Expanded Choreography between Logistics and Entanglement

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Expanded Choreography

Expanded choreography is the notion that an artistic-critical discourse within continental contemporary dance uses to denote a shift of protagonism: No longer is the human body the only and necessary center of attention. Choreography, this discourse asserts, is a body of knowledge not only used in the production of dances or other social situations. From now on, choreography wants to be able to control and manipulate all other sorts of materials, including non-human agents, and thus reflect or even alter the technological and environmental conditions of Westernized life-styles in late capitalism.

Literally, "expanded choreography" is both the title of Mette Ingvartsen's PhD-project in Sweden (Ingvartsen 2016) and of a conference organized in Barcelona in 2012. The conference, devised by Mårten Spångberg together with Bojana Cvejić and Xavier Le Roy (on the occasion of Le Roy's "Retrospectiva" at the Fundació Tàpies), conceives of "choreography as an expanded practice." In his introduction to the conference, that has not been published but can be listened to on the website of the museum where the conference took place, Spångberg argues for undoing the historic union between choreography and dance. He asks whether choreography is structurally bound to an expressive form, or if it can be more broadly organizational in nature. His desire is for choreography to become "a generic cluster of tools that can be used in productive and analytical manner for whatever" (MACBA 2019). Referring to discussions on immaterial labor and social choreography, for Spångberg it is perfectly possible to "choreographically approach business processes, even populations, or anthropology in general" (MACBA 2019).

While the announcement of the conference program thus claims that choreography is "becoming an expanded practice, a practice that is, in and of itself, political" (CaEP 2019: np), one could say that another expanded and eminently political "choreography of objects" has already been integrated into our contemporary

world: Logistics is maybe the most expanded choreography of both objects and people that we know of, I want to argue. In the following, I therefore raise a few questions: To what degree can logistics be considered a form of expanded choreography?[1] In how far does the notion of choreography add an analytic dimension to an assessment of logistics, beyond the more common notion of transport? And who wants to control whom within this hyper-extended choreographic *dispositif*?

Logistics

One of the reasons why I speak of logistics as choreography is because logistics companies sometimes do so themselves. In the 2010 UPS commercial "We Love Logistics," we see the continuous movement of parcels switching means of transportation and traveling magically to far-away places. In relation to this marketing campaign, the advertising director of UPS, Betty Wilson, said about logistics: "We love its precision, its epic scale, its ability to make life better for billions of people. Each day, our customers count on us to choreograph a ballet of infinite complexity played across skies, oceans and borders (as cited in Lecavalier 2012: 90)." What is more, the marketing campaign was launched with a show at the atrium of Beijing's Viva Shopping Mall on October 25 in 2010, in the which "a group of thirty performers dressed as UPS drivers and customers spontaneously broke into a series of choreographed dance numbers" (Lecavalier 2012: 90). It seems as if the notions of ballet (here equivalent to choreography as such), connected to virtuosity, lightness and ease, was used as UPS's new marketing strategy in order to mediate a self image of being able to administer complex movement and organizational schemes with effortless virtuosity.

On the one hand, the aesthetic notion of choreography summons up the sublime expansion and scale of logistics, by which "mountains of goods" are being moved (Maersk 2012). On the other hand, the notion implies a certain virtuosity, a continuous, never-ending and frictionless motion, in which no body and no thing are ever allowed to stop, seamlessly coordinated by smart algorithms that make sure that everything is delivered "on time every time" (Maersk 2012). On the whole, these marketing videos convey a world view where everything, be it bodies or materials, can be transported and delivered to the right place at the right moment. Choreography, here, comes to stand for the organizational faculty that needs to be in place for an almost infinite number of processes and movements to be coor-

1 I am not the only person working on these notions. There is, for example, the research of Gerko Egert, working in Gießen and Berlin, which deals with logistics as one form of "choreo-power," and, importantly, there is the work of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, on which I draw a lot (Moten/Harney 2013).

dinated. At the base of this idea of choreography as vastly extended process management, there is a quasi-Deleuzian ontology, where "manufacture is merely one moment in a continuous, Heraclitean flux" (Berne 2013: np). Let me be clear: the notion of logistics as a gigantic ballet that UPS employs is a fantasy, one that is always met by friction, obstacles or chaotic circumstances on the ground. And yet, as a fantastically extended process management model, it is extremely powerful: Business, transportation and movement processes all over the planet are modeled on the choreographic ideology outlined in these commercials.

One may then well ask where logistics got its ambition to control and move so much stuff. Deborah Cowen names three main technological reasons for the emancipation of logistics from its military use: It is the invention of the shipping container at the end of the 1950s, the proliferation of new telecommunication technologies that allow for data flows across great distances, and, finally, new computer technologies which enable more complex calculations of total costs along the full supply chain (Cowen 2013). These three factors, along with a new systems organization approach in management, brought about the rise of logistics as central field of business administration. From there, logistics has become the overall governance of flows of capital and commodities on an ever greater scale, and on ever more finely attuned temporal measures. Based on lower transportation costs, more and more extended and complex supply chains have been installed, a process in which "an astonishing cast of characters […], and complex movements across great distances" is not only coordinated but calibrated (Cowen 2013: 1). Logistics has reshaped large areas of the planet, mostly at the periphery of urban settlement. All the while, the imperialist and neo-colonialist dimensions of supply chain capitalism are one of the central reasons for a continued entanglement of logistics and the military sector.

Yet, more than considering logistics as mere transport, I am interested in how this extended *dispositif* of moving things and people impacts and produces subjectivities: Indeed, the advent of global logistics has brought about new paradigms for the organization of labor, which Anna Tsing terms a dangerous mix of self-exploitation and superexploitation (Tsing 2009). Along the supply chain, agency, life chances and mobility are distributed highly unequally, which is why logistics has to be considered an assemblage that is concurrently both bio- and necro-political (Cowen 2013). Today, logistics is regarded not only as the central most important field of business administration and innovation, but also as a form of governance of populations (Moten/Harney 2013).

Most importantly, though, there is also a historic dimension to the question of how choreography and logistics interface in the production of both subjects and objects. As Fred Moten (2016) reminds us: There is no possibility of a however celebratory philosophy of things, or of object oriented ontologies, for that matter, without taking account of the history of transatlantic slave trade, the first big

transport of bodies as things, as "commodities that could speak" (Harney/Moten 2013: 92). Thus, one can state by extension: there is no possible discourse of "expanded choreography" or of a "choreography of things" without recurrence to a Western colonial history of moving people as mere things – practiced, executed, and legitimated discursively from the 16th century onwards. The co-evolution and emergence of capitalism and colonialism are bound by the transport of enslaved labor and commodified bodies. As such, the logistics of slavery within the "capitalist-colonialist assemblage of power" (Lepecki 2016: 4) is directly linked to the practice of moving people as things, i.e. to the abductive, remote-controlled, and heavily-insured business-field of logistics.

If I think of logistics as a form of choreography here, it is thus in so far as it produces and re-enforces the categories of subject and object, black and white, cargo and crew onto everything it transports. Marcus Rediker, in his book *The Slave Ship*, has argued that the transport technology of slave ships themselves functioned as a factory that produced the very commodities it transported, while and by way of reinforcing racial categories and ideologies. The logistical transport of abducted bodies itself produced the entity of the "slave" in "the ship as factory" by taking them to a new sales market across the Atlantic. All the while, within that transport, diverse European working-class populations came to be labeled as white crew, whereas "a multiethnic collection of Africans […] would, in the American port, become 'black people' or a 'negro race'" (Rediker 2007: 7). And a great many authors, including M. NourbeSe Philip and Ian Baucom, have drawn our attention to the 1781 events on board the slave ship *Zong*, in which the captain of that ship had ordered for at least 133 slaves to be thrown over board, allegedly for lack of drinking water on the ship. In the following, the murder was restricted to the legal language of a law case entitled *Gregson vs. Gilbert* in which it was to be determined whether the murdered bodies were to be considered human or cargo, and thus properly insured (Baucom 2005, Philip 2008). What we witness here is the formation of a modernist-racist form of social-material choreography that I want to term choreologistics.

Similar to the way that Lepecki has described choreography as an "apparatus of capture" (2007: 120) that abducts the collective and local practice of dance, thereby prescribing its conditions of signification and visibility, this other choreographic apparatus works by way of abductive transport and therein sorts everything it moves into objectified categories. Logistics is a constitutive element of a modernist politics of movement, where both

> geo-political and bio-political questions become essentially choreographic ones: to decide *who* is able or allowed to move – and under what circumstances, and on what grounds; to decide *where* one is allowed to move to. (Allsopp/Lepecki 2008: 1)

Within the history of logistics, this modern *dispositif* of movement enacts a similar, yet even more extended form onto-epistemological violence: the modernist imperative of continuous acceleration and seamless flow – that in its capitalist form takes the name of logistics – subjects both materials and flesh, cutting and dividing it into the oppositional realms of sovereign white subject (the navigators, administrators, citizens or persons) and everything else, there as resource, there to extract, to throw out of their homes, to be transported, immobilized, exploited (the realm of things). Indeed, it is a choreography, insofar as it re-assesses over and over again, with unimaginable brutality (thereby echoing Spångberg's question from the beginning), what it means to be human. What it means to be fully human, in that respect, is to be the choreographer, is to be the one who writes the score for other bodies and all sort of things to be moving around the planet, practically invisible, fully suppressed, hidden in containers and camps, so that we – Westerners – can perform our privileged lives. Therein, logistics is more than mere transport, it always implies a political power to define that which it transports as mere object, as abductable.

The notion of choreography employed within these choreologistical assemblages can productively be described as a form of proceduralism, as denounced by Bojana Cvejić and Ana Vujanović (2015) in their *Public Sphere by Performance*. If expanded choreography "entails a shift from the bias of the body and embodiment to procedures, or how processes are structured and operated in time," it does so in so far as "procedures [...] define actions and attitudes in general, which allows us to treat them as a logic, a thinking model, *an ideological apparatus*" (Cvejić/Vujanović 2015: 72). Indeed, the merely operational usage of the notion of choreography in logistics, denoting the efficient and seamless governance and control over super-extended movements of commodities as much as labor force, information, and capital, is in itself highly ideological. The super-efficient, highly rationalized *dispositif* of choreologistics – that is perhaps but the dark, material and economic aspect of modernity as general mobilization in the sense that Lepecki gives to the term in his introduction to *Exhausting Dance* (2005) – goes by way of rendering stuff mobile, abducting things from their locale, turning them mere objects, thereby also forcing populations into homelessness. It creates forms of superexploitation that make national, racial, gendered and ethnic minorities outcompete and outperform each other within the overarching architecture of assemblages of logistical transport, financial speculation, and brutal extraction of either natural, physical or emotional resources.

Entanglement

If Harney and Moten claim that "the transport of things remains, as ever, logistics' unrealizable ambition" (2013: 92), they do that in the name of a specific notion of entanglement. It is the work that Moten has published over the last 20 years, always in close relation to the tradition of black radicalism in poetry, performance and jazz, which formulates most clearly, if poetically, a notion of entanglement that I want to subscribe to: It is entanglement as fugitivity and refuge, refusing the constraints of the performance of normative personhood, the exclusive logics of citizenship, as much as the foundational onto-theology of the subject (Moten 2016, Moten 2018).[2]

I wish to end on a performance project I have been working with for a while, as a practical example of how logistics links up very different people, materials and contexts. The project is called *African Terminal* and was conceived by the Hamburg performance group *Geheimagentur* in the frame of their alternative port project called Free Port Baakenhöft (2019). There is something about the entanglement and complicity of my position and voice that has recently become clearer to me within that project.

In *African Terminal*, a group of cultural workers from Hamburg collaborates with refugees from Ghana, Gambia and Nigeria in a project that investigates and intervenes into the field of used goods business logistics between Hamburg and West Africa. A great many things are entangled here: Most people that I work with in the project have no legal status, no work permit. All of them came to Europe via the Mediterranean, in boats so fully packed that any of their motions may have made them capsize. They were immobilized, and are immobilized ever since. At the moment, the police in Hamburg have intensified their control especially in St. Pauli where some of the traders of the Terminal used to work as drug dealers, which means that they cannot leave their houses any more. My colleagues travel "in the wake" of historical trauma, as Christina Sharpe (2016) would say, initiated by the choreologistical *dispositif* installed in transatlantic slavery.

Yet, at the same time, many of them carry practical expertise on logistics that most of Hamburg's citizens do not have. While most of the citizens (including me) are blind to the vast extended choreographies that sustain our lives, the migrant workers, with whom I collaborate in *African Terminal*, not only know about "crossing the river," as they say, but also know how to pack a container: Migrants have been sending used goods from Hamburg to West Africa for two generations now. Which is why we founded a business school, to learn more about the trade and to professionalize the group of refugees in used goods logistics. Yet, I believe the

2 For lack of space, I can neither develop the notion here, nor unfold the other prevalent formulation of entanglement within the work of Karen Barad (2007).

project was a failure on many levels. The goods we can collect in Hamburg in order to ship them to West Africa are not always valuable enough in their respective sales markets, mostly in Gambia. More importantly even, the transport of used goods to these places is questionable in the first place. While they are needed and in demand in these countries, mostly because customers believe they are of higher quality than the cheap Chinese electronic products or furnitures that the market is flooded with, the used goods trade, sometimes based on charity economies, minimizes the possibility for production to be established in West Africa. Yet, more importantly even, the EU seals off its domestic market. While I am in solidarity with the situation of my colleagues who, at the moment, have no chance of working legally, the project heightens my sense of deep entanglement, of ethical complicity with the long tides of shipment and its colonial choreographic rules.

It necessitates a form of thorough self-critique, and feels to me like a starting point for a humble questioning of my own position of privilege. I believe the deep work, and maybe this is also a sort of choreographic work, is to address, acknowledge, and challenge our very complicity in the entangled choreologistic networks that sustain our livelihoods often without us noticing it. Indeed, the extended choreographies of logistics are highly political. They are always bound up with extraction and abduction, with fugitivity and homelessness – and with a sense of precarity and instability that Moten names "blackness" and which, according to him, will "be revealed as entanglement's gravitational feel" (Moten 2018: 24). To uncover, to mourn, to (not) accept our own complicity in logistics' neocolonial schemes, to practically challenge its presumptions and ideology, maybe this would be a way to address or practice a different from "choreography of objects": First of all, it would start moving and be moved by an insight into the ongoing racial-patriarchal sorting of flesh, of the material world, in and by way of transport, a choreography and logistics we are entangled with whether we want to or not.

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