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“Let the motion happen”.

The emergence of dance from the felt-bodily relationship with the world

Abstract

Following Erika Fischer-Lichte’s notion of emergence as an unexpected phenomenon that questions the notion of agency, our aim is to investigate how dance emerges through movements that are spontaneous and yet learnt while not being reducible to a motor expertise. Through Hermann Schmitz’ theory of the felt body, and notions such as “kinaesthetic attention”, grace and “pure” presence, we will show how dance movements emerge from the mutual “affective” influence between dancers and the surroundings thanks to dancers’ “pathic” state between awareness and unconsciousness, lâcher prise and restraint.

Keywords

Emergence, Pathic moment, Embodied communication

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1. Introduction

Emergence [...] means the unpredictability of new phenomena. Thus, all those phenomena are considered emergent that could not have been predicted before their first occurrence, even if a plausible explanation for their occurrence can be found afterward [...] As regards its use in theatre-theoretical contexts, two aspects are of particular interest about the concept of emergence two aspects are of particular interest: (a) the specific mode of perception that emergent phenomena challenge, and (b) the effects of emergence. on the agency of the perceivers [...] The perception of a causal chain [...] is abruptly interrupted. A discontinuity arises, a break [...] Such a mode of perception causes the perceived element to appear as present in a particular way and with particular intensity [...] insofar as causality and intentionality are considered decisive for the course of events and the completion of actions, the events and actions themselves appear as large predictable. That is, man can direct his own actions according to such predictions and in this way influence events, indeed determine them. In this sense, he has considerable agency [...] for if events can occur unforeseen, so that they cannot be countered with planned action, this requires a willingness to let oneself be determined by them and not only to want to determine them. Events can only ever be partially controlled, but never completely. (Fischer-Lichte 2005: 90, our transl.)

Fischer Lichte's characterisation of the notion of emergence in the theatrical context expresses the meaning of emergence we intend to explore in our investigation about what allows the emergence of dance, namely how dance movements can emerge as such, as spontaneous movements yet irreducible to mere reflexes, as learnt movements yet irreducible to a mere execution of steps and positions.

Before delving into our analysis of the emergence of dance movements from the perspective of the dancer, some specifications need to be made. The first concerns the unpredictable nature of dance movements; the irreducibility of dance movements to the sequence of choreographic steps performed depends exactly on their unpredictable nature, which manifests itself in the fact that, not only at their first appearance – as pointed out by Fischer-Lichte – but also on each occasion when they are performed, they are experienced by the dancer and the spectator differently. This seems to occur also in non-improvised dances¹, as the way one feels in the context in which one dances – whether

¹ According to us, in improvised dance forms we witness the exhibition of the process underlying the emergence and the performance of non-improvised dance. We will therefore refer to studies on both improvised and non-improvised dances.

in the dance studio or on stage, with or without an audience² – changes according to contingent factors reflected in the way movements are performed and, consequently, in the way dancers and spectators are affected.

As regards Fischer-Lichte's claim that emergent events appear "in their presence", it seems that not only the notion of "presence" as it is used here should be explained, but also that, in the case of dance, the notion of presence should be referred to dancers rather than to their movements. The notion of "presence" refers, in fact, to dancers' attunement to how they feel while moving in a certain choreographic piece, thus relying on their being not agent subjects but rather, borrowing Tonino Griffero's expression, "pathic subjects"³, i.e., subjects that let themselves go with what is happening to them. This brings us to the second aspect associated by Fischer-Lichte with the phenomenon of emergence: its influence on the agency of the subject who, faced with an uncontrollable event, gives up trying to determine it through planned action and disposes himself to be determined by it. In our opinion, the emergence of dance does not simply modify the agency of the subject but shows how inaccurate our overall conviction is of being able to determine events as dance movements, and highlights how our actions are, instead, the result of the unpredictable way in which we are affected by the environment.

Our thesis is that dance emerges from the relationship of the dancer with the surroundings, whose "affective" action gives rise to movements that are neither voluntary goal-directed actions nor involuntary reactions to stimuli, but rather arise from a hybrid condition in which voluntariness and involuntariness, consciousness and non-consciousness, control and unpredictability are intertwined, provided with a spontaneity that, precisely because it is acquired through technique and daily

² Fischer-Lichte identifies, as the source of this unpredictability, the unpredictable nature of the interaction between the performers and the spectators, whose felt-bodily co-presence is at the basis of every performance. Although, for a dance performance to occur, the felt-bodily co-presence of dancers and spectators is indispensable (Fischer-Lichte 2010), it does not seem to be the case for the emergence of a dance movement to occur. Not only may a dance movement emerge as such when the dancer is alone in the studio, but it can also happen that – on stage or not – dance movements do not "emerge"; dancers, in fact, may merely execute instead of "really" dancing their movements.

³ Tonino Griffero's notion of a "pathic subject" is at the centre of the "atmospherological approach" he elaborated within the framework of a "pathic aesthetics" (Griffero 2014; 2017; 2020a).

practice, reveals the genesis of every spontaneous movement. A central role in our analysis will therefore be played by the conditions that must occur for the dance movement to be "allowed" to happen, rather than "made" to "happen". When a dance movement is merely executed, the dancer himself is conscious of not having "really danced": "Even professional dancers have moments when they say: the dance happens or it doesn't [...] 'It just isn't there', I can't feel it, I'm not getting it'. (Fraleigh 1993: 103). What is lacking in these cases is not technical competence or correct memorisation of movement sequences, but the ability to have made oneself receptive to "welcome" the movement, which requires to be "felt" before it can be executed. If, however, what allows dance movement to emerge is not an indistinct and mechanical application of principles, neither it is a kind of invocation of movement in an almost mystical state. On the contrary, dance emerges thanks to the ability to tune into "how it feels" to move in a certain context, entering a "state of receptivity", a "tension entre le lâcher prise et la retenue, entre l'abandon et la possibilité d'une reprise" (Pouillaude 2006: 155) and thus discovering the ways of moving and feeling made possible by the context.

2. The "pathic" origin of dance

In this movement I always get chills hearing the music and...knowing that my partner is walking to me amongst all these girls. I'm so excited they are about to do this amazing ballet. And then when he touches me, it's like the beginning of a journey. And I never know what is going to happen, it's always different every show. "Serenade is all about sweeping and bending and really luxuriating in the moment, letting the music kind of sweep you off your feet. I do not really go with my steps until the music takes me. There is no story, there is no specific thing that we have to show. It can be whatever we are feeling. It's just being in the moment with each other. Jared and I have danced so much together that we can really be free... Here I feel like I'm being swept off my feet like a teacup ride at a theme park and if my partner does not do it right my feet are killing me, but Jared always does it right, and I feel like I'm floating around⁴.

Ballet dancer Sara Mearns' comment on a video showing her in the *pas de deux* of George Balanchine's *Serenade*, the emergence of dance appears as one of the most intense moments of dancers' experience. Manifesting itself at as the same – "I always get chills..." – and yet always differ-

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gza2jhUWl2Q> (accessed: 04/09/2022).

ent – "And then when he touches me ... I never know what is going to happen, it is always different in every show", not only dance does not begin with the execution of Mearns' first movement but not even with a physical movement. The dance emerges, in fact, from the effect of her partner's touch on Mearns' shoulder; even though she expects it, she can never predict what sensations that touch will arouse in her, how she, "ignited" by this touch, will respond to its "mute" call.

The sensation aroused by this initial touch is, however, only the beginning of the dance's emergence, a "journey" itself where each movement will be allowed to "happen" not in the single steps or position but in the space between the movements, in the invisible and yet tangible everchanging intertwining of the dancers, the music, the stage, that underlies and qualitatively connotes the gestures performed. At each re-configuration of this intertwining, Mearns is less and less the author of her movements, feeling so much at one with the music that she does not even execute the steps, it is the music that "takes" her, but also with her partner and – we could even say – the floor, the suspended breath of the spectators, the blue light illuminating the stage, and the costume floating around her. Independently from the affective states that differ at every performance, Mearns is pervaded by a feeling of "freedom", not a simple release, but a sense of "presence", of "being there" – *être là* (Boissière 2018: 17) –, the feeling of coinciding with what is happening to her, which "takes" and leads her to an unknown destination towards which she moves with a confidence that amazes the dancer herself, first and foremost.

The peculiarity of dancers' being "taken", is that that there is not a transcendent, third dimension that acts upon the dancer, making her interact with the other dancers and elements present in the surroundings the way puppets are moved by a puppeteer, but rather "intracorporeal unities" formed by the intertwining of the dancers and between them with and the surroundings. These unities refer to a more fundamental, original unity where "the subject and the object are not independent and isolable parts" (Griffero 2014: 121) but are united in a relationship that ontologically precedes their existence as separate entities. The sensations is one of being part of something that moves in, between, and through them while moving the dancers themselves, in an everchanging, uncontrollable, and yet unexpectedly "right" patterns for the movements foreseen by the choreography to occur. This can be explained as the experience of what Erwin Straus characterises as "pathic moment" of our perceptive experiences, i.e., "the immediate communication we have with things

based on their changing way they present themselves to our senses" (Straus 2011: 69). Straus' definition of the "pathic" as the way in which things are presented us – thus differentiating it from the "gnostic" moment, the "what" we experience – refers precisely to this primordial, pre-conceptual relationship we have with the world.

As Mearns' words show, in fact, dance emerges even before the physical gesture in the sensations aroused by the "affective" touch of the environment in which the dancer is immersed. Initiated neither inside nor outside the dancer's body, the movement arises not from the simple interaction between the dancers but from the spontaneous formation of relational units between each other and between them and the environment, in which the fundamental and original dimension of the "pathic", immediate communication with the world, resonates with different tones each time. There is thus no such thing as a "dance movement" *ex-nihilo* created as a single physical gesture, but a whole dynamic that "pathically" arises and unfolds permeating the whole dance experience.

3. *Dance as the "active outflow" from primitive presence*

When we refer to the emergence of "dance movement" we will therefore be referring to this dynamic, to investigate which we will recur to Hermann Schmitz' "alphabet of felt-bodiliness" (Schmitz 2019b: 19-21) within his "new phenomenology", an approach aimed at restoring the access to "spontaneous life experience [i.e.,] anything that happens to humans in a felt manner, without their having intentionally constructed it" (Schmitz 2019a: 11). Although dance is not at the centre of his investigation, this art is, for him, closely related to the "pathic" dimension of experience, by Schmitz designated as "felt bodiliness", i.e.,

whatever someone feels in the vicinity (not always within the boundaries) of their material body as belonging to themselves and without drawing on the senses seeing and touching as well as the perceptual body schema (the habitual conception of one's own body), derived from the experiences made using the senses" (Schmitz 2019a: 65).

"Neither body nor soul", the felt body is "an entity which is spatially extended in a way similar to sound (it is indivisible and pre-dimensional, yet differentiated into moving masses of diffuse "isles") (Schmitz 2002: 492) built around the felt-bodily dynamic, the dialogue between contractedness or

narrowness (*Enge*) and expansiveness (*Weite*), i.e., the poles to which the tendency towards contraction (*Engung*) and the tendency towards expansion (*Weitung*) are respectively directed, and whose intertwining forms the "vital drive". This latter ceases to exist when contraction and expansion subsist one independently from the other in the form of "privative contraction" and "privative expansion". The oscillation between narrowness and expansions gives rise to all our affective states – "fear, pain, lust, hunger, thirst, disgust, vigor, tiredness and being in the grip of emotions (Schmitz 2019a: 65) – which are positioned on a scale from privative expansion to privative contraction.

According to Schmitz, dance shows the generation of the felt-bodily dynamic, namely its arising from affective involvements, as an outflow from primitive presence, i.e., the "extreme point of narrowing" (contractedness) that one reaches when is affectively involved by, say, a sudden pain or fright, so that he

collapses under the pressure of the threat of the unexpectedly sudden new, which tears apart the smooth flow of his life and places him in the confines of a present that is as much temporal as spatial: temporal as the torn-off suddenness, spatially as the narrowness into which he is forced by the collision. (Schmitz 2011: 2, our transl.)

The spatial and temporal present where the subject affectively involved is confined, are the absolute time – the suddenness – and the absolute place – contractedness – of the primitive presence (Schmitz 2019c). This latter is defined by Schmitz as the way in which we convince ourselves of being "here and now" leaving no doubt of being exactly ourselves (Schmitz 2011: 1). During affective involvements, primitive presence manifests itself as the fusion of "the five elements *here, now, being, this, and I*" of which it constitutes the "primitive root"⁵. When one is affected by, say, a sudden pain, he finds himself in an "absolute" time and space – i.e., in a place and time un-

⁵ This is the condition of infants, together with animals and persons affected by advanced dementia. With the access to the world as adults, "the absolute locus turns into a number of relative loci in space, the absolute moment into a system of relative moments in time. Identity and difference become independent of the primary situation of being affected [...] being is linked with [...] non-being [...] some subjective meanings [...] lose their subjectivity" (Schmitz 2002: 493). Although most of our everyday life takes place in the unfolded presence, we are never totally emancipated by it, which orients us, giving us the self-awareness that underlies every self-attribution but which, at the same time, "cannot fill life if it does not unfold" (Schmitz 2006: 19). The unfolding of primitive presence takes place with access to the world and with the formation of the felt-bodily dynamic from the contraction provoked by affective involvements.

definable through a system of mutual positions and distances – which, merging with reality, deprive him of the possibility of detaching himself from it (Schmitz 2018: 49). It thus becomes impossible for the individual to identify himself with anything, feeling instead to coincide with what happens to him; he, therefore, loses the "relative" identity that characterises his everyday life and accesses his "absolute identity", the solid basis that allows him to identify himself and to ascribe to himself what happens to him, which is what characterises us as "persons" (Schmitz 2019a: 61-72).

As it includes both pauses and gliding momentum (*gleitender Schwung*), dance embodies the "basic antagonism" between the suddenness of affective involvements and the gliding duration in which this suddenness is withdrawn. While pauses mark the sudden interruption of the new and the confinement of the subject affectively involved in contractedness – the spatial correspondent of suddenness –, the gliding momentum exhibits the formation of the felt-bodily dynamic from the expansion elicited by the contraction provoked by suddenness, as expansion tends to be unbroken, gliding duration in which suddenness withdraws. The contraction elicited by the affective involvement through which we access the primitive presence stimulates, in fact, the reaction of felt-bodily expansion. As expansion joins contraction, they bind together giving rise to the vital drive through which the felt-bodily dynamic begins (Schmitz 2011: 19). The gliding momentum that initiates dance movement is thus the spatial representation of the unfolding of the primitive presence into the felt-bodily dynamic, which does not show up in the time frame, in which one only witnesses the slipping into non-being of the present exposed by the sudden irruption of the new. While this latter is a "mere happening, a suffered event" where duration offers no possibility for active shaping (*Gestaltung*), movements represent the active outflow (*aktive Hervorgehen*) from primitive presence thanks to the extension offered by space as a field of active unfolding.

Dance appears therefore as the exhibition, while realising it, of the generative process of movements themselves from affective involvements, which are configured as the unfolding of primitive presence in the vastness of space. This is shown not only through pauses and gliding momentum but in the very way in which each movement or pose is performed, which returns the affective action exerted on dancers by the surroundings – the presence and actions of the other dancers, music, props and even the floor – whose way of affecting the dance is in turn affectively influenced by the mode of execution of dance steps and poses.

As we observed in commenting on Mearns' words, the dance emerges from the "immediate" relationship with the environment in which the dancers are immersed, which is differentially expressed in the intracorporeal unities that underpin each dance movement, each transition from one to the other through the solicitation of modulations of the sensation felt by the "affective involvement" with which the dance begins – it can be a glance, the initial note of a music, the darkness before the turning on of the lights. Pivoting on receptivity to stimuli (*Reizempfänglichkeit*) of the vital drive is the constant search for unexplored ways of being affected by the context – which is in turn by affected by what we could call, with Frédéric Pouillaude, the "general mode of being and of doing" (Pouillaude 2017: 156) transmitted by the technique of the dance genre in question. A key role, in this research is played by "motor suggestions" and "synaesthetic qualities", i.e.,

bridging qualities that can be noticed in one's own felt body but also be perceived in encounters with others, whether at rest or in motion. These are suggestions of movement – vivid sketches of motion without being fully enacted – and synaesthetic qualities that are mostly intermodal properties of specific sensory qualities, but can, in the case of expansive, dense or pressing silence, also occur without any sensory quality. Synaesthetic qualities that do not require synaesthesia are, for example, the sharpness, luridness, softness, flashiness, brightness, hardness, warmth, coldness, gravity, massiveness, density, smoothness, roughness of colours, sounds, smells, sound & silence, of a springy or sluggish gait, of joy, of enthusiasm, melancholy, freshness and tiredness; this list suggests how much overlap what is felt bodily and what is perceived objectively. (Schmitz 2019a: 68)

Music, for example, is the "realm" of motor suggestions (Schmitz 2006: 23; 2011: 34-5; 2015: 52), which, together with the synaesthetic qualities of the environment – the quality of the floor, of the props, or even of other dancers' touch – "inspires" certain movements and a certain modality of execution through the activation of felt-bodily isles, i.e., pre-dimensional, surfaceless, "absolute" areas corresponding to some areas of the physical body but irreducible to them⁶. Another dimension of the felt body that

⁶ The felt body itself can be conceived as "a 'crowd' of felt-bodily isles, some of which are relatively stable (oral cavity, anal zone, chest, back, belly, genitals, soles, etc.) while at other times they come forward or dissolve on the basis of excitement (itch, palpitation, burst of heat, ache, etc.)." (Griffero 2019: 21). When contraction decreases, the felt-bodily isles flourish to the extent that when privative expansion prevails the isles merge and vanish; this also happens in correspondence with an excessive increase in tension.

seems to characterise the dancer's experience are "protopathic" and the "epicritic" tendencies; while the protopathic spreads in a dull and diffuse manner closer to expansion, the epicritic, sharpened and more pinpointed, is closer to contraction. A musical piece, for example, may epicritically elicit a contraction that unifies the felt-bodily isles and triggers sharp, quick movements. On the contrary, the contact of the back with the soft theatrical stage may act protopathically and make certain felt-bodily isles dissolve triggering slow motions or even immobility.

The ways of moving and being triggered by motor suggestions and synaesthetic qualities are therefore expression of what we have called "intracorporeal unities" that inform the emergence and the execution of dance movements, referring to the "pathic" relationship between the dancer and other dancers as well as all the elements present in the surroundings. These intracorporeal unities, which mark the unfolding of the felt-bodily dynamic outside one's own felt body, are what Schmitz designates as "embodied communication", i.e., "a kind of interplay between partners that need neither to be alive" (Schmitz 2002: 492) nor to be in physical contact that with which they share the same vital drive:

The vital drive does not only run through one's own felt body, but also gives rise to the community in participatory embodied communication. It is already sketched [...] in the form of the dialogue of the competing tendencies of tension and swelling [...] It already occurs in one's own felt body, when experiencing pain [...] The person affected wants to, on the one hand, expansively escape the pain and, on the things of contraction, resists the expansiveness of pain itself, which presses and urges [...] the intercorporeal dialogue of contraction and expansion, in pain, begins to be straddled into a form of communication between partners [...] The straddling of embodied communication in the channel of the vital drive goes even further when it connects figures separated spatially, for instance, in exchanging glances: a glance in my direction contracts me, I return it, expansively bearing up against the contraction, and thus contract the other in such a manner that a shared vital drive of contraction connects us. (Schmitz 2019a: 67-8)

In the example of the glances described by Schmitz, an "antagonistic one-sided encorporation" occurs, namely an interplay between partners characterised by the alternating of the contractive pole from one partner to the other. On the contrary, when the contractive pole of the vital drive common to partners is held exclusively by one partner, thus guiding the direction of embodiment from narrowness to expansiveness, an "antagonistic mutual encorporation" occurs. It is the case when one evades a dangerously approaching bulky mass that magnetically attracts our glance thus giving rise to a shared vital drive of which the mass holds the contractive pole. When

the shared vital drive connects many individuals without anyone turning to any other, a "solidary encorporation" occurs, e.g., in joint singing, playing music, rowing, or sawing.

The experience of dancing is thus marked by the continuous forming and reconfiguring of these forms of embodied communication, through which the dancers do not merely "copy" the way in which they are affected by the surroundings but, by showing the embodied communication we have in everyday life with the surroundings that usually go unnoticed – e.g., the influence of different kinds of floor on our way of walking – solicits different manifestations of our pathic, felt-bodily relationship with the world. For example, the epicritic walking mode caused by the antagonistic one-sided encorporation with the pointe shoes solicits the epicritic action of the hardness of the wooden floor of the dance studio, which, by increasing contraction, compacts the felt-bodily isles corresponding above all to the lower part of the body, transmitting to the dancer a sense of stability that allows her, for example, to move the upper part of her body – the torso and arms – with ease. Without technical preparation and daily practice, however, this ease would not develop; not only the dancer would not be able to walk on her pointe but, more significantly, she would feel a sense of rigidity rather than stability, so that she could not move with fluidity. To better understand the dynamics underlying the formation of the forms of embodied communication illustrated, we will analyse the felt-bodily genesis of movements, which is what dance exhibits.

4. The felt-bodily nature of movements

According to Schmitz, our movements efficaciously represent our "double life" in the primitive presence and in the unfolded presence. They are, in fact, "felt-bodily directions" unfolding out of contractedness – primitive presence – taking up with vastness of the lived space and often going far beyond the visibly executed movement[s]" (Schmitz 2003: 125, our transl.). These latter are therefore the visible parts of the felt-bodily directions, which provide them with a form that is not sensorially perceived but felt-bodily experiences:

Every gesture, even gesticulation [...] has a bodily and perceptible shape that, unfolding out of the confines, takes up space and often goes far beyond the visibly executed movement. A short push of the outstretched time finger can pierce space as a felt gestural figure. (Schmitz 2018: 125, our transl.)

Gestures are therefore unfolding felt-bodily directions that come from the motor scheme, i.e., the orientation system that organises and controls both voluntary and involuntary movements. This system, composed of felt-bodily directions such as the gaze, finalised movements or non-finalised ones that become fluid after much practice, controls all our movements and has a system of coordinates of all moving bodily parts so that they maintain their positions, presupposes a point of reference to which, for example, the right hand is always to the rights. This "null point" (Schmitz 2003: 32), however, is both variable and unreachable. The motor scheme, in fact, is not organised according to positions and distances related and calculated through reversible connections but according to irreversible felt-bodily directions.

All our fluid motor activities are felt-bodily directionally, as it is just the appropriation of the trajectory that informs the movements foreseen by the motor activity in question to the motor scheme. Dance, that seems to be one of the activities in which the motor scheme achieves its "free development" (Schmitz 2006), is included by Schmitz in fluid motor activities, namely in motor competences. Like swimming, playing the piano or typing, dance is the result of a three-step process: 1. a "trial phase" (*Probierphase*), where the subject orientates himself either in a chaotic way (by trial and error) or through positions and distances. In dance this is the phase in which one must reflect with each step on the centimetres of movement of the left or right foot (Schmitz 2003: 33), 2. a turning point where the subject acquires some mastery over his movements as the motor scheme adapts itself to the task and 3. when the motor scheme takes over the leadership of the movement so that the orientation to positions and distances becomes unnecessary. The execution of virtuous dance steps is possible precisely because of the takeover of the motor scheme in the guidance of movement, so that the limbs coax without a perceptible reaction compared by Schmitz to the optic-motoric cooperation between the driver's gaze, hands, and feet Schmitz 2015: 21-2).

The fluidity or "grace" of motor expertise thus acquired therefore results from the passage from the prevalence of one orientation system over the other, namely of the motor scheme on the perceptual scheme. This latter is the optical and tactile representation of our physical body that allows to us to visualise, with our eyes closed, our bodily parts by means of connective and reversible lines that form a system of reversible positions and distances (Schmitz 2003: 31). Although we usually resort to the perceptual scheme, our movements take place thanks to the actioning, below the perceptual scheme, of the motor scheme, which is related, instead, to the primitive presence – the source of felt-bodily direction.

This shows how our “double life” in the primitive and in the unfolded present-presence is represented by our movements; every time we move resorting to the perceptual scheme in our adult, everyday life – thus in the unfolded presence – our movements are made possible by the more primitive and original motor scheme, which acts as a complicated “score” performed by a changing and self-driving orchestra (Schmitz 2018: 125), while it gives assignments to our physical body by means of felt-bodily directions. It is thanks to the motor scheme that we move our limbs fluidly, without stopping at each step to calculate the position and distance from every final and intermediate goal previously seen – as would be the case if we relied exclusively on the perceptual scheme (Schmitz 1967: 61-3).

This peculiar relationship between the motor and the perceptual scheme also has consequences with respect to the space in which we move. Our movements, in fact, take place not only in the space of the perceptual scheme, i.e., the local space – the space of physics and of common sense – composed of relative spaces that are mutually determine through reversible lines that connect positions and distances (*Ortungsraum*), but always also in directional space (*Richtungsraum*), i.e., the space of the motor scheme (as well as of the felt body, sound, affective states). The directional space – which, as it is surfaceless, provides the local space with an “absolute localization” thus granting its stability (Schmitz 2019a: 89-92) – is filled with “a concert” of irreversible directions that partly proceed from contractedness – primitive presence – to amplitude and partly radiate as motor suggestions (Schmitz 2006: 24).

Although Schmitz’ description of the felt-bodily nature of movement, and his notion of motor scheme and of directional space would seem to effectively describe the nature of dance movements, the orientation systems used by dancers and the space in which they move, it seems that the fluidity of dance movements is not reducible to that provided by the acquisition of motor expertise required by a dance genre⁷. The peculiarity of dance, however, does not go unnoticed by Schmitz, who claims – without further investigating it – that “the task and achievement of dance is to present [the gliding momentum and inhibition] in an arbitrarily formable gesture that encompasses the felt body and the body holistically and without purpose” (Schmitz 2006: 26). The peculiarity of dance resides in the coexistence of this arbitrariness and aimlessness, which make dance movements irreducible to voluntary goal-directed movements as well as to

⁷ See Portera (2020: 27-35) on the relationship between expertise and the aesthetic-artistic experience.

casual movements⁸. To understand the role played by the coexistence of arbitrariness and aimlessness – and of intentionality and involuntariness, awareness and unconsciousness – is the purpose of the next paragraphs.

5. Between awareness and unconsciousness

One first aspect that needs to be clarified is the distinction between dance movements and everyday movements, which does not seem to reside in the way they are “felt” and performed. According to the dancer and philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, although all movements have their own qualitative kinaesthetically felt dynamics⁹ – intensity, expansiveness, rigidity, suddenness, and so on – (Sheets-Johnstone 2011a: 46), the qualitative felt dynamic of dance movement is more complex than that of everyday action such as taking a shower or tying a shoelace. This complexity does not concern the action itself – dance “is not a matter of doing something or accomplishing something” (Sheets-Johnstone 2011a: 46) – but the fact that dance movements embrace all the “degrees of free-

⁸This reflection touches on one of the central aspects within the contemporary debate on the notion of gesture (Viglialoro 2019). A relevant perspective from which to analyse the intentional and yet disinterested status of dance movement is that offered by Giorgio Agamben, according to whom “gestures, above all the artistic ones, do not aim at the execution of a function; they rather produce an indeterminable space of sense (the pure mediativity), embodying potentialities and expressing the totalizing nature of media” (Viglialoro 2019). Dance movements could thus be characterised as a gesture understood as a “pure medium”, marked by “inoperativeness”, i.e., the “neutralisation of the works to which it was bound as a medium” (Agamben 2017: 138, our transl.) and thus the deactivation and rendering inoperative of human works – the everyday movements directed towards a purpose – opening them up to a new, non-instrumental, but adaptive and creative use. This last aspect could be addressed by referring to Christoph Wulf (Gebauer, Wulf 1998, Wulf, Fischer-Lichte 2010) idea of gesture as “a kind of somatic knowledge, consisting in productive-reproductive abilities (the mimesis) that express a non-intentional scenic behaviour [...] Gestures visualise a fundamental human mimetic function, which does not simply consist in the ability to copy or recreate the reality, but also has an adaptive goal” (Viglialoro 2019).

⁹ Although Sheets-Johnstone characterises kinaesthesia as “a neuromuscular sensory modality common to all humans, thus the proper point of departure for investigations into cross-cultural universals underlying the art of the dance” (Sheets-Johnstone 2011: 40), she uses it to refer to the first person lived experiences of the realization of the inherent dynamic of movements. On the role of kinaesthesia in dance see Foster (2010); Sheets-Johnstone (2011b); Ehrenberg (2015); Leroy (2021).

dom" – i.e., the infinite qualitative variables – inherent to every movement and which are not realised in everyday movement. When we raise an arm in everyday life, for example, we do not realise its degree of freedom, i.e., we do not unfold the countless ways through which the movement can be generated and performed¹⁰. The exploration of these ways is, on the contrary, at the centre of dancer's experience. The peculiarity of dance movements does not therefore reside simply in their qualitative dimension – which all movements have – but in the realisation of their qualitative variables:

any movement [– say, brushing one's teeth –] has a particular spatial and temporal character that is dynamically created by the mover in the very act of moving [...] the linear and areal qualities of movement shape and contour its spatial dynamics – its expansiveness, jaggedness, compactness, roundedness, and so on; the projectional quality of movement determines its temporal dynamics – rushed, attenuated, bouncy, sudden, swinging, flowing, jerky, and so on – those dynamics being marked by tensional quality in terms of accents and shadings that mark the dynamics rhythmically. The inherent qualitative dynamics of movement come to the fore in dance: rather than simply taking place in space and in time, movement creates its own space, time, and force and thereby a particular dynamic that informs the dance every step of the way and in fact constitutes its uniqueness." (Sheets-Johnstone 2011a: 49)

While an everyday activity such as brushing one's teeth is an activity that takes place in space and time almost always presenting the same qualitative dynamics, dance movements, on the other hand, in the very moment that are performed, are set free to creatively unfold, accordingly to the everchanging way in which the context affects the dancer.

For this creative unfolding of dance movements' qualitative patterns to occur, a process of "kinaesthetic memorization" of "corporally resonant dynamic patterns of movement" is required. This process differs from that used to learn everyday movements in that, once these movements have been incorporated and flow forth on their own, this flow is not given marginal attention but rather focalised attention. It is exactly in this "kinaesthetic attention" that the qualitative variables of dance movements are experienced and expressed by the dancer, essentially informing both dance learning and performance. Merce Cunningham for example, was "kinaesthetically attentive to the flow of his own move-

¹⁰ "From a standing position, the movement may be initiated from the shoulder, the elbow, the wrist, or, supposing one's elbow is flexed and one's forearm extended horizontally, from an extension of the fingers" (Sheets-Johnstone 2011a: 47).

ment: its amplitudes, its shifts in direction, its modulated intensities, and its singular manners of projection [through which he learnt] the peculiar qualitative dynamics of each sequence of movements" (Sheets-Johnstone 2011a: 49-50) and made them become the essence of his choreographies.

Like Schmitz, Sheets-Johnstone therefore recognises in everyday and as well as in dance movements a sort of automated quality of dance movements that leads them to flow "without hesitation or doubt" (Sheets-Johnstone 2011a: 49). However, unlike Schmitz, Sheets-Johnstone accounts for the different attitude of the dancer towards his movements, according to which an intentional and conscious focus on dance movements coexists with the effortlessness, without hesitation, in a presumably unconscious flow of movements.

Without going into the debate on the role of awareness in dance¹¹ – it seems to us that this coexistence is functional to the spontaneous emergence of dance movements; the degree of awareness required by kinaesthetic attention, in fact, is such to prevent dance movements from being a mere mechanical execution while not requiring the dancer to step outside the experience in which he is immersed. Thanks to kinaesthetic attention dancers grasp the qualitative dynamic of movements and let themselves be guided by them in discerning which qualitative variables are inherent in the movements and how to facilitate their unfolding in that situation. This seems to happen without conscious reasoning but through a sort of receptivity to one's own felt-bodily sensations – elicited by both their ways of moving and the motor suggestions and synaesthetic qualities present in the surroundings¹² – while benefiting from a degree of awareness that enhances the flow of movements.

¹¹See Sheets-Johnstone (1981), (2011b); Fraleigh (1987); Legrand, Ravn (2009). A position close to ours is that of Camille Buttingsrud (2021) whose notion of "embodied reflection", however, does not account for the role of pathicity in the dancer's experience. On the debate on the role of awareness in highly skilled activities including dance see Fitts, Posner (1967); Dreyfus, Dreyfus (2004) for the thesis according to which expertise occurs automatically and McDowell (2008), Montero (2010; 2016) for the thesis according to which expertise involves rational cognition. An intermediate position – close to ours and to a neo-phenomenological approach (Griffero 2021b; 2022) – is provided by Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics (2008; 2012) whose melioristic approach, however, does not fit the peculiarity of the dance experience.

¹² The qualities of movement indicated by Sheets-Johnstone herself refer to the felt-bodily sensations elicited by movements and not to the movements considered in themselves. A broader vision of attention such as the one we propose is currently called "a kinaesthetic mode of attention" (Ehrenberg 2015) whose characterisation,

Such awareness can therefore be considered compatible with a series of automatisms¹³ concerning, for example, basic steps and positions that are the focus of conscious attention during the learning phase but which, once learnt, are not thematised, thus enabling the dancer to focus on the qualitative variables of more complex sequences of movement. It seems therefore that a distinction should be made between the kinaesthetic attention of beginners and that of expert dancers. While for the former, the degree of consciousness is high as they focus on the qualitative dynamics of basic steps and position singularly taken, the expert's degree of awareness with respect to these disappears, turning instead to the transitions between one movement and the next, as part of a state of receptivity where the qualitative variables inherent in individual movements are – sometimes more consciously, sometimes less so – perceived and allowed to unfold in movements that follow one another fluidly. We therefore propose an integration of the three-step model provided by Schmitz in reference to the acquisition of motor expertise; the acquisition of motor skills required by a dance genre seems to be achieved by relating the information coming from the perceptual scheme to the felt-bodily sensations that one is taught to feel as "right" for the movement in question¹⁴. The expert dancer's playing "blind" with respect to technique allows him to focus on previously unnoticed felt-bodily sensations conferring the movements an equally unprecedented fluidity.

The emergence of dance movements from the coexistence of conscious and unconscious elements can be further analysed by characterising the dancers' condition as a "hybrid position of fluid treatment between the light of attention and the darkness of unconsciousness of automatic processes" (Schmitz 2019d: 302, our transl.). The peculiarity of this hybrid state between awareness-attention and automatic unconsciousness – associated by Schmitz to the embodied communication with objects – is that the former does not subsist independently from the latter but is slipped into it. While we pay attention to our physical body and to the

however, does not account for the fact that the dancers' attention does not coincide with but is only part of a broader pathic state of openness towards one's own felt-bodily sensations.

¹³ Automatisms themselves, which constitutively imply the possibility of being modified, prevent movements from being a mere mechanical repetition (see Pelgrefi 2018).

¹⁴ Think of expressions such as "*legato*" or "*soft*" used by dance teachers to characterise movements that also involve epicritic/contractive components.

positions and distances of it with reference to the object in local relative places in the learning phase of a motor skill, the motor scheme is operating in the background, without our being conscious of it and of its fundamental role in the acquisition of the motor skills required. The acquisition of a motor skill, in fact, results from the extension of the motor scheme; beside an "original layer" (*Urschicht*), which is the habitual orientation to which the limbs return after having carried out an action, the motor scheme has a non-habitual "broadening" layer (*Erweiterungsschicht*), which allows the inclusion, in the structure of the irreversible directions of the motor scheme, of the of the irreversible directions that come from the "partner" with whom one is in embodied communication.

If we try to understand how this dynamic operates in dance, it seems that the generation of different forms of embodied communication with the surroundings that inform both the learning and the performance of dance movements, can be explained as the result of an unconscious constant broadening of the motor scheme. Thanks to the unconscious extension of the motor scheme dancers "forget" technique and focus on the qualitative aspect of their movements. The awareness-attention involved in dancing neither directs nor controls the broadening of the motor scheme but focuses on the effects elicited by this broadening, namely on the felt-bodily sensations provoked by the forms of embodied communication that characterise this experience.

A neophenomenological understanding of this dynamic may initially refer to two of the categories through which Undine Eberlein expands the "alphabet of felt-bodiliness" provided by Schmitz: the "active focused felt-bodily experience" (*active fokussierte Leiberfahrung*), where we address our active attention towards our affective state to feel a certain sensation (Eberlein 2013: 97, our transl.) and the "peripheral" or "unfocused" (Eberlein 2017) felt-bodily experience (*peripherische Leiberfahrung*), "where we do not focus our affective state through attention but in a half-conscious way" (Eberlein 2013: 97, our transl.). According to Eberlein, the learning of bodily practices such as martial arts like Qi Gong or Tai Chi and – especially contemporary – dance, requires a shift from the peripheral experience – which is prevalent in everyday life – to the active felt-bodily experience, by means of consciousness-raising and suggestion exercises – such as those provided by the so called "somatic" techniques – e.g., Alexander Technique or the Feldenkreis method. Through such practices one becomes aware of the continuous oscillation between contractedness and expansiveness that characterises

one’s own felt-bodily dynamic. However, as an excessive concentration creates an accumulation of tension that induces one to move “jerkily”, interrupting the flow of energy, the active focused felt-bodily experience characterises only the training or preparatory phase of martial arts or dance movements. Martial arts practitioners and dancers are therefore in a state of

complete presence and at the same time “suspended” [*schwebend*], self-forgetful attention in relaxed calm and naturalness with at the same time extreme concentration and the right amount of tension [so that] the permanent dynamic of inside and outside, centring and opening, condensing and widening seems to extend beyond the outer body boundaries into the felt-bodily directional space and to fill this space. (Eberlein 2017: 105, our transl.)

This passage from Eberlein allows us to further characterise the state of receptivity to which we have claimed that dancers’ attention belongs; here described as “suspended and self-forgetful. This attention is part of a state where complete presence – a “being in the moment” (Eberlein 2013: 107), calm and naturalness and extreme concentration coexist in a non-contradictory way.

6. “*Let the motion happen*”

An appropriate characterisation of this state is that of “state of availability” between *laîcher prise* and retention introduced by Pouillaude, where the subject, not completely abandoned to what is happening to him, exposes himself to the affective action of the elements present in the surroundings, ready to grasp the possibilities of movements offered by them. A remarkable characterisation of this condition is provided by Jacques Gaillard, who traces the emergence of improvised dance movements back to

une modification de l’état attentionnel, qui se met en suspension de son activité auto-centrée, faisant taire el langage interne déstabilisant, se tournant en disposition d’accueil, nouant avec le principe clef de l’improvisation: l’émergence [...] il est important de noter qu’à partir d[e l’activité d’accueil sensoriel] [...] le corps [...] ne fait que porter, en sa chair rendue disponible, la liberté mentale de celui qui [...] accepte de ne pas savoir et de ne pas chercher à tout contrôler. L’ouverture sensorielle déploie l’activité attentionnelle, réduisant le contrôle, offrant à la chair une détente et une disponibilité qui peuvent se déployer [...] en une fertile activité. (Gaillard 2006: 77)

The kind of attention at work in dance is therefore not simply part of an affective state of receptivity, of listening and openness to bodily sensations, but is the result of this state, which enacts a suspension of the attentional activity proper to the subject of action – the “agency” mentioned by Fischer-Lichte – opening instead to the pathic experience – hence Eberlein’s description of attention as “suspended” and “self-forgetful”. Once this affective state is elicited, the dancer accepts “not knowing” what will come next¹⁵, releasing control over his movement so that he automatically exposes himself to the possibility of being affected – and thus of moving – within the constraints provided by the context in which he dances.

What activates this state of readiness from which the dancer’s attentional activity arises is, paradoxically, the “feeling of mastery [...] of the movement, environment, and/or choreography” (Ehrenberg 2015: 52) acquired through the preparation required of improvisers and not-improvisers alike. This phenomenon is effectively described by Sondra Horton Fraleigh:

In dancing [...] I feel and pay attention to my own movement, as I articulate it, directing and allowing its emergence [...] I come to know the space – time of my dance, exactly where it goes in space, the length its phrases, its pulses, its stretching, coiling, windings and unwindings. I know its stillness, its barely there-ness, as well as its explosion. I own all of the feelings that these motions and stillness create in me, as I own myself in motion, moving as I intend to [...] I am fully alive to my powers of motion. I am powerful in dancing moments because I move with finite, yet gentle, control. The power and the control are the result of the right investiture of my energies in accord with intent. At this point, I am released from needing to control; control has been internalized, the movement made easy through practice. I no longer need to think about my movement, where it is going, what I am doing. I own my movement [...] The more the dancer experiences agency in motion, the more she is able to *let* rather than make the motion happen. In the broadest sense, to dance is to be free, to feel free and at ease in motion, the dancing moment connotes freedom; it appears when grace appears. Without grace, or we might also call this freedom, there is no dance. (Fraleigh 1993: 105-6)

¹⁵ Alessandro Bertinetto (2018; 2021) defines this condition as the epistemological paradox of “knowing and not knowing” as the improviser, thanks to his technical preparational competence has a procedural knowledge of the movement and, at the same time, does not know what he will do – and, we add, how it will be qualitatively connotated.

The paradoxical aspect of Fraleigh's description resides in the fact that the feeling of mastery and ownership of the movement – what Fraleigh calls "agency" – is related to the awareness not of her technical competence but of how the dance affects her and her ability to grasp how it has to be performed. The intention to move in a certain way, in fact, does not coincide with any intentions decided in advance, based on an abstract interpretation of the movement, but is formed as the dancer experiences the lengths of dance's phrases, its pulses, its stretchings, that have to be rendered in the way they are. The feeling of being "fully alive [to her] powers of motion" experienced by the dancer because she moves "with finite, yet gentle, control" does not therefore refer to her ability to perform certain movements but to the sense of "rightness" of the quantity of energy invested in the movement.

This sense of "rightness" is not already present as like a principle applicable to movements but, on the contrary, comes from the movements themselves, namely from the felt-bodily sensations from which they arise. When dancers feel this sense of "rightness", it means that they have already suspended their control over the movement, that they are already in a state of availability, with their attention focused on finding the "right" felt-bodily sensation yield to the movements elicited by how they are being affected. It is through this focusing of attention that the sense of rightness arises, telling the dancer what not to do rather than what to do (Olsson-Forsberg 2013):

dance needs [...] the exercise of "no": not to take place. Badiou rightly speaks of "retenue", restraint: "the movement of the dance has its *raison d'être* in that which does not take place, in that which has remained withheld within the movement itself [...] Dance is not at all the liberated bodily impulse [...] Dance invents itself by showing, in its own making, that it does not yield to what it presses and presents itself [...] as immediate, spontaneous [...] the restraint is the way of sustaining a mobility "that unfolds by itself", that does not allow itself to be designed by any presupposition. (Zanardi 2020: 144-5, our transl.)

To let dance "happen" is precisely to practice this "exercise of 'no'", pivoting on the "retention", the refusal that accompanies the *laîcher prise* of the dancer's state of availability, a withdrawal from impulsively acting which marks, at the same time, an assent to "feeling" the arising of the movement itself from the felt-bodily relationship with the surroundings.

When this occurs and the movement is performed, the grace of the movement appears. Defined by Fraleigh as the "achievement of spontaneity and fulfilment of intention when movement attains surety of pur-

pose" (Fraleigh 1987: 99), grace designates the affective state felt when the movement flows in the way which one has strived for with hours of study and repetition, and which now perfectly flows without the need of being reflexively directed or controlled. This state is the same underlying Hubert Godard's characterisation of grace as the "événement du 'geste réussi [...]' 'je sors de l'image' (du connu, mais aussi du mimétique), ce qui fait que 'quelque chose peut naître': la genèse du geste elle-même se donne à voir, plutôt que la reproduction de gestes déjà connus" (Basselier 2021: 277).

What distinguishes the grace, the flow of dance movements from the motor expertise described by Schmitz is precisely the feeling of witnessing – and "pathically" taking part – in the "birth" of the movement, which appears as an "emergent phenomenon" in the manner described by Fischer-Lichte, as it is impossible to trace it back to its execution during rehearsals or even in previous performances. The successful gesture is, in fact, exactly the same gesture rehearsed up to that moment or previously performed, and at the same time could not be more different from it. The successful gesture is, in fact, the continuation of itself and, a continuation that is, simultaneously, its explanation, as it reveals, by its very existence, the "generative" power inherent to the gesture rehearsed and that only now, as it spontaneously unfolds, in a way that the dancer cannot explain to himself, makes sense. Like a birth, the dance gesture comes to exist from an intense, unique, and relational state of suspension, where the past – the known – and the future – the unknown – are intensely and deeply connected, where one feels "porté par ce qui precede" et par un imprévisible" (Basselier 2021, 281), projected in an unknown to be given and yet all here, already "present".

7. "Pure presence" as a pathic state of "in-betweenness"

Presence or, "pure presence" is the affective state that permeates the emergence of the movement:

When I dance [...] I study [my motion], try out new moves, study and perfect them, until I eventually turn my attention to their subtleties of feeling, and meaning. Finally, I feel free in them [...] When I make any movement truly mine, I embody it. And in this, I experience what I would like to call "pure presence" a radiant power of feeling completely present to myself and connected to the world [...] When we are dancing, we are moving "ourselves", and we "ourselves" are being moved. We have initiated an interaction between ourselves as we are immediately present in the

motion and ourselves as we may be given to the motion, given up. That is, we may forget ourselves, get lost [...] The dance becomes larger than its controllable bodily elements [...] the dance exists at this point of freedom, when the motion is *allowed* to emerge, not made happen. (Fraleigh 1993: 104-7)

When a dancer experiences this feeling of "pure presence", she has achieved the culminating point of the state of "availability", when suspended attention has been activated and the movements flow spontaneously and gracefully, one after the other. While the affective state of grace seems to be more related to the movements in themselves, pure presence seems to permeate the whole experience of the dancer, underlying the execution of all movements, the pauses, the waiting moments that compose the performance. The image of irradiation associated by Fraleigh to pure presence recalls the broadening of the structure of the felt-bodily directions realised by the intertwining of intracorporeal communication that informs the dance. The sensation of self-forgetfulness and of getting lost, in fact, is only the impression elicited by the sensation of being unable to control a motion that the dancer gives up executing while "pathically" giving herself to it, accepting to take part, the "journey" of the emergence of dance. Thus, instead of being "lost", the dancer is in deep connection with the world, with, the felt-bodily relationship with the surroundings from which dance emerges.

Pure presence is therefore part of the sensation of being "moving-moved" (Bigé 2019: 328), taken, carried away by a movement of which they have "given themselves" (De Spain 2003). It is exactly this availability of being affected, transformed, altered that, according to Preben Friis characterises presence:

I would say that you are present when you respond to a gesture spontaneously and are altered by your response. And so, if your response to a gesture does not change you, we will recognize yourself as being less present. (Friis 2006: 90)

Although Friis refers to theatrical improvisation, this experience seems to further characterise the "state of availability" experienced by dancers, who "pathically" make themselves available to be affected by their surroundings. Neither active nor passive, dancers are in a state of "pathic" in-betweenness, where they do not feel they are dancing any more than that they are being danced, because their movements are not distinguishable from the movement that "dances" them.

This state can be characterised by referring to the notion of middle voice, "the verb forms of many language (including classical Greek) [that

designates] events [that] occur neither in the active nor passive voice" (Foster 2003: 7). It is the case of touching, where the act of touching is inseparable from being touched in turn, or being born, flying, or dying. The peculiarity of the middle voice resides in the fact that it does not merely indicate the state of being active and passive at the same time, as it precedes the polarity inherent in any dialogue designating instead the more original and holistic dimension of the pathic "in-betweenness": "medial is not so much between active and passive; rather, it points to the ecological "milieu" we are enmeshed with and that contributes to constitute us" (Bigé 2019: 328). It is exactly from this milieu, to which we belong and of which the forms of embodied communication show the different nuances, that dance emerges:

Dance does not begin in us: it begins between us – between movers, lights, sounds. It is not in me, or in the music, or in my partners that dance happens, but in the relation that we have to each other. (Bigé 2019: 328-30)

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