

Alain Badiou: Dance as a Metaphor for Thought: Excerpt

Dance is, first and foremost, the image of a thought subtracted from every spirit of heaviness.

Dance frees the body from all social mimicry from all gravity and conformity.

Dance is the prime mover: Every gesture and every line of dance must present itself not as a consequence, but as the very source of mobility. And finally, dance is simple affirmation, because it makes the negative body - the shameful body - radiantly absent. My soul is a leaping fountain.

Dance involves the breath, the respiration of the earth. This is because the central question of dance is that of the relation between verticality and attraction.

Verticality and attraction enter the dancing body and allow it to manifest a paradoxical possibility: that the earth and the air may exchange their positions, the one passing into the other. It is for all of these reasons that thought finds its metaphor in dance.

Dance lends a figure to the traversal of innocence by power.

In actual fact, what justifies the identification of dance as the metaphor for thought is Nietzsche's conviction that thought is an intensification.

Dance is the aerial and broken body, the vertical body.

Not at all the hammering body, but the body "on points". The body that pricks the floor just as one would puncture a cloud. Above all, it is the silent body. Dance for Nietzsche points to a vertical thought, a thought stretching toward its proper height. Dance corresponds to the Nietzschean idea of thought as active becoming, as active power.

In dance thus conceived, movement finds its essence in what has metaphor for a light and subtle thought precisely because it shows the restraint immanent to movement and thereby opposes itself to the spontaneous vulgarity of the body.

By "lightness" we must understand the capacity of a body to manifest itself as an unconstrained body, or as a body not constrained by itself. But above all it demands a principle of slowness. The essence of lightness lies in its capacity to manifest the secret slowness of the fast.

This is indeed why dance provides the finest image of lightness. "The will must learn to be slow and mistrustful." Dance could then be defined as the expansion of slowness and the mistrust of the thought-body. In this sense, the dancer points us in the direction of what the will is capable of learning. Dance would provide the metaphor for the fact that every genuine thought depends upon an event. An event is precisely what remains undecided between the taking place and the nonplace-in the guise of an emergence that is indiscernible from its own disappearance.

The event adds itself onto what there is, but as soon as this supplement is pointed out, the "there is" reclaims its rights, laying hold of everything.

Obviously, the only way of fixing an event is to give it a name, to inscribe it within the "there is" as a supernumerary name. The event "itself" is never anything besides its own disappearance. Nevertheless, an inscription may detain the event, as if at the gilded edge of loss. The name is what decides upon the having taken place.

Dance would then point toward thought as event, but before this thought has received a name - at the extreme edge of its veritable disappearance; in its vanishing, without the shelter of the name. Dance would mimic a thought that had remained undecided, something like a native (or unfixed) thought.

Yes, in dance, we would find the metaphor for the unfixed. It would thereby become clear that the task of dance is to play time within space. An event establishes a singular time on the basis of its nominal fixation.

Dance is subtracted from the temporal decision. In dance, there is therefore something that is prior to time, something pretemporal. It is this pretemporal element that will be played out in space. Dance is what suspends time within space.

Dance is the body beset by imminence. Dance, as the spatialization of imminence would thus be the metaphor for what every thinking grounds and organizes. In other words, dance plays out the event before the event's nomination. It follows that, for dance, the place of the name is taken by silence. Dance manifests the silence before the name exactly in the same way that it constitutes the space before time. As the silence of what? As the silence of the name.

Dance integrates space into its essence. It is the only figure of thought to do this, so that we could argue that dance symbolizes the very spacing of thought. Dance is the site as such, devoid of figurative ornament. It demands space, or spacing, and nothing else. That is all for the first principle. The dancing body, as it comes to the site and is spaced in imminence, is a thought-body.

The dancing body is never someone. About these bodies Mallarmé declares that they are "never other than an emblem, never someone". An emblem is above all opposed to imitation. The dancing body does not imitate a character or a singularity. It depicts [figure] nothing.

No role enrolls the dancing body, which is the emblem of pure emergence. But an emblem is also opposed to every form of expression. The dancing body does not express any kind of interiority. Entirely on the surface, as a visibly restrained intensity, it is itself interiority.

Neither imitation nor expression, the dancing body is an emblem of visitation in the virginity of the site. It comes to the site precisely in order to manifest that the thought-the true thought-that hangs upon the eventual disappearance is the induction of an impersonal subject.

The impersonality of the subject of a thought (or of a truth) derives from the fact that such a subject does not pre-exist the event that authorizes it. The dancing body is anonymous because it is born under our very eyes as body. Likewise, the subject of a truth is never in advance-however much it may have advanced - the "someone" that it is.

At the end of the day, what is at play in the ubiquitous allusion to the sexes is the correlation between being and disappearing. between taking place and abolition - a correlation that draws its recognizable corporeal coding from the encounter, the entanglement, and the separation. The disjunctive energy for which sexuation provides the code is made to serve as a metaphor for the event as such, a metaphor for something whose entire being lies in disappearance.

Mallarmé says "The dancer does not dance". We have just seen that this female dancer is not a woman, but on top of this, she is not even a "dancer". Dance is like a poem, the poem subtracted from itself, just as the dancer, who does not dance, is dance subtracted from dance.

Dance is like a poem uninscribed, or untraced. And dance is also like a dance without dance, a dance undanced. What is stated here is the subtractive dimension of thought. The dancer is the miraculous forgetting of her own knowledge of dance. She does not execute the dance but is this restrained intensity that manifests the gesture's indecision. In truth, the dancer abolishes every known dance because she disposes of her body as if it were invented.

So that the spectacle of dance is the body subtracted from every knowledge of a body, the body as disclosure [eclosion]. The body of dance is essentially naked. Just as dance is a visitation of the pure site and therefore has no use for a decor (whether there is one or not), likewise, the dancing body, which is a thought-body in the guise of the event, has no use for a costume (whether there is a tutu or not).

This nakedness is crucial. Dance "offers you the nakedness of your concepts". Dance, as a metaphor for thought, presents thought to us as devoid of relation to anything other than itself, in the nudity of its emergence. Dance is a thinking without relation, the thinking that relates nothing, that puts nothing in relation.

What is a spectator of dance? Mallarmé answers this question in a particularly demanding manner. Just as the dancer - who is an emblem - is never someone, so the spectator of dance must be rigorously impersonal. The spectator of dance cannot in any way be the singularity of the one who's watching.

These principles cannot become effective unless the spectator renounces everything in his gaze that may be either singular or desiring. It is not a spectacle because it cannot tolerate the desiring gaze, which, once there is dance, can only be a voyeur's gaze, a gaze in which the dancing subtractions suppress themselves.

What is needed is what Mallarmé calls "an impersonal or fulgurant absolute gaze. The gaze of the spectator must thereby cease to seek, upon the bodies of the dancers, the objects of its own desire-an operation that would refer us back to an ornamental or fetishistic nakedness.

To attain the nakedness of concepts demands a gaze that-relieved of every desiring inquiry into the objects for which the "vulgar" body (as Nietzsche would say) functions as support - reaches the innocent and primordial thought-body, the invented or disclosed body. But such a gaze belongs to no one.

It is instead the permanent showing of an event in its flight, caught in the undecided equivalence between its being and its nothingness. Only the flash of the gaze is appropriate here, and not its fulfilled attention. "Absolute": The thought that finds its figure in dance must be considered as an eternal acquisition.

Dance, precisely because it is an absolutely ephemeral art - because it disappears as soon as it takes place - harbors the strongest charge of eternity can establish that Spinoza says that we seek to know what thinking is while we don't even know what a body is capable of.

I will say that dance is precisely what shows us what the body is capable of art. It provides us with the exact degree to which, at a given moment, it is capable of it. But to say that the body is capable of art does not mean making an "art of the body".

To say that the body, qua body, is capable of art, is to exhibit it as a thought-body. Not as a thought caught in a body, but as a body that thinks. This is the function of dance: [The thought-body showing itself under the vanishing sign of a capacity for art].

The sensitivity to dance possessed by each and everyone of us comes from the fact that dance answers, after its own fashion, Spinoza's question: What is a body as such capable of? It is capable of art, that is, it can be exhibited as a native thought. How are we to name the emotion that seizes us at this point-as little as we ourselves may be capable of an absolute and impersonal fulgurant gaze? I will name this emotion an exact vertigo. If the capacity of the body, in the guise of the capacity for art, is exhibit native thought, this capacity for art is infinite, and so is the dancing body itself. Infinite in the instant of its aerial grace.

What we are dealing with here, which is truly vertiginous, is not the limited capacity of an exercise of the body, but the infinite capacity of art, of all art, as it is rooted in the event that its chance prescribes. Nevertheless, this vertigo is exact.

Thus we must return to where we began. Yes, dance is indeed -each and every time - a new name that the body gives to the earth. But no new name is the last. As the bodily presentation of the forename of truths, dance incessantly renames the earth.