be acknowledged openly. (GREENBERG 1961, 5–6)

As noted by Greenberg in this passage, the question of purity in modernist art is essential, and this purity in art is determined by its medium, which grants art its independence from being used as a means only. I take it that the originality of the work of art in Greenberg's sense is that the medium must be free of instrumental use. The medium becomes the work of art itself, the focus of our aesthetic judgment.

The philosophical challenge is understanding the meaning of modernism for dance. As I will now show, contemporary dance is the closest to modernist art because our focus is on the body itself as its constituting medium that brings dance art into existence. Because dance as an art includes many forms (e.g., pantomime, ballet, contemporary dance, and so on), in the following section, I justify which forms of dance free the body of its instrumental use. The general idea is that the body is treated instrumentally when it is used for the purposes of story-telling, of showing its athleticism, or of exhibiting social conventions. There is a parallel here between dance and Greenberg's idea regarding the Old Masters, who, by imposing standards on artistic medium, miss the aesthetic specificity of the medium itself. Dance forms that use the body in order to express something other than the body conceal the body from itself as an aesthetic medium. In order for dance to be an independent art in a modernist sense, it must be vulnerable to an immanent self-criticism: this self-criticism is to take the body on its own terms and use its limitations to bring a modernist work of art into existence.

## 2. FORMS OF DANCE, WHICH USE THE BODY AS ITS DISTINCT MEDIUM

I now turn to examine which forms of dance qualify as modernist in Greenberg's sense. Treating dance as a modernist art means that the artistic medium is artful on its own terms. If we merely use it as a means to express other independent meaning, we will miss the aesthetic specificity of the medium itself. We must examine the dancing body as art in itself. The general idea I develop here requires a way of understanding the body independently of its use in story-telling, or from exhibitions of athleticism, or social conventions. These all involve treating the body instrumentally rather than as a medium that is artful on its own terms.

There are many dance genres, such as ritual dance, classical ballet, modern dance, and contemporary dance. But not all dance genres qualify to be modernist art. In each of these genres, the weight of our aesthetic judging falls on different aspects of the moving body. In ritual dance, we judge the performance by looking at whether the narrative of the dance successfully communicates cultural and religious content. Classical dance aims at grace and precision of an acrobatic quality for the purpose of storytelling. The emphasis of our judging is placed on the dancers' technique and the suit-

ability of the choreography to the narrative. In modern dance, we also appreciate the dancers' technique and the choreography, but our focus is on the human bodies stripped of excessive costume and décor. Modern dance is a transitional form between classical and contemporary dance. On the one hand, it retains both narration and an emphasis on rigorous technique. On the other, the emphasis is as much on bodily limitation as it is on bodily grace. Finally, in contemporary dance, our aesthetic judgment is attentive to the body of the dancer and her or his expressive gestures. Contemporary dance aestheticises our everyday movement. There is no story to be told, no need for rigorous classical technique, and no elaborate costume, so as to avoid distracting from the bodily movements of the dancer. While they all aspire to exhibit the beauty of dancing bodies, most of them limit the body's expressivity by subordinating it to aesthetic and instrumental ends, such as storytelling. In this way, some of these forms of dance have an instrumental approach to the body because they draw our aesthetic appreciation to a story or a play that the body is supposed to communicate.

We can better see these limitations of each dance genre by looking briefly at the history and aims of each.

#### A. CLASSICAL DANCE

Let me begin clarifying classical dance by looking at the features which defined it in Europe. The origins of the classical dance in the Western world are derived from ballet de cour, which was performed in the 16th and 17th centuries at courts in Italy and France. This early form of ballet was part of the social practices of establishing formal hierarchies and governed social relations. The king had the central role in the dance, while other courtiers, depending on their social rank, were accordingly placed in the court choreography (HOMANS 2010, 34). Higher ranks danced closer to the monarch, lower ranks further away. By the end of 17th century in France, Louis XIV founded the first Royal Academy of Dance and ordered his first ballet master, Pierre Beauchamps, to formalize dance steps by "making dance understood on paper" (HOMANS 2010, 19). Beauchamps developed the five fundamental feet positions of ballet that are used in dance training today. These positions are as follows. In the first position, the heels are touching, and the feet are rotated open at 180 degree angle and point in opposite directions. In the second, still in the same open line of 180 degree line, the feet are spread apart at the approximate length of the hips. In the third position, one of the feet is placed in front of the other foot. The fourth

position is similar to the third position but here the heels are not touching. The feet are spread either in parallel or open position. The distribution of the weight is even on both feet. The fifth position is the most demanding of the five basic positions. It requires strong rotation of the hips in order to allow for the heel of one foot to align with the toe of the other.

There are other, more sophisticated and impressive formal poses in ballet that are still universally taught to ballet dancers. Among some of the most spectacular ones are the arabesque (“in Arabic style”). In the arabesque, the dancer is standing on one leg either in *pointe* or *half pointe* (lowered foot or *demi-pointe*), while her upper torso stretches up and the back leg extends in a turnout, as if she was wrapping her body with the back leg. As well, the pose called ‘the *grande jetés*’ is another paradigmatic classical pose, one often featured on the cover of a dance critique of a classical ballet. In this pose, a dancer makes a long horizontal jump, which begins with springing from one foot, splitting her legs in mid-air, and landing on her other foot. I only use a couple of ballet poses to draw attention to their complexity and the athleticism that is required to perform them masterfully in the air.

While the athleticism is one aspect of being able to perform classical ballet, another important aspect of this form of dance is the story that the dancers are supposed to express with their bodies. This dramaturgy occupies a central place in ballet.

#### (i.) August Bournonville

There is a continuity in two core assumptions of classical ballet from its early court stages to its more sophisticated forms in early Romanticism (*La Sylphide*, premiered in 1836), at the turn of the 20th century (*Swan Lake* premiered in 1877, *The Sleeping Beauty* premiered in 1890, and *The Nutcracker* premiered in 1892), to more recent interpretations of classical ballet by George Balanchine. The first assumption is the human body can be trained in a precise and formal way; an assumption embodied in the formalization of ballet postures. The second is that by formalizing human movement we can express through a unified language of bodily gestures stories of love, betrayal, and other dramatic themes. In *La Sylphide*, James, a bachelor who is on the eve of his wedding, falls in love with a nymph (Sylph), who kisses him during his sleep and disappears. James, in desperate search for the nymph (Sylph), betrays his mortal wife-to-be, Effie, and captures the Sylph, who shortly after being in James’ captivity dies. As Alastair Macaulay says,

“‘*La Sylphide*,’ with its ethereal [ETHERIAL] heroine dancing on point and its human hero forever trying to grasp her” (MACAULAY 2009). There is definitely a good moral to be learned from *Le Sylphide*: better a small fish than an empty dish, but as Macaulay suggests in his review of *Le Sylphide*, the aesthetic focus is the bodily acrobatics. “On Monday night Natalia Osipova showed her gazellelike elevation as the Sylphide, floating in jump after jump. The cabrioles, in which she beat her legs together behind her in the air, were especially miraculous, and the feathery circlings of one foot (in ronds de jambe sautés) made the air quiver” (MACAULAY 2009). On Macaulay’s reading of ballet, which is characteristic of most of his dance reviews for the New York Times, what is judged in ballet is how the story is told by the movements of the dancers, the adequacy of how dancers represent the characters in the story, and how have they perfected their ballet technique.

(ii.) Vaclav Nijinsky

*Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, or *The Nutcracker*, the prototypes of classical ballet, make the same use of the moving body trained according to rigid rules of ballet for story-telling purposes.

However, it is notable that at the turn of the 20th century, when standards of the Romantic ballets were mastered, Vaclav Nijinsky’s premiere of *The Rite of Spring* took place in May 1913, and it challenged the formality of ballet.

In his review of Nijinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* written in November 1913, Jacques Rivière wrote that this dance performance, staged for the first time in May 1913 (and only staged eight more times), was bold and innovative in the way it broke away from the classical ballet. Rivière says,

The great innovation of *The Rite of Spring* is the absence of all the “trimmings.” Here is a work that is absolutely pure. Cold and harsh, if you will, but without any glaze to mar its inherent brilliance, without any artifices to rearrange or distort its contours. This is not a “work of art”. With all the usual little contrivances. Nothing is blurred, nothing obscured by shadows; there is no veiling or poetic mellowing, no trace of aesthetic effect. The work is presented whole and in its natural state; the parts are set before us completely raw, without anything that will aid in their digestion; everything is open, intact, clear, and coarse” (RIVIÈRE [1913] 2008, 900).

Rivière goes on to claim that the innovation of this choreography, even though at the height of ballet, is that “[i]t no longer has any ties to the

classical ballet, [it is] rebelling against it” (RIVIÈRE [1913] 2008, 900). What are the standards of classical ballet that Nijinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* rebelled against?

(iii.) George Balanchine

In order to answer this question, I would consider a more recent ballet by George Balanchine, *Agon*,<sup>1</sup> which premiered in 1957 to music composed by Igor Stravinsky. *Agon* is a ballet choreographed for 12 dancers (8 females and 4 males). The title of the dance suggests that is about an ancient competition or rivalry, but the ballet, according to Balanchine, is plot-less. Balanchine suggests that this work is—and by some, it is viewed as—the first modernist dance (MACAULAY 2007), that he can redefine ballet and strip from it the constraints of story-telling and dependence on formal movement concealed in excessive costumes. The dancers are dressed in minimal black and white costumes, as if Balanchine suggests his breaking away with rigid standards of ballet reveals as much bodily movement as possible. *Agon* is not aimed at striking spectacular poses, rather the poses are off balance and seem more dynamic. One of the most famous moments of *Agon* is the *pas de deux*, which in 1957 was performed by an inter-racial duet of Arthur Mitchell and Diana Adams. In this *pas de deux*, Mitchell manipulates the limbs of his partner, as if she were a mannequin. Even though there is no story told by the dance itself, the use of a black male dancer on a major ballet stage as equal among other dancers, and his moving the body of a female partner as if she were a doll, was as revolutionary as Nijinsky’s reinventing of the language of dance by freeing dancers’ gestures from the confines of the rigorous ballet training. Although Balanchine aspired to radically redefine ballet, with *Agon* being the most revolutionary, he cannot break away from the kind of movement imposed by the standards of ballet. The bodies of the dancers in his choreography are feather-light, malleable, and their jumps defy gravity. The bodies are highly trained and the way we evaluate their movement is by judging how they exhibit the rigorous classic technique.

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<sup>1</sup> *Agon*, Part I and Part II (cast of 12 dancers 1981 — Heather Watts, Mel Tomlinson (Both Pas de Deux Part II at 6:25 min), Daniel Duell, Renee Estopinal, Wilhelmina Frankfurt, Maria Calegari (Solo Part II at 3:37 min), Victor Castelli, Peter Frame, Helene Alexopoulos, Carole Divet, Linda Homek, and Catherine Morris). Choreography by George Balanchine, music by Igor Stravinsky.

Let me return to the question about what made Nijinsky's choreography so innovative. There are two reasons why his work is more successful than Balanchine's in redefining classical dance in a modernist direction

Nijinsky lets bodies move in their most natural way, without their needing to defy gravity in a ballet style movement. He thereby achieves a choreography in which the bodies are free in their movement, which are most natural movements of the body expressing fear and trembling. The feet of the dancers in *The Rite of Spring* are not pointed, their knees are shaking; they do not show us any impressive arabesques. Rather, as Joan Acocella remarks,

"The choreography was aggressively anti-balletic. The dancers stood hunched over, turned in. They shuddered; they stamped. In the words of Nijinsky's sister, Bronislava, they seemed "almost bestial." The audience reacted on cue, producing Paris's most cherished theatrical riot. The police had to be called. If that wasn't enough to ensure the ballet's notoriety, there was Nijinsky's personal story. He may have been the greatest ballet dancer of the last century. In any case, he was ballet's first modernist choreographer (ACOCELLA 2001).

By drawing our attention to how the bodies move, Nijinsky showed us that excessive ornaments stand in the way of our aesthetic appreciation of bodily movements

I agree with Acocella that, for these two reasons, Nijinsky can be seen as making the first steps toward modernism in the history of dance. However, even Nijinsky is still very much drawn to the idea of telling a story with the moving bodies, a pagan Slavic story about early spring sacrifice of a virgin who dances herself to death for gods to renew and make the earth fertile. Hence his medium—the dancer's body—is still ultimately subordinate to expressing something other than itself. In my view, in order to acknowledge dance as modernist, its medium, the dancing body must be treated on its own terms as a work of art and not a mere vehicle for telling a story or for exhibiting the body's athleticism and perfected technique. In this way classical ballet and other forms of dance have an instrumental approach to the body as its medium. The body in classical ballet is just like a mere brush to the masters of the golden Dutch age in painting.



## B. MODERN DANCE

### (i.) Martha Graham

Modern dance rebelled against classical dance, in particular the constraints of rigid ballet techniques that distorted human bodies: the 180 degree angle turn-outs, the weightless bodies fighting gravity to arrive at grand poses. Martha Graham was among the first modern choreographers to develop a technique that deliberately used gravity to break away from capturing movement in static poses. Her main aim was precisely to allow a kind of movement that would capture the body. The basic elements of her technique are ‘contraction-release,’ ‘shift of weight’ and ‘spirals’ that aim to explore the never-ceasing-to-stop movement in and of the body. ‘Contraction-release’ is the aliveness of the body through breath or birth; ‘shift of weight’ expresses the struggle with gravity and mortality; and ‘spirals’ point to the continuity of movement.<sup>2</sup> The genius of Graham’s technique is that bare foot dancers never arrive at poses, they strive to reach further, and the spiral stretch is endless.

Just as great cinematographic images need no dialogue, the aesthetic experience of dance brings words to mind. After one of the first shows of *Lamentation* (1930), a solo in which tragically obsessed body of a dancer stretches inside a tube of elastic fabric, as if it were stretching inside its own skin, a woman from the audience, who obviously had been crying, came to Martha Graham’s dressing room to express her gratitude and said that Martha will never know what she has done to her that night. That lady, as it turned out later, witnessed her nine-year-old son killed in front of her by a truck. She made every effort to cry for years, but it only became possible when she saw *Lamentation*. She said that she finally felt that grief was honorable and universal, and that she needed not to be ashamed of crying for her son. Graham, moved by this story, realized early in her choreographic career, that there is at least one person to whom you speak in the audience. The body in movement can be looked at as a physical phenomenon that is

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Kozel, a dancer, choreographer and writer in collaboration with Kitsou Dubois, who trained astronauts at the French National Centre for Space Research to adapt to weightlessness, experimented with the brilliant technique of spirals in zero-gravity space in a dance performance: *Ghosts and Astronauts* (London, 1997). Dubois’ findings were that “In weightlessness the spiral is total and infinite. It is the discovery of an extraordinary fluidity of movement...the revelation that everything in the body spirals. This truly becomes the mode of communication between internal space and external space.” KOZEL 2007, 112.

unitary and indivisible. Its movement can be traced by a single unbroken line, and it is one special totality, which is unified in space as an enduring and temporally continuous mass. To simplify, one could add Cunningham's distinction of how bodies move across the space: either up, straight or down. Whichever way, the elements of space and time are the intrinsic elements in dance and part of the very structure of the body.

### C. CONTEMPORARY DANCE AS MODERNIST ART

Contemporary dance is "a free-style mode of non-ballet dance." (COTON 1975, 152). This very broad definition suggested in the late 60's by Coton, the London critic of dance, captured the character of choreographies, which did not rigorously follow the standards of classical training in dance. I agree with Coton that what partly defines contemporary dance is its break with the standards of classical dance and development of new dance movements, but also I would like add to this account contemporary dance is a fully modernist art form. It is modernist in that it breaks away from dance performances that depend on external expressive resources, such as stories, and instead draws on the expressiveness of bodily movement itself. To illustrate this claim I will consider a short account of contemporary choreography of Trisha Brown.

#### (i.) Trisha Brown

Let's consider an excerpt of the recent piece by a contemporary choreographer Trisha Brown, *I'm going to toss my arms—if you catch them they're yours*.

Set to original music by Alvin Curran ("Toss and Find"), four women and four men are diagonally moving in front of large fans placed on the right side of the stage. The performers' bodies, dressed in loose costumes, are blown into motion independently of the musical score. One might expect that the bodies blown by these powerful fans would result in chaotic movements, especially when the dancers move as if they are unaware of other dancers on stage. Their eyes rarely meet, and yet, their bodies precisely know when to catch one another, preventing each other from falling. Even without communicating through glances, their bodies evolve into a well-coordinated assembly, their limbs having a life of their own. In their individual rhythms, they put each other's limbs in motion, they line up through

the space on stage. The bodies form momentary shapes and relationships with other bodies, and then vanish into another form.

The beauty of this work is in its transient dynamism. The dancers make ordinary movements, like walking and waving hands, to which we usually attribute goals. Yet their movements are non-goal oriented. There is no reason for which they move, and still their movements strike us as beautiful. In my view, one of the ways in which we let the beauty of the dancing bodies be communicated to us is at the moment when we look at their movements without any goal attribution. In this way we shift the focus of the ordinary, mostly invisible goal-oriented ways of moving to an aesthetic consideration of the movement. In this way, the contemporary dance aesthetic makes ordinary movement visible. Taking away the goal-orientedness of bodily movement aestheticises the body in motion in the same way that Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, by being exhibited in art museums, aestheticises ordinary objects. By removing the purposiveness implicit in the ordinary way we move, the choreographer evokes aesthetic responses. In this sense, I claim that contemporary dance shows that we can't begin to reflect on the body as the expressive medium unless we free it from understanding and organizing its movement in categories of goal-oriented activities. The point of the aesthetic bodily intentionality is that it we can appreciate the moving body as a work of art without having to consider the results of the goals for performance. The dancing body in movement is a work of art rather than merely an exhibition of expert performance.

To conclude, my focus in this paper has been to clarify the idea of a fully modernist dance form. On the view I defend, modernism is defined by immanent self-criticism and pursuit of the 'pure' medium-specific essence of an artform. My main claim has been that only contemporary dance fully and self-consciously achieves this aim, by making the body in movement itself the medium of dance. I showed how earlier elements of this ambition were present in developments of ballet and modern dance, but that the distinctive contribution of contemporary dance is to strip away story-telling and athleticism and in doing so, ends up revealing the beauty of ordinary movement.

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## Summary

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My central claim is that contemporary dance radically breaks away from the other forms of dance and makes ordinary movements visible. In this respect, I also argue, only contemporary dance is fully modernist, in something like Clement Greenberg's sense: it makes explicit the medium-specific essence of dance as an artform, doing what only dance can do—revealing the body in movement. To be sure, other forms of dance, from classical to modern, also use the body in their performances; however, I argue that only contemporary dance draws self-consciously on the embodied nature of the dancer in a modernist sense. If the artistic medium of dance – the body in movement—has inherent aesthetic qualities, then the job of dance aesthetics is to provide a framework for clarifying the medium-specific elements and limits of dance.

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**Keywords:** modernism; art; dance; Clement Greenberg; George Balanchine; Vaclav Nijinsky; August Bournonville; Martha Graham; Trisha Brown.

## TANIEC WSPÓŁCZESNY JAKO SZTUKA MODERNISTYCZNA

## Streszczenie

Taniec ma bardzo szerokie spektrum stylów i zastosowań. W tym artykule traktuję taniec jako rodzaj performansu artystycznego, który wykorzystuje ciało jako charakterystyczne medium. Skupiam się na tym, które gatunki taneczne najlepiej realizują ambicję traktowania ciała jako jego centralnego medium.

Moim głównym twierdzeniem jest, że taniec współczesny radykalnie odrywa się od innych form tańca i uwidacznia zwykle ruchy. Pod tym względem twierdzę również, że tylko taniec współczesny jest w pełni modernistyczny, w pewnym sensie, w rozumieniu Clementa Greenberga, ukazuje specyficzną dla medium istotę tańca jako formy sztuki, robiąc to, co potrafi tylko taniec — odsłaniając ciało w ruchu. Oczywiście inne formy tańca, od klasycznego po współczesny, również wykorzystują ciało w swoich performansach; twierdzę jednak, że tylko taniec współczesny świadomie odwołuje się do ucieleśnionej natury tancerza w modernistycznym sensie. Jeśli medium artystyczne tańca — ciało w ruchu — ma nieodłączne walory estetyczne, to zadaniem estetyki tańca jest zapewnienie ram do wyjaśnienia elementów i ograniczeń tańca specyficznych dla medium.

Mój ogólny wywód składa się z dwóch etapów. Najpierw wyjaśniam pojęcie modernizmu. Następnie stwierdzam, że aby taniec był sztuką modernistyczną, musi uważać poruszające się ciało za sztukę samą w sobie. Aby wesprzeć ten pomysł, proponuję przegląd historii tańca, która pokazuje, że jego rozwój i rewolucje sukcesywnie udoskonalają ocenę samego ruchu ciała jako przedmiotu jego praktyki. Pokazuję, że ów rozwój kończy się tańcem współczesnym.

*Przełożył Stanisław Sarek*

**Słowa kluczowe:** modernizm; sztuka; taniec; Clement Greenberg; George Balanchine; Vaclav Nijinsky; August Bournonville; Martha Graham; Trisha Brown.