

Introduction to Part 3

Twentieth-century dance history manifests a fundamental diversity in dance culture. The European territory between the two World Wars, for instance, displays an almost-kaleidoscopic variety. Classical ballet productions at highly-regarded and institutionally-established theatres were produced alongside more daring, experimental, modern ballet productions by companies such as the Ballets Russes and the Ballets Suédois [Chapter 7]. Next to diverse ballets, modern dance and associated practices also manifested themselves in variable forms. Isadora-Duncan-inspired schools pursued quests of free dance and Jaques-Dalcroze-inspired schools tuned moving bodies into rhythm; while Mary Wigman exemplified an expressive but stark style of *Ausdruckstanz*, Kurt Jooss and Valeska Gert developed their own strands of dance theatre. In parallel, “girl” troupes performed in cabarets; Rudolf Laban guided non-professionals dancing in movement choirs; dancers from, or alluding to, Africa and Asia populated European stages and confronted audiences with their exoticising projections; Oskar Schlemmer echoed objectlike baroque costumes; and Fernand Léger made a film called a ballet. This striking diversity is not exclusive to the midwar years in Europe. A similar variety appears in, for example, the 1960s in the United States. This decade of “post-modern” dance saw the creation of Alvin Ailey’s *Revelations* (1960), Hanya Holms’ excursions towards musical theatre with *Camelot* (1960), Martha Graham’s *Phaedra* (1962), Katherine Dunham’s *Bamboche* (1962), José Limon’s *A Choreographic Offering* (1964), George Balanchine’s *Jewels* (1967), Alwin Nikolais’ *Tent* (1968), and Jerome Robbins’ *Dances at a Gathering* (1969) in parallel with Robert Dunn’s John Cage-inspired composition workshops, and the first Judson Dance Theater concerts. Such concurrent diversity is becoming more and more visible in dance historical research, even though the dominance of certain dance styles still skews portraits of the 20th century. Part 3 examines the extent to which such diversity also exists in the *choreographic* history of the period.

In the 20th century, choreography’s association with the function of dance-making and the medium of moving corporealities became entrenched and even essentialised. “Choreography” had been used to refer to dance-making since

the 19th century; in 1828, Carlo Blasis used it to describe artistic work on the dance-step content – and not the notation or plot – of a ballet;¹ in 1860, while acknowledging the sense of notation, August Bournonville wrote:

The term *choreography* has in a peculiar way changed meaning since Noverres's times; today it is used equally with regard to composition and to performance, and the appellation of choreographer is lightly given to the least supernumerary, who transmits what he has seen either his chief or the youngest dancers doing, and for the most part in a rather imperfect form [...] Let us begin by dealing with choreography in the literal sense of this word and afterwards with what is now conventionally called choreography, that is the composition of ballets and dances.²

It was, however, in the 20th century that the amalgamation of choreography with dance-making was most forceful in Europe and the United States. Wigman, for example, linked dance and choreography: 'We need [counting] especially in our choreographic work, during the process of creation and the rehearsing of group works in the modern dance or ballet'.³ Graham too spoke of choreography as equivalent to dance-making: 'I choreographed for myself. I never choreographed what I could not do [...] When I stopped dancing, but kept making dances, it was very difficult at first to create not on my own body'.⁴ Graham further underlined the connection by commenting that "choreography" can be absorbed by "dance-making":

[Anthony Tudor] was what was known as a choreographer. Such an impressive word. I had never heard the word "choreographer" used to describe a maker of dances until I left Denishawn. There you didn't choreograph, you made up dances. Today I never say, "I'm choreographing". I simply say, "I am working". I never cared much for choreographing. It is a wonderfully big word and can cover up a lot of things. I think I really only started to choreograph so that I could have something to show off in. It came as a great shock to me when I stopped dancing that I was honored for my choreography as well.⁵

1 Blasis, Carlo: *The Code of Terpsichore*, Hampshire: Dance Books 2008 [1828, trans. R. Barton], p. 95. Cf. Foster, Susan Leigh: *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*, Oxon/New York: Routledge 2011, p. 40.

2 Bournonville, August: *Letters on Dance and Choreography*, London: Dance Books 1999 [1860, trans. Knud Arne Jürgensen], pp. 49–50.

3 Wigman, Mary: *The Language of Dance*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press 1966 [1963, trans. Walter Sorell], p. 10.

4 Graham, Martha: *Blood Memory: An Autobiography*, New York: Doubleday 1991, p. 238.

5 Ibid., p. 236.

Beyond modern dance, this view of choreography was present in modern ballet – Susan Foster reports that it was in this framework that “choreography” was first used in this sense⁶ – as well as post-modern dance – as Dunn’s essay ‘Evaluating Choreography’⁷ illustrates.

The 20th century paralleled the association between dance-making and choreography with an increased focus on the body and movement as essential elements of dance. From the idea of dance as an autonomous – “absolute” (Wigman) – art that casts aside musical or textual support in favour of self-sufficient expression through corporeal motion, to an organic engagement with corporeality for technique development, and subjective expression through motion that finds a source in the body, the 20th century points to an entanglement of movement, body, and dance. In the words of leading modern dance critic John Martin, dance’s very ‘material is the whole human body, tangible and real, in movement’.⁸ While the above views are mostly associated with modern dance artists, 20th-century ballet also had a central focus on motion and body. For example, critic and ballet proponent André Levinson defined dance as

le mouvement continu d'un corps se déplaçant selon un rythme précis et une mécanique consciente dans un espace calculé d'avance. Du fait de situer un corps dans un espace, la danse apparaît comme un art plastique. Du fait d'imprimer à ce corps un mouvement réparti dans le temps, la danse se manifeste comme un art cinématique. [...] Une troisième donnée la différencie pourtant de tous les arts plastiques. C'est sa matière: le corps humain [the continuous movement of a body displacing itself according to a precise rhythm and a conscious mechanics in a pre-calculated space. Because it situates a body in space, dance appears as a plastic art. Because it inscribes into this body a movement distributed over time, dance manifests itself as a cinematic art. [...] A third element differentiates it, however, from all plastic arts. It is its matter: the human body].⁹

Against this background, choreography was associated with the specificity of human corporeality and the necessity of motion; Foster sees 20th-century choreography as heading towards the ‘process of individual expression through movement’.¹⁰ To take a specific example, Doris Humphrey explicitly linked choreography to corporeality:

6 Foster: *Choreographing Empathy*, p. 43.

7 Dunn, Robert Ellis: Robert Ellis Dunn Remembered. Four Pieces by the Artist/Teacher, in: *Performing Arts Journal* 19/3 (1997), pp. 14–16.

8 Martin, John: *America Dancing*, New York: Dodge 1936, p. 89.

9 Levinson, André: *La Danse d'aujourd'hui*, Paris: Duchartre et Van Buggenhoudt 1929, pp. 172–173.

10 Foster: *Choreographing Empathy*, p. 16.

[T]he first mark of the potential choreographer is a knowledge of, or at least a great curiosity about, the body – not just his own, but the heterogeneous mixture of bodies which people his environment [...] I have never heard of a choreographer who achieved even moderate success, who did not have a physical skill in moving bodies, and who was without an over-all theatrical sense of shape.¹¹

Mid-20th century, Nikolais qualified motional aspects of his multimedia practice as choreographic: 'I cannot be content as only a choreographer. As such, my dominant concern should be motion; yet I cannot forego my attraction to the shapes and forms of things'.¹² Humphrey-student Limon intersected choreography, body, and movement by talking about how one 'puts together the movements of his body to create the concatenation called choreography'.¹³ Once again – and despite the persistence of narrative-oriented choreographic models in classical dance [Chapter 7] – these tendencies are also found in modern ballet; for example, Bronislava Nijinska writes that '[m]ovement is the principal element in dance, its plot. A modern school of choreography must introduce movement into dance technique, it must provide a basis for the theory and the mechanics of dance'.¹⁴ In a framework closer to post-modern dance, Don McDonagh's *The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance* (1970) illustrates choreographic entanglement with a moving corporeality:

If dance could do without music and technique, could it also do without rehearsals? If it could do without elaborate lighting designs, could it do without visible light of any kind? If it could do without decor, could it do without costume? If it could do without any of these, could it do without dancers? The answer to the latter was the only "No!" Some attempts were made to create dances verbally or by printed suggestions so that audiences would conjure up their own movement sequences. But although these "concept" choreographies were interesting, they were exceedingly frail in the physical world of dance.¹⁵

¹¹ Humphrey, Doris: *The Art of Making Dances*, London: Dance Books 1997 [1959], pp. 20, 25.

¹² Nikolais, Alwin: No Man from Mars, in: Cohen, Selma Jeanne (ed.): *The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press 1965, p. 63.

¹³ Limon, José: *An Unfinished Memoir*, Hanover: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England 1999, p. 75.

¹⁴ Nijinska, Bronislava: On Movement and the School of Movement, in: Preston-Dunlop, Valerie & Lahusen, Susanne (eds.): *Schrifttanz: A View of German Dance in the Weimar Republic*, London: Dance Books 1990 [1930], p. 55.

¹⁵ McDonagh, Don: *The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance*, London: Dance Books 1990 [1970], p. 209.

An associated conception of choreography posits it as an arrangement of moving bodies in time and space.¹⁶ As the above quotations illustrate, choreography as an arrangement of moving bodies in time and space at times overlaps with the notion of dance-making, which is itself conceived of as an arrangement of moving corporealities.

Within the 20th-century field – in which choreography was most forcefully entangled with dance-making and human corporeality – there are, nevertheless, important variations of choreographic history. Frictions between dance and choreography appeared in the words of practitioners who associated choreography with parts of dance-making with which they did not agree. For example, for Paul Taylor this was the limitation of dancers' individual presence: '[s]ome dances look like "choreography" because the dancers are not allowed to become their most interesting stage selves [...] Up with dancers; down with choreography.'¹⁷ Frictions also appeared through references to dance-making not termed "choreography". In the 1960s, Serge Lifar suggested replacing the term "choreographer" by "*choréauteur*" [chore-author] when referring to a dance-maker.¹⁸ Both modern dance (Humphrey, Louis Horst, Wigman) and post-modern dance (the seminal 1960s workshops held by Dunn that contributed to the appearance of the Judson Dance Theatre) employed the term "composition" to refer to aspects of dance-making. Finally, frictions appeared in practices challenging the insistence of a necessarily-physicalised choreography – from futurist dance to Nikolais' multimedia spectacles, and from Loïe Fuller to Merce Cunningham's work with *LifeForms*.

Therefore, the 20th century both performed and questioned choreography's association with dance and/or the moving human body – an association so strong it feeds into current understandings of choreography. Against this background, Part 3 introduces an expanded choreographic perspective to the analysis of works from different moments of early- and mid-20th-century dance history; this perspective points to an undeniable diversity that challenges the idea of choreography being solely based on dance, the human body, and/or motion. This diversity also has implications for how historiography portrays 20th-century choreographic culture(s) – their complex relations with motion and corporeality, as well as their negotiations between different construals of these concepts; their concurrent embrace of choreographic medium specificity

¹⁶ For example, Gabriele Klein theorises 20th-century choreography as relating to the topographic ordering of bodies in time and space. Klein, Gabriele: *Essay*, in: Klein, Gabriele (ed.) *Choreografischer Baukasten. Das Buch*, Bielefeld: transcript 2015, p. 19.

¹⁷ Taylor, Paul: *Down with Choreography*, in: Cohen: *The Modern Dance*, p. 97.

¹⁸ Lifar, Serge: *La Danse: La Danse académique et l'Art chorégraphique*, Paris: Gonthier 1965, p. 16.

and artistic interdisciplinarity; their interrogation of the notion of choreographic authorship.

Chapter 7 looks at *Relâche* – a modern ballet conceived in 1924 by painter Francis Picabia for the Ballets Suédois. Identifying it as a nexus of multiple choreographic models,¹⁹ it shows that while Picabia's dada ballet was preoccupied with choreographic modernity's attachment to embodied motion, it also decentralised corporeal dance performance in a composite spectacle – thus sketching out yet another type of intermedia choreographic assemblage that can dialogue both with Saint-Hubert's 17th-century ballet [Chapter 1] and Olga Mesa's contemporary *Solo* [Chapter 5]. Chapter 8 investigates the work of modern dance's central figure, Laban, in industry during and after WWII. Amid Laban's attachment to the centrality of the human body and the necessity of motion, it identifies his view of supra-individual choreographies that emerge from the actions of both human and non-human agents – thus de-anthropocentrising choreography – and his belief in the presence of movement in apparent stillness – branching out to William Forsythe's present-day willows [Chapter 6] and Domenico da Piacenza's fantasmatic pauses [Chapter 3]. Finally, Chapter 9 analyses the choreographic productions of lettrism, a post-WWII artistic movement with roots in poetry, whose eclectic works are comparable to post-modern dance. Placing lettrism among dominant dance discourses of the 20th century – based on its confirmation of the link between dance and choreography – it posits lettrism as (also) a field in which choreography expanded to a range of materials and media, as well as immateriality, echoing Mathilde Chénin's informational-algorithmic [Chapter 4] and Raoul Auger Feuillet's abstract-graphic [Chapter 2] transfers. Identifying an ambivalence in relation to a dominant choreographic model at several points of the 20th century – both in historiographically-marginalised (lettrism) and -over-represented (Laban) examples – Part 3 presents figures of choreographic multiplicity, rather than a series of counter-examples that challenge a canon with an alternative, but singular, view.

Part 1 analysed written documents not only as discursive sources *about* embodied acts but also as objects displaying their own conceptions of choreography. Consistent with this methodological idea, Part 3 considers that choreographic practices – be they “condensed” in a single work (e.g. *Relâche*), spread out in a continuous process of work without a single designated product (e.g. Laban), or distributed over multiple works (e.g. lettrist choreography) – do not only consist of performative and/or embodied, but also visual, textual, auditory, and other manifestations. Correspondingly, to contribute diverse understandings of these

¹⁹ Cf. Leon, Anna: Vielfältige Konzepte des Choreografischen in Tanz und Film. Die Balletts Suédois und ihr Stück *Relâche*, in: *Montage AV* 24/2 (2015), p. 32.

practices, the following draws from multiple types of sources – from contemporary reconstructions to scripts, from scores to notations, from photographs to film, from written reports and notes to music.

While they are dispersed over several decades, Part 3's chapters relate to what may be referred to as the 20th century's "dance modernity". *Relâche* dates from the interwar context where several figures, notions, and practices associated with a heterogeneous 20th-century dance modernity – including modern dance – were active [Chapter 7]. Laban's projects in industry concern the activity of an artist central to modern dance history [Chapter 8]. Lettrism, while appearing slightly later, refers and responds to the pre-war historical avant-gardes as well as modern ballet and modern dance; it is included as an example of how arguments about choreography can be transferred from pre- to post-war modernity and exemplifies the former's possible influence upon the latter [Chapter 9]. Finally, as parts of, or references to, 20th-century dance modernity, these examples relate to a network of associated notions: the modernity of the avant-gardes (*Relâche*, lettrism), modernism (*Relâche*, Laban, lettrism), modern dance (Laban, lettrism), modern ballet (*Relâche*, lettrism), and the experience of body, life, and society as "modern" (*Relâche*, Laban). But, as Stefan Hulfeld illuminatingly reminds, "modernity" and the "modern" is neither fixed nor limited to the 20th-century timespan and position; despite modernist historiography's insistence on presenting modernity as a series of chapters – subsequent innovation annulling previous ones – modernity is a notion that calls for a macro-historical approach that acknowledges linkages, rather than affirming ruptures.²⁰ The following chapters tend towards this approach, looking into how 20th-century choreography branches out both to an expanded, pre-choreographic past, and an expanded present.

²⁰ Hulfeld, Stefan: Modernist Theatre, in: Wiles, David & Dymkowski, Christine (eds.): *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2013, esp. p. 15f

