

The Artistic Connotation and Expression Logic of Choreography Creation from the Perspective of Body Narrative

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Abstract: Choreography as a creative practice that produces meaning through the ordering of bodily movement in time and place is a different sort of story whose logic of expression cannot be adequately theorised within the frames worked out for language or literary narrative. This study addresses the logic of creative expression and the creative connotation of dance production from the perspective of body narrative. The choreographic body is not only a narrative subject, but also a narrative medium and a narrative text. This paper analyses four dimensions of body narrative in choreography, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, Mark Johnson's theory of embodied meaning and image schemata and Susan Leigh Foster's semiotics of choreographic representation. The pre-reflective kinaesthetic dimension, the image-schematic dimension, the compositional-structural dimension and the inter-corporeal dimension of performer-audience kinaesthetic empathy. In this paper I explore the logics of expression specific to the choreographic practice that choreographers employ to construct narratives that cannot be translated into verbal or visual equivalents. I analyse the Tanztheater of Pina Bausch and the deconstructive choreographic practice of William Forsythe, embodied metaphor, temporal folding, corporeal counterpoint, and spatial dramaturgy. The study then goes on to situate these logics of expression within the broader theoretical dilemma of how to account for non-verbal art-making as a legitimate and culturally distinctive mode of telling tales about the world.

Keywords: Body narrative; Choreography; Embodied cognition; Phenomenology; Merleau-Ponty; Image schema; Pina Bausch; William Forsythe; Kinesthetic empathy; Laban movement analysis.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and the Corporeal Turn

Since the early twenty-first century, the concept of body storytelling, the power of bodily movement to construct rather than merely convey narrative meaning, has developed as a fruitful point of confluence between dance studies, philosophy of mind, and narrative theory. The “corporeal turn” in humanistic scholarship (Shilling, Turner and others) has re-centred embodiment in social and cultural theory and opened up the analytical frameworks for the ways in which meaning is generated out of bodily practice, rather than imposed upon it from linguistic or cognitive superstructures. The first major articulation of this trend within dance studies was Susan Leigh Foster's *Reading Dancing* (1986), which used poststructuralist semiotics to study choreographic representation. This showed that dancing bodies construct rich, contextually particular meaning through representational conventions, expressive codes and kinaesthetic address, demanding theoretical scrutiny as sophisticated as that applied to literary narrative.

The theoretical implications of body story in choreography extend beyond the disciplinary concerns of dance studies. They pose fundamental questions in the philosophy of mind: is cognition essentially linguistic or does it involve non-conceptual, imagistic and kinaesthetic modes? And in aesthetics: is non-verbal art-making a distinct mode of world-disclosure with its own expressive logic or is it ultimately reducible to the narrative categories that have been developed for verbal discourse? The worries are made explicit, available for inquiry, through the work of choreographers like as Pina Bausch and William Forsythe, whose practices actively

question the boundaries between movement, text and theatrical representation.

1.2. Research Questions

The analysis is built on three research topics. RQ1: What theoretical frameworks are most effectively applied to the body's capacity to produce narrative meaning in choreography? What are the constitutive characteristics of body storytelling as a choreographic practice? RQ2: What are the specific expressive logics by which choreographers compose body narratives and how do these logics differ from the structural logic of verbal or literary narrative? RQ3: What are the artistic consequences of conceptualising choreography as body narrative, both for the interpretation of existing works and for the orientation of creative practice?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Merleau-Ponty and the Body as Primary Narrative Ground

The phenomenology of embodiment developed by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* and expanded in *The Visible and the Invisible* provides the foundational philosophical basis for understanding the body as a primary site of meaning-production rather than an instrument of pre-formed cognitive content [3]. Merleau-Ponty's basic claim that the body is not an object among objects in the world, but the primary condition for our having a world at all, a “general medium for having a world,” establishes embodied experience as prior to and constitutive of the conceptual structures through which experience is later expressed in language. The concept of the *corps propre* (the lived body as opposed to the body as physical object) is the

pre-reflective bodily knowing that is already intentional, skilled and meaningful, a knowing-how that underlies but is not reducible to propositional knowing-that. Sheets-Johnstone's phenomenological analysis of dance goes further than this, arguing that movement does not express felt qualities but constitutes them – the dancing body does not translate pre-formed meanings into movement but generates meaning in and through movement, a process that is simultaneously perceptual, motor and affective [12]. This is further developed in his later notion of "flesh" (la chair) as the ontological medium shared by the perceiving body and the perceived world into the intercorporeal dimension of performance: the kinaesthetic response of the spectator to the observed movement is not a matter of cognitive inference, but a direct, flesh-level participation in the kinetic meanings that the dancer produces [3][4].

2.2. Mark Johnson's Embodied Meaning and Image Schemata

Mark Johnson's cognitive-philosophical approach in *The Body in the Mind* (1987) and *The Meaning of the Body* (2007) complements Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description [5] by specifying the structural patterns through which physical experience generates abstract meaning. At the heart of Johnson's theory is the notion of the picture schema, a dynamic, non-propositional kind of bodily experience that repeatedly organises sensory interaction with the environment. Johnson's theory gives an account of the mechanism by which pre-linguistic physiological patterns provide the cognitive substrate for abstract conceptualisation. The schemas SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, CONTAINMENT, BALANCE and FORCE are not simply metaphors based on physiological experience but also essential organisational structures of experience, which are subsequently extended to abstract domains by means of conceptual metaphor. In the terminology of choreography, the image schemata are the deep structural patterns through which sequences of movement generate meaning. A choreographic phrase enacting the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema develops experiential-narrative patterns of journey, ambition and arrival without any spoken articulation. Thus, the image-schematic framework explains the embodiment of abstract narrative meaning in non-propositional movement and meaning that cannot be adequately expressed in linguistic paraphrasing [5][6].

2.3. Foster's Choreographic Semiotics and Narrative Representation

Choreographic semiotics, as articulated by Susan Leigh Foster in *Dancing and her subsequent Choreography and Narrative* (1996) [2], offers a dance-specific theoretical model for analysing how choreographic bodies generate narrative representation. Foster identifies four modalities of choreographic representation—resemblance, imitation, replication, and reflection—which affect the relation of movement to the meanings it generates. She claims that the choice between these forms is the primary representational attitude of any choreographic piece. Her analysis of choreographic narrative shows that the 'staging of story and desire' of ballet follows a historically specific, culturally contingent and ideologically freighted grammar of movement-as-sign, a grammar that has been systematically interrogated by post-modern and contemporary choreographic practices [10]. In Foster's Choreographing

Empathy (2011) the idea of the inter-corporeal dimension of choreographic narrative is further elaborated through the theorising of kinaesthesia, the embodied sense of movement and effort, as the principal way in which choreographic body tales are received and experienced by audiences [4].

3. Dimensions of Body Narrative in Choreography

3.1. The Pre-Reflective Kinesthetic Dimension

The basic dimension of body story in dance lies at the pre-reflective level of kinaesthetic experience, before to the imposition of narrative framework or symbolic interpretation. This dimension consists of the immediate experiential aspects of movement - weight, speed, flow, spatial directionality - that Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) systematically characterises through its four categories of Body, Effort, Shape and Space [7]. The Effort category of LMA, which describes the qualitative dynamics of movement along the dimensions of Weight (heavy-light), Space (direct-indirect), Time (sustained-sudden), and Flow (bound-free), is a phenomenological vocabulary for the pre-reflective kinaesthetic values that constitute the affective substrate of body narrative. The same spatial pattern performed with sudden, direct, strong effort qualities tells an irreducibly different kinaesthetic story than when it is performed with sustained, indirect, light qualities – a difference that is bodily and immediately understood by audiences before any symbolic or narrative interpretation [7] [3].

3.2. The Image-Schematic Dimension and Embodied Metaphor

On the image-schematic level of body narrative, the performance of basic bodily orientations in movement patterns activates pre-linguistic cognitive systems. Choreographic embodied metaphor, the choreographic variant of Johnson's conceptual metaphor, works by exploiting the structural similarity between image schemata and abstract domains of meaning: sustained lift from floor to vertical is an embodied enactment of the VERTICALITY schema as an embodied narrative of aspiration or transcendence; a sequence of weight sharing and support between dancers is an embodied enactment of the BALANCE schema as an embodied narrative of interdependence and reciprocity [5][6]. These embodied metaphors are not ornamental addenda to choreographic meaning, but its basic cognitive function. They offer a way to understand how dance communicates complex thematic and emotional content to audiences that lack any cultural understanding of a particular choreographic tradition except for their own embodied humanness. Physical humour, grief, and triumph in dance—be it classical ballet, Butoh, or contemporary hip-hop—are cross-culturally communicable because of the universality of the visual schemata that choreography activates, even though their specific enactment is always culturally and historically inflected.

3.3. Case Analysis: Bausch and Forsythe as Body Narrative Practitioners

Pina Bausch's Tanztheater is the most theorised case study of a body story in modern choreography. The primary creative process in Bausch's work—interviewing dancers about their lived experiences and constructing choreography from their verbal and physical responses—represents a systematic

translation of life-world narrative into body narrative which, as Alderson describes, is “emotionally raw” and humanistic, allowing for authentic human contact through choreographic form [8][11]. Her use of repetition as a structural principle – the same phrase repeated a number of times with increasing contextual weight – is a body narrative strategy that mimics the temporal repetition and return structures characteristic of trauma narrative, producing an experiential rather than representational account of emotional states. The works *Café Müller* (1978) and *Kontakthof* (1978) construct body tales of desire, fragility and asymmetry of human connection using movement vocabularies whose expressive logic cannot be reduced to theatrical text or psychological characterisation [8][4]. [2] Foster’s reading of *Dancing’s* representational framework provides an analytical language for the recognition of key choreographic conventions—spatial positioning, effort qualities and connection patterns—that bear the principal narrative weight in Bausch’s work.

William Forsythe’s deconstructive choreographic method is a supplementary body narrative strategy that interrogates the conditions of choreographic representation rather than employing them. Forsythe’s systematic deconstruction and recombination of classical ballet vocabulary, where balletic movement is treated as a form of generative material to be algorithmically manipulated, spatially manipulated and temporally fragmented, produces body narratives that are about choreography itself as a system of embodied knowledge [9]. His project *Improvisation Technologies* developed a digital notation system based on geometric principles acquired from Laban, articulating the structural logic by which choreographic body narratives are built from elementary spatial and kinetic activities. The body narratives produced by the resulting works, *Artefact* (1984) and *Eidos: Telos* (1995), are formally rigorous and phenomenologically immediate, demonstrating that the logic of expression of body narrative can work reflexively, making its own structural conditions legible without sacrificing experiential punch [7][9].

4. Expression Logics of Choreographic Body Narrative

4.1. Temporal Folding and Corporeal Counterpoint

The most essential difference between the expression logic of choreographic body narrative and literary narrative is its treatment of time. Literature is limited to the linear flow of language, whereas choreography can offer several simultaneous streams of time through the compositional device of corporeal counterpoint - several dancers executing overlapping, phase-shifted or rhythmically divergent movement phrases, the relationship of which to one another produces complex temporal significations unavailable in any single strand [2][7]. This simultaneity allows for what we can call “temporal folding” — the choreographic folding of past and present, or anticipation and recall, into a single kinaesthetic moment — that creates a distinctly choreographic narrative tense that has no equivalent in verbal speech. Bausch’s typical structure of interrupted and resumed phrases, where a sequence of movements is interrupted, diverted and resumed in another context, is a case of temporal folding as an expression logic that captures the psychological temporality of memory, desire and compulsion with a precision narration cannot attain [8].

4.2. Spatial Dramaturgy as Narrative Architecture

The spatial dimension of choreographic body narrative — the organisation of bodies in the performance space, their paths, formations and spatial relationships — constitutes what may be termed “spatial dramaturgy”: the use of proxemic, kinaesthetic and architectural spatial values as primary narrative elements rather than mere staging conventions [3][6]. Distance between dancers encodes relational narratives of intimacy and isolation; the spatial trajectory of movement phrases encodes intentional narratives of approach, avoidance, and circulation; the relationship between dancing bodies and the edges of the performance space encodes narratives of confinement, freedom, and transgression. Foster’s choreographic semiotics considers spatial structure as a major vehicle of choreographic meaning, with a narrative content as definite and analysable as the kinetic language it sets [2].

5. Discussion: Cultural Specificity and the Limits of Body Narrative

Does to consider choreography a body story raise the question of cultural specificity: how universal and how culturally unique are the image schemata and logic of expression identified here? Neuroscientific research on mirror neurone systems shows that some components of body narrative are grounded in shared human embodiment, with reports of transcultural communicability of kinaesthetic empathy [6]. But, according to Shilling’s social theory of the body, the very language of movement, spatial conventions and expressive codes through which choreographers make narratives of the body are always culturally and historically specific [1]. A In contrast, the embodied metaphors of a Butoh practitioner are grounded in a uniquely Japanese phenomenological and aesthetic tradition. The embodied storytelling patterns of a West African griot store culturally particular temporal and relational values that cannot be understood through LMA or Labanian spatial harmony without major interpretative reduction [7]. For the practical work of choreographic creation, this means that body narrative works at the same time on the level of the embodied universal and the cultural particular, and that the most fully realised examples of body narrative as an art form are those choreographic works which productively negotiate this tension – works that are at once immediately kinaesthetically accessible and culturally specific.

In response to RQ3: The pragmatic artistic consequence of thinking choreography as body narrative is that choreographic creation has to be grounded in the awareness of the four narrative levels identified here – pre-reflective kinaesthetic, image-schematic, compositional-structural and inter-corporeal – as autonomous and irreducible expressive resources, each one with its own logic and its own relation to cultural specificity.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that choreography is a unique form of body narrative, whose mode of expression cannot be reduced to verbal or literary narrative, and whose artistic connotation is generated through the interaction of pre-reflective kinaesthetic meaning, image-schematic embodied metaphor, compositional temporal and spatial structure, and

inter-corporeal kinaesthetic empathy. Answering RQ1: The most productive theoretical frameworks for understanding body narrative in choreography are Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the lived body, Johnson's image-schema theory of embodied meaning, and Foster's choreographic semiotics. Their complementary perspectives illuminate different dimensions of the same choreographic phenomenon. Regarding RQ2: the specific expression logics of choreographic body narration, embodied metaphor, temporal folding, corporeal counterpoint, and spatial dramaturgy, are fundamentally distinct from the logic of literary narration in their use of kinaesthetic simultaneity, spatial dimensionality, and pre-reflective bodily immediacy. The artistic significance of choreography, understood in its entirety, resides not in its power to recount stories that might equally be told in words, but in its capacity to express aspects of human experience – temporal, relational, kinaesthetic, inter-corporeal – that language can allude to but never fully encompass.

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