

## IV MEDITERRANEAN CONGRESS OF AESTHETICS “Art & Time”

### Time as a strand of the dance medium<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

Time and space are at the core of our aesthetic experiences of dance performances, yet dance has been frequently categorised as a space-based art. In this paper I revise the choreological perspective developed by Preston-Dunlop and Sánchez-Colberg that conceives dance as an embodied performative art articulated in a multistranded medium (performer, movement, sound, space). I argue that time should be allowed a distinct place in the choreological discourse since its presence is key to the expressivity of a dance piece. I conceptualise the meaning of the time strand and expose how different substrands emerge, connect with others and become expressive in dance performances. My investigation considers in particular the aesthetics of time in live performances in the theatre compared to dances created for the camera, focusing specifically on instances of contemporary transpositions from one context to the other.

#### Introduction

This paper is a first step toward the elucidation of time as a creative core element in dance art. For this, I will build on the choreological perspective developed by Preston-Dunlop and Sánchez-Colberg that is an integral part of the Laban tradition. Their proposition is the combination of phenomenological and semiotic approaches for “attending to the complexity of embodied theatre works of dance.” (110) They expanded Laban’s claim about the importance of “thinking in terms of movement” (The Mastery of Movement 22). For them, uniting theory and practice should constitute a triple act of doing dance, feeling dance and thinking about dance. Choreology aims at understanding the different ways we can engage with dance during its creation, performance and reception (12), processes that arise from a synthesis of the medium, ideas and treatments that become a work.

Attention to time in dance performances is not only important for understanding our aesthetic responses to them but also for non-aesthetic interpretations of their content. Both, as Carroll has argued, are key for “a successful interaction with art” (“Art and Interaction” 61). My intention here is to situate time in a more prominent place within the choreological framework, in particular to recognise time as a strand of the dance medium acknowledging its role in the creative process and its impact on our appreciation of a dance piece.

Although one must acknowledge that computer generated and filmed effects are expanding and changing the traditional elements and possibilities on the theatre stage, for

the purpose of this paper I am going to concentrate on dance performances that do not include any of these technologies in their productions. My investigation considers the expressive contribution of time mainly with specific references to the work of the American choreographer Merce Cunningham for whom time is a more flexible element than space. Cunningham opened up new forms of making dances, introduced innovation in performance and demanded new ways of engaging with dance. He has declared that "time the very essence of our daily lives, can give to dancing one of the qualities that make it, at its most beautiful, a moving image of life at its highest." (qtd. in Vaughan 61).

## Dance and Time

Time and space are at the core of our aesthetic experiences of dance performances, yet discussions on space predominate in the world of dance art<sup>2</sup>. Traditionally, in the field of dance there has been a limited reflection on the artistic potential of time as its fourth dimension and of the representation of time in dance pieces, on how the artistic manipulation of time affects our understanding of the works and our aesthetic responses to them.

Geisha Fontaine's book *Les Danses du Temps* is an exceptional philosophical and artistic reflection on the notion of time in dance. She proposes the separation of the spatio-temporal unity for the purpose of examining time in its own right in the context of dance, and analyses the approach to time in the work of various key contemporary dance makers. Fontaine highlights the necessity to ask about unexplored issues such as "does time shape dance or does dance shape its time? Is time in dance comparable to time in the other arts or does it display unique characteristics? What variations of time are introduced by each choreographer? What are the temporal openings specific to choreographed movement?" (12).

So why has time not been fully considered in dance? There are a number of reasons why time as a complex dimension, idea, creative force and key constituent of dance pieces has not always been considered. One reason is that the visibility of space, performers and movements together with the inescapable presence of sound dominate the invisibility of time. Audiences as well as dancers cannot avoid spatial awareness, while temporalities are more easily neglected through inadvertence. Of course, there are means by which time has the capacity to become visible and audible such as rhythmic patterns in the choreography or explicit narratives like the ones in the tradition of the classical ballet, but as we will see, these are limited displays of the more profound involvement of time in dance.

Link to that invisibility of time, is the fact that dance has essentially been an impermanent art, and in a way continues to be so at present. Like other performing arts such as music, drama and cinema, dance is an art that manifests itself over time. A dance piece evolves in a set length of time, and then disappears. From the point of view of the creator, performer and spectator, dance performances are at a constant vanishing point. Dance has been the impermanent art *par excellence*; its evanescent nature and historic lack of accessibility makes dance intellectually slippery. And the fact that we can't hold onto dance events in their actual form has an emotional effect in the perception and appreciation of dance pieces. The American dance critic Arlene Croce highlighted this fact in the 70s, declaring:

"An afterimage is what we are left with when the performance is over. Dancing leaves nothing else behind- no record, no text- and so the afterimage becomes the subject of dance

criticism. A dance critic tries to train the memory as well as the organs of sense; he [sic] tries to make the afterimage that appears in his [sic] writing match the performance" (ix)

Although it is true that this immateriality makes appreciation and interpretation more difficult, in reality not everything vanishes. It is not only afterimages but music records, documented scenery and costumes, text narratives of plots and artistic intentions, lighting design, performers' histories, notations, etc. that we are left with after a dance event. However, the process of remembrance Croce is talking about relates to the elusive artistic synthesis of all the dance components that we experience when watching a performance. The material form of individual elements is different to their articulation in the development of the piece. After a dance event the critic starts the process of putting together memories, or afterimages in Croce's words, and a fragmented materiality of records. It is during this exercise of recovery where temporalities are more vulnerable to oblivion, unless, of course, the concept of time is central to the piece and therefore inescapable and unforgettable. Sally Banes has pointed out that the American choreographer Yvonne Rainer draw attention to "the two alternative solutions for the choreographer concerned with surmounting the ultimate difficulty the ephemeral nature of dance provokes: one can drastically simplify [...] or one can complicate the dance so that its instant disappearance becomes the subject of the choreography" (45).

Film has been decisive in our memory of dance in the past decades. Nowadays, dances are easily recorded and watched when convenient. Filmed performances have, in principle, the capacity to support our afterimages and therefore our aesthetic appreciation of a piece, although only consistently and effectively, I would argue, if the afterimages and the film happen to be of the same performance. As we will see, filmed or videoed dance events not only have made possible a more careful attention to time, but they have also offered dance the possibility of utilise it in new ways.

Another reason why time has not been the object of our attention in dance is because the human body in motion is essentially recognised as the medium. Time essential formal features of continuity (past, present and future) and direction match essential aspects of dance movements and it is within these where time has been mostly explored and discussed in dance. In dance performances every movement is followed and preceded by another one, and sequences can only progress into further movements in the future. Similarly, temporal determinants such as location and duration, allow dance to reflect on the position of each movement within the flow of the dance structure as well as on its persistence within that flow. A difference, however, is that dance movements do not present continuous instants of the same form; they can build a poetic meter and phrasing. The western world learnt from Rudolf Laban's eukinetics at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the weight of the body, its direction in space, the time taken and the flow of its movement constituted the factors of motion. Laban studied the resulting combinations between these factors (weight, space, time and flow) which give dance movements their dynamic structure and rhythm (Modern Educational Dance; The Mastery of Movement) Since then, it is in the appearance of the movement's energy or effort where time has been mostly located in dance. Time, however, is both intrinsic to other dance elements and part of the dance medium. Dance captures time but also creates it. Central to an examination of time in dance in all its complexity is the study of our responses, our sentiments towards its perception and appreciation.

### **Time Ideas and Treatments**

In her study on dance and time, Fontaine states that "[t]ime can therefore be a subject (physical, compositional or thematic) of choreographic research or a tool in the service of the quest for expressive intent" (Fontaine 61). But as we will see, time can also be considered a strand of the dance medium. Choreology establishes ideas, treatments and the medium as the three constituents of a dance work (Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg 19). There is an active dialogue between them, as artistic ideas are treated and define in a process of interaction with the dance medium which is articulated by a number of strands.

The concept of time can indeed inspire creative ideas, and temporal treatments are not infrequent approaches in contemporary dance. For instance in pieces by avant-garde choreographers such as Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* (1965)<sup>3</sup>, Steve Paxton's solo improvisations in the 1980s, or Douglas Dunn's work *Gestures in Red* (1975), the dance idea is to emphasize the passing of time (Banes 45). In these cases, not only time is the creative idea, but time is exposed by a new treatment that involves eliminating typical narrative aspects such as introduction of characters, development of ideas, climatic conclusions, and dynamics.

The choreographic treatments individual artists decide to explore shape their styles and identities, by accepting, rejecting or synthesising established codes, processes and techniques or even proposing new ones. Fontaine explains that "choreographers impose themselves temporally in the interplay of the synchronicity and the simultaneity, of the durations and the speeds, of the variations and the repetitions, of the choice of continuity and break, (and) in the assembly of the different materials" (Fontaine 54). Awareness of these possibilities facilitates the viewers' interpretation and appreciation of the works. Structuring decisions are key to the progression and temporal feel of the works. Traditional forms of temporal progression in dance are closely linked to those in music but new ones are constantly developed. Merce Cunningham's use of chance procedures, which he developed with his partner the musician John Cage, exemplifies this. In their methods the concept of time has a key role. They educated dancers and audiences to perceive in music and sounds the passing of time as well as to feel duration of time where movement occurs simultaneously. Chance became Cunningham's method of structuring his dance pieces leading to an unexpected variety of operative modes and discoveries. Temporal chances became his idiosyncratic process of creating and performing dance. In *Excerpts from Symphonie pour un Homme Seul* in 1952<sup>4</sup>, Cunningham had decided on the idea of introducing everyday gestures, exploring art as life, and transforming classical and modern dance forms for ever. He had been struggling trying to marry the music and the movement since the electronic music was not countable in the traditional sense, so he saw the opportunity to apply the chance procedures he had been experimenting with. Cunningham describes how the work he did for this piece was his solution to a compositional problem in the following explanation:

"So that's why I thought, well, I'll just make the dance in terms of lengths of time, so I set up this procedure with both the solo and the company piece, with different gamuts for each, but figuring out how long in time any given part of the dance took, and I knew the length of each part of the piece, of the sound, and then of course because the sound remains the same all the time, there gradually got to be cues." (qtd in Vaughan 64)

## The Time Strand

Choreology conceives dance as an embodied performative art articulated in a multistranded medium (39). Artists manipulate their ideas exploring the possibilities of the dance medium. Four main strands (performer, movement, sound and space) emerge in dance pieces interrelating in a variety of nexial connections (43). More precisely, choreology understands the complexity involved in these strands and acknowledges that they are formed and defined by a composite of substrands, "that is, those visual, aural or kinetic items" that link to each other within the practice of dance (44). For instance, within the space strand, sets, props and lighting, and more recently projections of filmed spaces and objects are relevant possibilities, i.e. count as substrands. In our observations, we perceive the form of a dance work and establish, or at least sense, connections among substrands that reveal crucial artistic choices and arrangements. These recognitions are essential to our identification, understanding, appreciation and evaluation of the particularities of a piece, its identity and style.

In this framework, however, time is not clearly categorised and appears in between being considered a substrand of the main strands and having the properties of a nexus. Time is perhaps more explicitly stated, in a previous choreological work by Preston-Dunlop where she acknowledged the importance of the experience and organisation of time in dance. Time is placed within the performer and movement strands. She explained that from the performer's experience, time can be perceived, on the one hand, phenomenally from the inside, feeling and strengthening the now; and on the other hand, the dancer can sense time objectively, organising it from the outside with counts (56). In this study, Preston-Dunlop stresses in particular the role of time in movement and how movement rhythms and dynamic qualities happen "within the framework of counted time" (101). Movement becomes objectively metricized in their connection with a time rhythm characterised by pace, duration, speed, and acceleration/deceleration which has traditionally linked movement and music.

As it has already been mentioned, the displacement of time from the core materials that constitute a dance work, could be attributed to the Laban's theories on movement dynamics that choreology takes as reference. They revealed time and space together with weight and flow as motion factors with distinct effort qualities. Time in dance theory and practice is intimately related to a rhythmic presence and rarely considered from other perspectives.

It is my contention that time should be allowed a distinct place in the choreological discourse since temporal choices are key to the processes of creating, performing and appreciating. Choreographic movement displays steps, gestures, techniques, actions and dynamics that involve spatio-temporal dimensions, but space and time can be also attended to as distinct elements of the dance medium. Space as a strand offers artistic choices in the form of sets, lighting, props, place, etc. which play an important role in the creation of the atmosphere in dance art. Time, on the other hand, has not counted as part of the medium. But time together with performer, movement, sound and space constitute the main components of dance art, which interplay in and contribute to dance experiences giving them value and meaning.

Before we continue, I believe it would help to think of these strands of the dance medium with respect to their extremes that suggest a range of possibilities from which artistic choices can be made. So, in the case of the movement strand, this means that it needs to be expressed in terms of movement/stillness. Similarly, we need to conceive a

sound/silence strand, a space/darkness strand, a performer/projection strand, and a time/timelessness strand.

Let me focus now on the choices available to the dance artist with respect to time, on what substrands could be used in the articulation of dance pieces. Firstly, there is the possibility of creating in real time. This is a time we are used to, the time we know how to measure at regular intervals, the time that flows at a constant rate. It is measured clock time, chronological, linear, and ageing and coincides with the natural duration of a performance. In dance art pieces real time is an inescapable dimension to performance although it is quite often not integral to the creative compositional and performative processes and therefore not relevant to their appreciation. In live performances, this means that dance is primarily sequenced and realised by human bodies within a space in real-time before an audience.

Secondly, fictional time, is another option. Fictional time is a deliberate manipulation of real time. Fictional time usually has a referencing logic in its sequencing and narrative, although it can also display incoherent temporal sequences that can be categorised as surreal. Fictional time refers to real time when it organises the plot of a story or narrative; when it represents selected moments of a fictional setting. In fiction, temporal sequences are expanded, compressed, deleted: "Fictional work presents an imagined spatiotemporal world of events in fictional time, but in which we assume unless told otherwise that the form of time, the direction and rate of flow, exactly resembles natural time" (Sesonske 422) This is the case of classical works in ballet such as *The Nutcracker* (1892)<sup>5</sup>, which typically reflect fictional time in their plots.

Thirdly, in dance we have not only the capacity to create new forms of time in which the usual characteristics of time are altered, linearity and sequencing are disrupted, new pulses are constructed, but we have also the possibility of eliminating time, suspend it, arrest its flow. That is, artificial time can be created, in which metric counting disappears and new temporalities emerge in spirals and zigzags, or in which we can experience timelessness.

Fourthly, there is a great creative potential related to memories and imagination, for which the feel of events lacks regularity or clear instants. The artist can work on changes in our consciousness by allusions to (real or fictional) memories, or stimulate different perceptions of time. This is what we refer to as psychological time, i.e. a personal experience of time that arises from engaging in an activity. It refers to the sense of passing time, to how performance might feel, e.g. longer or shorter than it really is from the point of view of the spectator and dancer. The feeling of a psychological time though applies mainly to actual, real time rather than represented time.

The creative options here described, are of course not exclusive to dance. Other arts share aspects of the dance medium, and indeed, in the cases of music and film merge frequently with dance. What it is of interest here are the variations in the articulation of the dance medium, i.e. the selection of elements by the artist(s) and how these emerge in a web of complex nexial connections, because those variations together with the form they take in performance are what constitute the identity of a piece, its specific stylistic devices and expressive qualities. They are the basis of our aesthetic appreciation.

Nexial practices, as explained by choreology, can take a number of forms; they can aim at integrating, juxtaposing, or at presenting co-existing or contra-contextual strands (Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg 58). If we examine Cunningham's compositions,

we see that "[t]he music and dance co-exist as individual but interpenetrating happenings, jointly experienced in the length of time they take up and divide." (qtd in Vaughan 134). Due to this nexial coexistence, Copeland has described Cunningham's work as "a performative version of collage" (13); the term reflects how the choreographer works the connections between the elements in a dance in terms of simultaneity but total independence from each other, with a major emphasis on how this occurs between movement and sound, with human bodies, time and space underlying them.

Our interest in dance art is not, however, exclusively in *what* substrands are involved and *how* they are interconnected but also in *why* they are chosen, *when* they become physically realised and *who* takes part in the creative process. Focusing on authorship allow us to identify the increasingly fluid roles of the artists and audiences, contributing to our understanding of the artistic merits and creativity involved. Answering why questions around the dance substrands provides socio-cultural insights into a piece while responding to when brings a historical dimension to it.

We will now see some examples in which time functions as idea, treatment or strand of the medium in dance pieces, first in the context of dance performances for the theatre, and then in instances of dance for the camera. The main focus will be on the creative process with some considerations on the process of appreciation.

### **Time in dance performances for the theatre**

Real time, or metric time, is inescapable to every dance event. However, dance art usually works hard to hide this fact, involving us in a fictional, artificial and/or psychological temporality. Most frequently in the creation, performance and appreciation processes, several layers of time are at work.

As it was previously mentioned, works in real time have been explored by contemporary dance, notably in the work of Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham, and subsequently by a multitude of post-modern dance makers. Artists have worked on the insistence of an instant, on emphasis on the present moment in dance that immediately dissolves in the past, marking the abandonment of fictional references and the embracement of sheer actuality and reality. With respect to Cunningham, Stephanie Jordan explains that he called "for a more acute sense of each moment or element in a work, for what the moment is rather than for its meaning or value in relation to anything else" (4). Not only are we asked to experience real moments but also to resist making sense or aesthetic connections beyond the performance itself. Cunningham believed that "if you accept it as it is and go along with it as it happens, moment by moment, then it doesn't have to be cohesive in that ordinary sense. It becomes what it is the moment you are looking at it" (*The Dancer and the Dance* 172). Cunningham went on to explore a number of ways in which real time could be used in dance, in choreological terms, as a main creative idea, as a way to treat an idea as well as the dominant aspect of the dance medium.

The question here is how attention to real time in performance can be accomplished in dance works. A possible way is making the performing act a creative process and so dispensing of planning, rehearsing, remembering, repeating; in these cases, the dance develops at the moment of its performance. Another way in which real time can be exposed is by leaving actual time length open, unfixed, as it is the case in some of the Cunningham's pieces. For instance, *Summerspace* (1958) does not have a fixed length of time, it can last between 15 and 17 minutes, depending on the different sizes of the stages (Vaughan 110)<sup>6</sup>. Cunningham would later retake this idea of unfixed length of time and

extend it to the other strands of the medium in *Æon* (1961),<sup>7</sup> which was explicitly stated in the programme notes for this work: "This is a dance of actions, a celebration of unfixity, in which the seasons pass, atmospheres dissolve, people come together and part. Its meaning is the instant in the eye and ear, and its continuity is change" (qtd. in Vaughan 126).

Most commonly, art creates fictional time, a time where events reflect a narrative that highlights selected moments, although these do not need to unfold in the exact sequence of events, it can reach future and past. Pieces of classical ballet like *Swan Lake* (1877)<sup>8</sup> typically reflect fictional worlds, development of characters, narrative suspense and so on. In addition there are fictional non-narrative pieces that refer to chronological time but do not employ its logical order. Again, these possibilities have been explored by contemporary artists. As Banes has explained "[n]ot only can the body be relaxed in post-modern dance (in contrast to both ballet and modern dance), but time, in the sense of suspense, is also relaxed" (Banes 16). These fictions do not display introductions, conclusions, climatic moments or continuities. Traditional hierarchical structures to convey meanings are undermined and juxtapositions are preferred to sequencing. A device used, for example, in the work of the choreographer Pina Bausch.

In addition to the experimentation with real and fictional time, dance can make use of artificial. Artificial time has the capacity to stop time and make the piece timeless (a similar action can be done with respect to the other strands of the medium, exploring their polarities, i.e. stop sounds, hold stillness, virtualise performers or make them disappear, etc.). Repetition is one of the devices that has been used expressively, for instance, by Gertrude Stein and Richard Alston "to suspend time into a continuous present and to isolate the moment to be observed" (Jordan 12). Engagement with artificial time includes blurring the boundaries between before and after resulting in a never ending present, as well as the exploration of the possibility of simultaneous actions of movement and stillness, such as in Cunningham's explorations in *Walkaround Time* (1968)<sup>9</sup>.

But how are these temporal experiences perceived and appreciated? Sesonke has suggested that "[l]ocation in time, in film as in literature, is internal to the work. An event we see in a film may be seen as past, present or future within the world of the work" (425) However, this is a simplification of our experience of art in terms of its commonly fictitious intrinsic time. It is important to acknowledge three main possibilities in our time experiences of art: temporal overlapping, temporal fluctuations and temporal contradictions.

First, during the course of a performance event, audiences will encounter an inevitable degree of interplay and convergence between various temporalities, so the experience is really a synthesis of perception of a range of different times. Fontaine has pointed out, that Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, in particular, has deliberately aimed at that experience. She uses time as a tool and constructs complicated scenes where a multiplicity of temporal instances are assembled together. A clear example of this is her work *Rosas danst Rosas* (1983), in which "[v]arious time modes are woven together: chronological (development and transformation), cyclical (repetition), heterochronic (the simultaneous relationship of different temporalities)" (Fontaine 196)

Second, although it is true that we learn through conventions to suspend disbelief and accept the logic of fictitious narratives or artificial temporalities presented in a piece, however this experience, occasionally, might not be sustained or could be disrupted. Individuals can experience the domination of different temporalities at different

moments, which can be initiated by the work and its properties but it can also be due to personal levels of consciousness. These variations in attention to time factors, and therefore in the way time is experienced among different individuals, are what make appreciation of dance works a subjective enterprise.

Thirdly, in our perception of time in dance we can perceive tensions between different temporalities that prompt contradictory messages.

### **Dance for the camera<sup>10</sup>**

A further complexity with respect to the realization and perception of time in dance is added when a piece is captured by technological means. Dance in film becomes a single artistic object, a tangible piece that (in some cases) has been conceived to exist exclusively on that form. For the purpose of this paper, I will concentrate on dances that have been created or translated for the camera, and therefore I will exclude references to dances that were filmed with the aim to keep a record of the work as well as references to dance performances in the theatre that incorporate film and/or other technological devices or products.

Imaging technology together with dance form a hybrid medium opening up the range of creative possibilities. The result is that the emotional texture of the dance event is mediated by the camera. Dance and film have been having a successful relationship, enriching each other practices. As Rosenberg has suggested:

"the representation of that dancing is filtered through the compositional and esthetic strategies of the camera operator or director, and, at a later point, through the editing process [...] The language of time-based media allows for a constantly shifting, ever fluid definition of place and time. What is consistent is that dance is the catalyst for each investigation" (277)

After decades of interaction, neither dance, nor film can be the same again. Unsurprisingly the effects of technologies on dance can be appreciated in some contemporary pieces. Many choreographers have acknowledged the fact that technologies have helped them to create and conceive new movement ideas. Merce Cunningham understood the role of film and its influence on dance products and practices, acknowledging in particular its impact on the tempo of the movement:

"The camera takes a fixed view, but it can be moved. There is the possibility of cutting to a second camera which can change the size of the dancer, which, to my eye, also affects the time, the rhythm of movement. [...] the speed with which one catches an image on the television made me introduce into our class work different elements concerned with tempos which added a new dimension to our general class work behaviour." (qtd. in Vaughan 276)

This impact was more dramatically felt by Meredith Monk. Her declaration: "I'm doing live movies" (qtd. in McNamara 102) reflects her cinematic approach to performances.

It can be argued that it is in filmed or videoed dance in particular, where the articulation of time becomes quite prominent. In dance for the camera, our perception of temporal dimensions is sharpened, that is, it becomes easier to recognise time as a main strand of the danced medium. In contrast, space not only gets more fragmented but it also loses part of its dimensionality. Technologies flatten the dance image but they bring to dance a plasticity that is lacking in live performances in the theatre. Through multiple perspectives, lenses, camera movements, special effects and editing techniques, the dance content has the potential to become something very different from what it is on the stage. When presented as cinematic art, moving bodies, sounds, spaces and times can be enhanced, disjuncted, distorted, disembodied, resulting in a new dance reality. Dance is

created and appreciated in an extended or virtual reality, even a disappearing one. The nature of the strands, as well as the relationships between them, can be altered. Different nexial connections between spaces, times, bodies, physical actions and sounds bring new identities to dance.

In dance for the camera we experience a more explicit aestheticization of time. Live performances force the simultaneity of the performance and appreciation processes, while in filmed dances appreciating is more detailed and reflective as one can control de viewing time. Multiple references to time are possible, and can produce a kaleidoscopic array of times similar to the multiple spatial facets displayed in cubist paintings –where visually conflicting spatial perspectives are configured simultaneously aiming not at the representation of a coherent whole but rather at a complete representation of a reality that reveals a detailed analysis of its components including a translation of its colours (Daix and Rosselet). As it occurs in the theatre, the spectator's sense might shift from overlapping temporal dimensions to a reduction of a single time that overpowers the others. Again, despite the artistic intention or tricks to construct a particular experience, individuals consciously and unconsciously manage the works' temporalities. This makes the experience of time deeply subjective, and potentially different in various encounters with the work.

Merce Cunningham was soon aware of the potential of the technology and sought to explore it. He has been a prolific filmmaker, filming numerous pieces with his own company.<sup>11</sup> Cunningham's work is one of the best examples of the use of dance and technologies including a range of transpository experiments from the stage to the camera and vice versa. Next I will examine the use of the dance medium with particular attention to the time strand in one of his best known pieces.

### **Time in *Beach Birds*: from the Stage to the Camera**

In 1992, Cunningham launched into a transposition of his recently created dance for the stage, *Beach Birds* (1991), to a 35mm wide-screen film format, resulting in *Beach Birds for Camera*.<sup>12</sup> Cunningham work in this piece is an instance of what can be described as an amplified transposition, since the filmed version modifies quantitatively and qualitatively the original staged dance. I will be examining in this section how the time strand is employed in both of these pieces, how time contributes to their expressivity, and how it affects our understanding and appreciation of the works.

As it is characteristic of Cunningham, in both versions, the main strands appear primarily as coexisting, i.e. movement, sound and space components are developed and performed independently of each other, sharing only real time and space but not communicating. He is applying here his old idea of "time-structure", a time span in which movement and music can work autonomously from each other (Cunningham, "Space, Time and Dance" 67) Cunningham uses the actual time the work takes to evolve to support the chosen theme. However, the work does not show temporally structured events in a narrative form, as the piece unfolds, the spectator is invited to construct images of birds, animals, humans and rocks on the beach. There is a poetic quality to the way time evolves as fluid continuity blending subsequent phrases without an intention of progression. Moreover dance sections are connected in a sequence that can differ in length from performance to performance, a possibility that evidently disappeared in the filmed version which was fixed in 28 minutes, slightly less time than the original staged version.

In the filmed work we see eleven dancers (three more than in the choreography for the stage) from Cunningham's own dance company. Marsha Skinner, in charge of the costumes, dressed them all in identical white and black leotards and tights making a direct reference to bird figures. Performers bring birds to mind but also draw attention to their human bodies but outside any specific temporality. These performing bodies are not meant to be expressive in the sense of conveying emotions, they just move. Tresca Weinstein remarked: "What's most chilling about Cunningham is the absence of emotion. His dancers move like well-assembled collections of body parts, powered by the force of nature or mechanics but without will or desire of their own" (3). In fact, Cunningham accentuates this remarkably in the film where, despite a closer encounter with these bodies, we are even more aware of the fact that they are decentralized in space, that they do not intend to connect with us.



*Figure 1. Merce Cunningham Dance Company, Beach Birds for Camera.*

His emphasis on the absence of projection of emotions does not mean, however, the elimination of expressivity but rather he is moving away from expressive conventions. Cunningham believes in the expressive power of the moving body and the personal reading of it, as he put it: "I don't think that what I do is non-expressive, it's just that I don't try to inflict it on anybody, so each person may think in whatever way his [sic] feelings and experience take him. I always feel that movement itself is expressive, regardless of intentions of expressivity, beyond intention" (*The Dancer and the Dance* 106). Cunningham partly composed his choreography with the use of the 3D computer animated programme LifeForms. He explained the movements for this piece in terms of time at two different levels: "It is all based on individual physical phrasing. The dancers don't have to be exactly together. They can dance like a flock of birds, when they suddenly take off. They are not really together; they just do it at the same time" (qtd in Vaughan 258). Preston-Dunlop describes the timing of these movements as arbitrary timing "which suggests the arbitrary shifts in nesting, sitting, roosting birds" (28). On the one hand, arbitrary timing is completely artificial, it is irregular and unpredictable. Movement phrases display an artificiality of action time, relating simultaneously to fictional moments. On the other hand, the audience encounters a dynamic tension of movement and stillness that is not based on common counts, the timing of the movement is individual.

In both instances, Cage's music *Four*<sup>3</sup>, based on the sound and silence of one or two pianos, twelve rainsticks, one violin or oscillator, coexists with Cunningham's

choreography.<sup>13</sup> Long silences, scattered notes at the pianos, isolated notes on the violin set the piece in a suspended time. Aural time is artificial, unordered, without rhythm, dynamics or building on melodic expectations. Silence and stillness hold the passing of time.

References to time are more clearly established with the use of space constituents. The full depth of the stage is exposed and the backcloth is a white scrim on which colour lights are projected using chance methods not integrated in the structure of the choreography. The lighting would evoke different moments on a beach, e.g. dawn, dusk. But these time references are not fictional references to a reality. Colours connect more clearly with a psychological time, with our individual memories of single or multiple spatio-temporal experiences. Lights connect nexially with a psychological time prompting a reverie of real but unordered lived moments at the beach.

In *Beach Birds for Camera*, the connection between space and time is slightly different. In this instance, we are presented with two differentiated sections: a first one in black and white followed, after 13 minutes, by a second one in full colour. This change of colours has been explained in terms of recognition of the existence of the original stage piece, as a reference to its original staged production. Whether that is an intentional artistic quote or not, black and white images do have in film a sense of the past, they transport us to old times, while colour brings us to the present and closer to the future. A subtle blackout between one part and the other, and abrupt cuts between choreographic phrases alert us of a temporal jump. In addition, the black and white part was shot at the Industria Superstudio in New York City and the second part in colour at the Kaufman Astoria Studios in Queens. Cunningham takes full advantage of the cinematic possibility of jumping from one location to a completely different one. We can see the daylight of the real world through the windows of the Industria building, and as in the staged version, the sides of the rooms are revealed in the Studios at Queens. The original idea of the backcloth displaying different tonalities of colours is only used in a light blue. Spaces appear fragmented and changing from real to fictional worlds, suggesting a range of temporalities.

What is our aesthetic response to this creative formulation? Watching this piece my attention is constantly pushed to different temporal perspectives by the visual and aural elements demanding a continuous evaluation of its structuring devices. *Beach Birds* main expressive power is grounded in the nexus time establishes with other strands maintaining discreet and unrelated connections with each of them and creating a multidimensional time. Considering the effect of the work at a macro level, we are confronted with several layers of time. The time of performing/appreciation is real and reinforces thematic development; the piece projects a variety of intrinsic times: movements use artificial time to construct fictional activities, lighting ignites a psychological time and cinematic techniques situate us in a present that experiences memories of the past. Non narrative spatio-temporal references become the main focus of our engagement. In the filmed version, where the cinematic medium allows for a more extreme exposition and fragmentation of spaces and temporalities, we are further challenged in the request to focus on the physical continuity of the work. At a micro level, individual rhythms, timings and dynamics of the strands of the medium become essentially functional or are explicitly eliminated. Movement qualities display what Denby identified as "action rhythm", i.e. whatever rhythm an action might require for a dancer, and the music is formulated in sounds that avoid meeting points, rhythmic patterns or variations in tempo.

As it is characteristic in Cunningham's works, this piece invite us to engage with it, neither by appealing to our emotions nor by requiring a search for meanings or intentions, but rather by purely appreciating its capacity for evocation. My emotions arise not by sympathising with characters or dramatic events but by synthesising these temporalities and their effective connections with the other elements in the dance event. In turn, this process initiates a reverie of familiar moments, and transports me to recognisable lived instants. The attentive contemplation of the work brings pleasurable feelings beyond the dance event. In this sense, I become actively engaged in a subjective experience inspired by the created temporal layers in the dance work but grounded on my past experiences. At this stage I am not troubled about whether this is part or not of the artist's intended effect since I am not aiming at an interpretation of the work. For me, time is aesthetically significant here as I am moved by its functioning in the universe of the piece and the accidental connections with my own history.

### **Conclusion**

A combined phenomenological and semiotic investigation of the role of time in dance art, as proposed by choreology, requires the study of time ideas and treatments, but should also allow us to examine time as one of the strands of the medium and discover its nexial intricacies with the other elements involved in a dance event. This approach can illuminate our understanding of specific past and future dance works but also our aesthetics responses to them.

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<sup>2</sup> The literature on the characteristics of space as an entity, the function of space in dance, space as the context of dance, etc. is considerable compared to the attention that has been given to the concept of time in dance. See on space, for example, Vera Maletic, Body, Space, Expression. The Development of Rudolf Laban's Movement and Dance Concepts (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1987), Valerie Briginshaw, A., Dance, Space and Subjectivity (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave, 2001), Helen Thomas, ed., Dance in the City (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Performed for the first time as *The Mind is a Muscle, Part 1*, at the Judson Church in New York in 1966. It was danced by Yvonne Rainer herself, David Gordon and Steve Paxton. It was subsequently filmed in 1978, and recorded in labanotation by Joukje Kolff and Melanie Clarke in 2004.

<sup>4</sup> First performed in Waltham, Massachusetts, under the title *Collage*. Electronic music by Pierre Schaeffer with the collaboration of Pierre Henry.

<sup>5</sup> First performance at the Imperial Ballet, St. Petesburg. Music by P. Tchaikovsky.

<sup>6</sup> Morton Feldman's music for this piece cannot support phrasing and tempo so a personal sense of time becomes important for the performers. Scenery by Robert Rauschenberg.

<sup>7</sup> Cage explain this unfixity: "The dance is so made that it can be presented for a longer or shorter time, with more or less events and more or fewer performers, and the order that the events take can change from evening to evening." David Vaughan, ed., Merce Cunningham. Fifty Years (Aperture, 1997) 126. *Æon* was originally presented under the title *Combines*. Music by John Cage, costumes and objects by Robert Rauschenberg.

<sup>8</sup> First production from Moscow with music by Peter I. Tchaikovsky and choreography by Julius W. Reisinger. Many subsequent choreographic versions.

<sup>9</sup> Music by David Behrman, scenery by Jasper Johns who designed it after Marcel Duchamp's *The Large Glass*. Film version directed by Charles Atlas in 1973.

<sup>10</sup> A number of different terms have been proposed to refer to the marriage between dance and imagining technologies. "Screen-dance" was suggested at the International Dance and Technology conference in 1999 for dance that was experienced in film, video or computers. "Dance for the camera" has been also widely used for similar purposes. A more recent classification has been attempted by Carroll who has identified three types of what he has called "moving-picture dance": moving-picture dance documentations, moving-picture dance constructions and moving-picture dance reconstructions, that is, straight recordings of live dance performances, recordings that create a new dance work and those that reinterpret an existing one

respectively. For a full discussion of this terminology and new concepts, see Noel Carroll, "Toward a Definition of Moving-Picture Dance," *Dance Research Journal* 33.1 (2001).

<sup>11</sup> Some of his choreographies for the camera are *Variations V* (1965), *Westbeth* (1974), *Channels/Inserts* (1981), *Points in Space* (1986) and *Fabrications* (1987).

<sup>12</sup> The film was directed by Elliot Caplan and first shown publicly at L'Opera de Paris Garnier.

<sup>13</sup> The word 'four' in the title makes reference to the number of performers for the piece, the superscript number 3 indicates the chronological order of the work in other compositions of the same title. This piece was based on Satie's composition *Vexations*.