

Andrew Hewitt

Choreography is a way of thinking about the relationship of aesthetics to politics

Interviewed by: Goran Sergej Pristaš

Frakcija: The key concept and the title of your book is “social choreography” and you use it in relation to both dance and the aesthetic of everyday movement. How do you frame that concept and how is it related to choreography as artistic practice?

Andrew Hewitt: My methodology of “social choreography” is rooted in an attempt to think the aesthetic as it operates at the very base of social experience. I use the term social choreography to denote a tradition of thinking about social order that derives its ideal from the aesthetic realm and seeks to instill that order directly at the level of the body. In its most explicit form, this tradition has observed the dynamic choreographic configurations produced in dance and sought to apply those forms to the broader social and political sphere. Accordingly, such social choreographies ascribe a fundamental role to the aesthetic in its formulation of the political. Attempting to reconnect to a more radical sense of the aesthetic as something rooted in bodily experience, I further use the category of social choreography as a way of examining how the aesthetic is not purely superstructural, purely ideological. I do not claim that aesthetic forms do not reflect ideological positions: clearly they can and do. But they do not only reflect. My claim, instead, is that choreography designates a sliding or gray zone where discourse meets practice – a zone in which it was possible for an emerging bourgeois public sphere to work on and redefine the boundaries of aesthetics and politics.

This argument for the centrality of the aesthetic to the elaboration of social configurations places the critical project of social choreography in opposition to two alternative approaches to the consideration of dance. If the most obvious polemic is against that critical tradition that takes dance as a physical experience of metaphysical transcendence – i.e. against a vocabulary developed in Symbolist and aestheticist writings of the late nineteenth century – this study no less resolutely resists any reduction to the specific social “determinants” of dance, such as race, gender, or class. My argument will not be that these categories do not hold with respect to social choreography, but that in both the practice of choreography and in the critical discourses it generated, such categories were themselves being rehearsed and refined. The aesthetic thus functions in this study neither as a quasi-metaphysical realm separate from the socio-historical, nor as a practice that can be fully explained in terms of socio-historical analysis.

I began the book – as a literary critic – with the desire to challenge the traditional literary tropes of transcendence that have dogged scholarly studies of dance by literary critics. Obviously, dance has a privileged place in the pantheon of modernism. The prevailing modernist paradigm for thinking dance – inaugurated by the Romantics and carried through by the late nineteenth-century aestheticists – has consistently privileged the philosophical, aesthetic, and even religious question of individual “grace” over the politics of social choreography. By looking at choreography as the disposition of bodies in space, I wished to examine a more “lateral” transcendence. Indeed, as I point out in the book, early Enlightenment political theory often – as in Hobbes – took the freedom of bodies to move through space as the very basis of political freedom. To choreograph that movement is always to invoke such notions.

What I am calling “choreography” is not just a way of thinking about social order; it has also been a way of thinking about the relationship of aesthetics to politics. Aesthetic dance – and here we encounter the importance of the performative within our notion of social choreography – functions as a space in which social possibilities are both rehearsed and performed. Consequently, choreography as an intrinsically performative aesthetic form cannot simply be identified with “the aesthetic” and set in opposition to the category of “the political” that it either tropes or pre-determines. In the bourgeois era, I argue that choreography has provided a discursive realm for articulating and working out the shifting, moving relation of aesthetics to politics.

Abstraction in choreography is always related to a “concreteness” of the movement – the more concrete (less gestural) the movement is, the more abstract it becomes. In your book you put an emphasis on abstraction as a distillation of social formations. If we are thinking about choreography between two poles of understanding: mimetic and performative, it seems that we are still missing one aspect and this is productive or poetic...

On the question of the “concrete” in dance, I think your question raises some important issues. I think it is most helpful to understand the concrete in its curious Hegelian formation. “A true concrete,” Hegel argues, “involves Being and Essence, and the total wealth of these two spheres with them.” Logic § 160 Note. In other words, the concrete is not something we should simply oppose to the abstract, but rather the instance in which something “essential” is revealed as dependent on its accidental occurrence. In my book, I work with the semiotics of Peirce to get at this problem by insisting upon the materiality of the signifier. Dance, as an aesthetic form, strikes me as the best example of this materiality – which is dynamic and dialectical rather than merely material and static. Thus, to think between “two poles of understanding: mimetic and performative” is to think undialectically. What dance allows us to perceive is that even the most mimetic forms of signification are, if you like, dependent upon their being performed. My favorite example from the book is Nijinsky’s final dance at the Suvretta House, where he claims to perform and expiate the guilt of Europe at the First World War. It is only when he falls and injures himself – that is, only when he performs an aesthetic lapse – that his aesthetic itself is actualized. Peirce talks of the materiality of the signifier as “knocking against” something – i.e. against the realities and contingencies of existence. That is what happens here – when Nijinsky “knocks against” the hard floor and injures himself, he does not break the semiotic code, he enables it. I see this moment – the “fall” into the realms of physical existence, if you like – as a concrete moment in the Hegelian sense. It is a moment in which the reliance of abstract signifiers at the moment of their physical performance is revealed. The “accident” of Nijinsky’s fall reveals itself as essential to the work his dance is to perform.

In terms of its engagement with current critical trends, the concept of social choreography marks my response to certain equivocations in the recent critical emphasis placed on the question of performativity. I felt that much that was interesting in this concept in the work of Judith Butler had subsequently been lost as a result of the term’s popularization in two diametrically opposed directions. On the one hand, there was what I would call the “ludic” tendency, according to which all identity is performance, all so-called “essentialism” is reactionary, etc. This tendency struck me as a banal and rather naïve celebration of some form of postmodern freedom. On the other hand, there was a tendency to stress the scripted nature of a performance and stress the unfreedom inherent in so many of our actions and interactions. Performativity became, here, a sort of anthropological concept focused on

everyday rituals. This tendency lent itself to a form of critique of ideology no less banal than its counterpart: “you think you are just acting spontaneously, but look, let me show you the script.”

To some extent, your questions hint at this dichotomy when you speak of “two poles of understanding: mimetic and performative.” The “mimetic” polarity would be that discourse that claimed to uncover a hidden social script. What you term the performative would be that which stressed the moment of performance itself. It was the inevitability of this polarity that I wished to question. One questions this distinction, however, not by denying it. In other words, faced with two camps effectively arguing that the truth of performativity – or anything else, for that matter – lies on their side of the divide, one does not get any closer to the truth by denying the validity of the divide. Quite the opposite, the split is the truth.

To question this dichotomy also, to some extent, required questioning the distinction of aesthetic and non-aesthetic or, as you put it, the “aesthetic of everyday movement” and “choreography as artistic practice.” In stressing the notion of the performativity of the aesthetic I was led to think about performance in the more limited sense. My argument in the book is that dance has served as the aesthetic medium that most consistently sought to understand art as something immanently political: that is, as something that derives its political significance from its own status as praxis rather than from its adherence to a logically prior political ideology located elsewhere, outside art. Again, the aim is not to respond to an historically ossified distinction between life and art by insisting upon a continuum that renders them inseparable, but to examine the logic of the distinction. I think that recent work in cultural studies has gone a long way to demonstrate the historically and socially grounded nature of discursive distinctions between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic. My concern, however, is that such accounts afford a classic *petitio principii* by privileging one side of the debate. The aesthetic always appears as something determined within the parameters of a framing social discourse. I reject this.

It struck me that no aesthetic form better demonstrated this fact than choreography – where the formal medium cannot be abstracted from the medium through which subjects experience themselves. All formalism in dance is compromised by the fact that subjectivity is itself embodied – the body that enacts formal principles in dance is the same body through which the subject – so often under attack in formalist experimentation – presents itself. Similarly, even in the most mimetic of dance forms, the body that leaps leaps. Form and content are entangled not by virtue of some Yeatsian transcendence, but by virtue of the fact that without the body, they cannot exist.

Though coming from literature myself, I felt that there was a danger in the current mania for “reading” the body. I wished to trouble the regime of reading to ask whether there were not other modes of signification that were oriented toward production rather than reference. Rather than extending the realm of an episteme of reading, I wished to challenge it by turning to performance. Rather than taking text as a model for reading performance, I propose taking performance instead as a challenge to our model of “reading texts.” To question the status of a dance-interpretation on the grounds that it is, after all, a trope, a certain approximation of interpretive reading strategies, is to naturalize the act of reading itself as non-metaphoric, as the hegemonic medium for the production of meaning. Instead of asking what the performance analogues of literary techniques would be – e.g. What is a bodily metaphor? When is a gesture performative rather than denotative? What is a choreographic sentence? etc. – I wished to ask what literary studies might learn from performance itself. A study of social

choreography entails opening us up to the many different ways in which meaning is produced in both aesthetic and social arenas. Dance, then, is not simply another object onto which text-based “reading” strategies can be projected; it is a motif, a challenge internal to the operation of textuality.

Pretty soon, however, I found it equally important to reject a tendency that pulled in the opposite direction – an aesthetic that stressed materiality, the brute somatic nature of the body. I believe that a romanticism of non-transcendence – a romanticism of the body, if you will, and one that is most troubling politically and ideologically – has emerged ever more insistently in recent years. One certainly encounters it in discussions of modern dance again and again. Perhaps in response to transcendental tendencies in classical dance – the tendency to efface the materiality of the body, the old Yeatsian impossibility of telling the dancer from the dance – modern choreography has tended toward what you call “concreteness.” As an antidote or reaction, this tendency is quite understandable, but nevertheless troubling for the ways it traduces the dialectical nature of the concrete. Not since the days of Feuerbach has it been intellectually respectable to think of materiality in such brute terms. The “concrete” cannot be reduced to the material, nor the “real” to the merely somatic experiences of a body.

Let us re-examine one of the examples I just gave; What is a bodily metaphor? Given the materiality of the semiotic process in performance – in short, its embodiedness – this question becomes almost nonsensical. A metaphorical leap and an actual leap are one and the same. A choreographic metaphor would always be of the nature of a catachresis. To reflect on catachresis – on what it means to speak of the “leg” of a table, to take the most common example – is to reflect on the ways in which rhetoric serves not only secondary, or metaphoric functions. If there is, after all, no “proper” term for what we “improperly” refer to as a table’s “leg,” the very referentiality of language itself comes into question. Whereas metaphor makes sense out of what it finds, this catachresis actually brings into being what we might ordinarily presume to have preceded it – its referent. This is the sense in which I want to insist upon the status of social choreography as catachresis – it really is the thing it wishes to signify. I believe that the tendency to identify abstraction with “concreteness” in choreography is dangerous. On the one hand, this tendency might lead us to think of the concrete in rather undialectical and crudely materialist terms. I believe that there is a romanticism of the somatic at the heart of some of the most rigorously “abstract” modern choreographies. Whereas it is easy to identify the ideological underpinnings of a balletic tradition that sought to transcend and, effectively, efface the human body, the pathos of “honesty” that so often accompanies the choreographic foregrounding of the body’s limits, lapses and sheer hard work in dance strikes me as even more disingenuous. Choreography is not just another of the things we “do” to bodies, but a reflection on – and enactment of – how bodies “do” things, and on the work that the work of art performs. Social choreography exists not parallel to the operation of social norms and strictures, nor is it entirely subject to those strictures. It serves – “catacritically,” we might say – to bring them into being.

This brings us to your concern about the productive or poietic function of dance. I am glad you pose this question, because it is precisely this function that I wish to privilege in my study. It is entirely lost within any consideration that accepts the binaries of mimetic and performative as you set them out. On the one hand, the function of the aesthetic sphere has always been to articulate the possibility of another way of life. The mere existence of “art” testifies to the insufficiency of life. The fictive function of art is its determinant. Yet on the other hand, as Adorno insists, “Erlebnisse sind kein Als Ob.” The experience of the aesthetic is – for all that it is fictive – no less an experience. In aesthetic performance, a fundamental

dissatisfaction with what is played out within what is. A performance indicates to the audience “what if things were this way...” – and for a moment they are.

This really brings me to the question of the implications of my work for choreography as artistic practice. The question for a choreographer, it seems to me, is how to work with this reality/irreality of the bodies s/he choreographs. By this I mean that choreography obliges us to dialectical thinking in ways that the unhelpful dichotomies you rightly outline do not. When teaching students about the nature of “the real” in performance, I often use the example of sitting in the audience of a play in which one’s lover is playing the romantic lead. We do not jump up in outrage when our beloved locks lips with his or her romantic counterpart in the play. We know that they are not “really” kissing. But, of course, they are. Lips touch lips as they do when I embrace my beloved. What we mean when we say that they are not “really” kissing is that we have codes for understanding the real that transcend mere materiality. They are kissing and they are not: performance always performs yet erases its own boundaries.

It is not my place to prescribe in any way at all, of course, but it seems to me that choreography becomes essentially conservative in one of many ways. It might accept the division of art and life, become mere divertissement. In this sense it becomes what Marcuse would call “affirmative.” On the other hand, it might reject that division and protest. In both cases, however, there is an unquestioned operative understanding of what is “real” at work. It is the function of choreography, I believe, to question that understanding – not in the name of a more fundamental notion of the real (a notion we might identify with hypostatized notions of truth, or with the materialist romance of the body), nor through some relativizing gesture that would reject truth outright. In dance productions, truth – and perhaps it seems old-fashioned to insist upon the truth content of art, as Adorno does, but without it, there is no need to talk of art – is of the nature of an event. Perhaps this is what choreography performs and re-performs – the belief that the truth is written in the future tense.

But then we could think about choreography as being an “affirmative” practice, or “affirmative” performance more in Badiouian terms, as prescriptive political action, as the forcing of an issue, the production of truth, at least for this moment that you mention above. Do you think that dance is capable of this political action today and what would be its political agenda?

For those such as I schooled in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, the term “affirmative” has always been highly ambiguous with regard to aesthetic practice. Marcuse uses the term in a negative sense when speaking of art as a palliative, as something that “says yes” to the status quo. For Adorno, though, the affirmative value of art is, perhaps, less negative. “Erlebnisse,” he writes, “sind kein Als Ob.” In other words, even the experience of an illusory consolation nevertheless bears within itself a premonition of true experience.

When this experience is, as it were, an “embodied” experience, however, the situation becomes more complex. How can we conceptualize a physical “premonition” or differentiate such an experience from an experience of the actual. The deferral implicit in a disinterested physical experience would seem to be impossible (at least, for the dancer). You will recall that “disinterest”, in the Kantian sense, relies upon the superfluity of the physical existence of the object from which we derive pleasure. He uses the example of a painting of a piece of fruit and argues that the pleasure we derive does not rely upon the existence of the fruit itself as something a hungry viewer could eat. Kant argues here from within a representational paradigm, but the question becomes more complex once one moves into the realm of a non-

representational aesthetic. If aesthetic pleasure is derived from the signification itself rather than from its signified (from the *painting* of the fruit rather than from an imagining of the fruit itself), the object that does not “need” to exist for our experience of aesthetic pleasure could then be construed as the aesthetic object itself. In other words, there is something self-destructive in the nature of aesthetic pleasure. Moving one step further into the realm of a performative aesthetic, the medium that makes possible the play of signification – the body – and the medium of “reception” through which pleasure can be experienced – likewise, the body – would seem to be one. An aesthetic lack of “interest” in the existence of the body that dances seems to entail a concomitant dissolution of the body that experiences. Clearly, then, it seems that our concept of body needs some differentiation. I attempt such a differentiation elsewhere in an essay on “Body and Soma in Adorno” and it seems to be something that is central to Badiou’s presentation of the event.

Badiou seems attuned to the problem when he discusses the affirmative in terms of the bringing into being of a subject that is not reducible to the body. The body is not simply the trace of the subject – and the tendency to portray it as such is precisely that which I have been opposing in my criticism of a trend toward the romanticization of the body and the reinstating of a kind of organicism that I find politically very troubling. Now whether or not one thinks this “affirmative” aspect of the event in terms of a prescription is a vexing question. Without wanting to either critique or support Badiou – whose thoughts on the matter I have not examined well enough – I would tend by instinct to resist any prescriptive function for aesthetic production. Having worked extensively in the past on the question of fascist aesthetics, I am wary of any attempt to mix aesthetics and politics in anything but the most mediated of fashions. At best I might think in terms of rehearsal – that is, the rehearsal of alternative social possibilities and formations. That rehearsal, moreover, might itself be thought in terms of the French *répétition* as something that is not merely future-oriented, but in fact repeats and re-runs experiences. Such a rehearsal would be both the freeing up of possibilities and the mastering of them. Returning to Adorno’s formulation – “*Erlebnisse sind kein Als Ob*” – I might begin to answer your question by seeing in performance a sort of inversion of the structure of the sublime. Instead of a spiritual faculty rescuing the subject from a fear of physical annihilation – we have the body forestalling the annihilation of the spirit.

I like to think of this in terms of Lyotard’s discussion of the sublime in the avant-garde, where he claims that the sublime experience is a question of sorts, the question “Is it happening?” Can we still ask this question with respect to an embodied experience? Surely we know in choreography, don’t we, whether or not “it is happening”, since “it” is happening in and through our own body? Well no, we do not – for what we do not know is who – or what – the subject of that experience would be. The body? The “spirit”? This is what I see as so exciting about a shift to performative notions of the aesthetic – the way in which the persistence of the body resists traditional notions of aesthetic transcendence, but nevertheless repeats and rehearses the trajectory of sublime experience. In other words, it is no longer a question in aesthetic experience of operating from the position of “spirit”, but nor can it be a question of ditching the transcendent in the name of an immanent – and resolutely ideological – body.

Of course, questioning the status of the subject necessarily questions the possibility of political action since it brings into doubt the status of the political agent. But the body serves at the same time as the reminder of the need for political action. In *Social Choreography* I draw a distinction between Isadora Duncan’s claim that the pain inflicted on the dancer’s feet in ballet is a sure marker of its aesthetic and political “wrongness” and her subsequent

assumption that a painless dance must, therefore, be culturally and socially right, somehow. In the move from the critical function of pain to the affirmative function of painlessness, I see the slip into ideology. A painful aesthetic is, indeed, wrong – but it also articulates that wrong. To move beyond this critical function to a painless aesthetic is to move into the realm of the affirmative and of ideology, by embracing too prescriptive a role for aesthetic performance itself. To take up again the example of Nijinsky's final dance, in which he falls and bloodies his foot. His pain, I argue, is the prerequisite of significance – the price the body pays for its cultural passage beyond the realm of mere soma. To this extent – and I am sorry if it seems rather etiolated as a form of politics – I would envisage an aesthetic that concerns itself less with a political action to be projected elsewhere, beyond itself, but that seeks instead to articulate fully the preconditions of its own existence. Aesthetic practice would, therefore, entail not the utopian imagination of a condition in which pain would be absent, but a confrontation with pain's inevitability as the very ground of all existence – the subject's confrontation with the object, the clash of the body in motion and the ground across which it moves.

One of the most interesting facts about your book is that it does not come from a performance studies context which dominates in the research of cultural performance. How do you see your work in relation to performance studies? I like your proposal of “taking performance as a challenge to our model of ‘reading texts’” very much, but I'm still not completely sure of its real methodological consequences or its reality. How would the results of this challenge, for example, look in the reading of your own book? Would it bring us to more artistic practice or political action or...?

As to the questions regarding alternative modes of interpretation that would undercut models of “reading” the body and touching upon my own status as a literary scholar, I think the two can be treated together. You are clearly right when you indicate that it is conceptually easier to think of the possibility to an alternative to the paradigm of writing and reading that governs our regime of interpretation than it is to enact one. Perhaps, as a literary scholar, I intended a provocation more than a positive indication. However, my sense is that recent shifts toward cultural studies have tended to install a form of positivism in interpretation – a positivism in which some kind of hypostatized History serves as the key to all interpretation. I very much wish to resist this. While it is clearly important to resist the glib tropes of transcendence so central to literary modernism's understanding of dance, it is equally important, I think, to resist the invocation of categories such as race, gender, class etc. as the key determinants of our interpretation. We should resist not because such categories are not important, but because they are categories that do not simply exist externally to the cultural artifacts they are called to explain. For me, a “revolutionary” aesthetic – if I may invoke a rather overused notion – is not one that can be somehow translated back into a revolutionary discourse of the political, or into a program of political practice. This is not, for me, the status of the aesthetic. A revolutionary aesthetic would be one that scrambles the possibility of any such one-to-one translation. How often does one encounter the absurdity of performances that have as their aim the representation of the death of the subject – as if that death had not already taken with it the possibility of any such simplistic “representation.”

In a sense, my training in literary studies puts me at something of a disadvantage in talking about my “relation to performance studies” because that relation, I think, might be better explicated from the other side of the dialogue, from the perspective of performance itself. It is certainly not my aim to offer prescriptions to performers, but to raise possibilities – perhaps in the realm of theory only – that they themselves might then articulate. In writing the book, I

felt very strongly that Nijinsky served as the cultural “hero” of my text, not for his conscious response to the theories I invoke to talk of dance, but for his ability to shed light on those theories. In particular, I think of the ways in which Nijinsky helped me understand the logic of the semiotic of Peirce for example. At several points in the book, I sought to take up key organizing categories of cultural studies – Nijinsky as a cultural “icon” of modernity, for example – and to subject the categories themselves to scrutiny from that perspective. What is an icon? Is there something in the structure of the icon that can be elucidated with specific reference to dance? If an icon is a motivated sign, what does the art of motion have to say about it? As a literary scholar, one might be alert to tropes and motifs – to the *motivum* – but are we doing violence to the *motivum* – that is, to our own critical categories – if we cannot think of its relation to motion? These are the kinds of question I sought to pose.

It might seem at first sight that my resistance to a direct politicization of the performative reflects a failure to conceive of agency with regard to action. I do not think this is the case, however. Certainly, my work foregrounds the collective nature of choreography, but I do not believe either that the problem of the subject – the problem of modernism, par excellence – can be solved by opposing the bourgeois individual to a collective that simply replicates the logic of the subject on a grand scale. When I try to think of instances of the performative production of subjectivity within the political realm, unfortunately, I arrive again and again at examples from the far right. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe talk of this when they discuss the “mythic” quality of fascism – by which they mean not the belief in a specific set of (for example, Germanic) myths, but a belief in the power of belief itself to produce a subject of history. By foregrounding the body, however, I wish to stress that I have no faith in such belief – no mythic belief in belief itself. The ability of the mythic subject to conjure itself – ex nihilo – from the abyss, is frustrated by the reliance of that subject upon an objective and embodied existence. To this extent, the objective – one might even say “abject” – status of the body within such thinking is transvalued. Whereas fascism relies eventually on a body that transcends itself into pure raciality, for me the body that “knocks up against” reality – to use Peirce’s term for explaining the work of the semiotic – becomes “objective” in both a somatic and historical sense. The political agent, for me, is neither the transcendental subject, or even just the bourgeois subject of ego psychology, nor is it a purely somatic body that acts from some form of urge or untrammelled pre-social drive. It is the one operating through the other – the subject aware of its historical objectivity through the medium of its body. I write, perhaps, not of history’s subjects, but of its objects.