

Papers IV: SCENE OF ACTION

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Con forts fleuve. Politics of perception in the work of Boris Charmatz

In this article I explore ways how french choreographer Boris Charmatz creates a political approach to the theatre from a materialist perspective of the body in which the senses play a key role. I do this by departing from the thinking of Hans-Thies Lehmann about the political in relation to contemporary theatre.

According to Lehmann to exploit its political potential theatre needs to engage with its own ways of presenting in order to establish conditions for true communication. This can only be done by making the use of signs transparent, i.e. the making of theatre itself, and by taking risks in dealing with what is presented. Lehmann calls this a politics of perception.

In the article I will argue that in his choreography Con forts fleuve Charmatz engages with a politics of perception by obstructing the visual as dominant mode of perception of dance. Instead sound and kinaesthesia are leading elements in a radical manipulation of the senses.

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Mise-en-scène in motion: movement-related implications of theatrical objects

The paper will proceed in roughly three sections. At the outset, I will point out some inadequacies of traditional scenographic vocabulary such as “scenery,” “props,” and “costume,” for discussing material objects in theatrical performances. As many a scholar has shown, these alleged categories will easily morph into one another, as the performance proceeds: for early Prague-school semiotician Jiri Veltruský, “scenic spontaneity” was a matter of what he enigmatically called “action force,” for historian of props Andrew Sofer, objects “become props” when physically manipulated by actors. As is often the case with human categories, thus, the boundaries are inescapably “fuzzy”: without dismissing the above contributions, the first part of my argument is to replace their vocabulary by that of James Gibson’s ecological psychology, and especially, by his famous concept of

“affordances” – “what [the environment] offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill.” In the ecological scenario – given that most often the materiality of theatrical objects remains even as they come to signify different things – it is little short of redundant to speak of objects “becoming props,” or even of things becoming objects; what can and will change is their relationship with the actor/s (read: affordances) either actual or performed – and in terms of this conference, most of these affordances will both enable and constrain varieties of movement (whether of the actors, or of the material objects they manipulate).

The second part will briefly expand on Veltruský’s key finding (1940) that neither actors nor objects can be “delimited as a closed sphere,” in the theatre, drawing on developmental psychology and cognitive anthropology, on the one hand (ontological “domains” and their violations), yet keeping with the Gibsonian/ecological emphasis on perception and on “invariance” in movement. Perceptually, as it happens, the distinction of the animate and the inanimate appears simple enough, for ecological and cognitive psychology, alike: prototypically, the former move on their own, in nonrigid trajectories, and respond to their environment, whereas the latter neither respond nor move, unless externally caused to move, in which case they do so in a more or less predictable manner. Simplistic as these definitions may sound, the value of such perceptual “clues” lies in the utter easiness of simulating them, on stage – given how Veltruský himself speaks of “perceiv[ing objects] as spontaneous” (though surely the boundary with “conceiving” is as fuzzy as any) and the emphasis on movement, manipulation, and perception not only in discussions of theatrical objects but in the conceptual metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson, the concluding part of my argument can only agree on his most fundamental thesis concerning the social implications (worldview-wise) of “question[ing] the relationship between man and things” in the theatre. If, as Lakoff and others suggest, the central prototype for our diverse concepts of “causation” – the most abstract, social and metaphysical varieties included – indeed comes down to object manipulation, the metaphorical implications of whether a mode of performance is generally “moved by” actors or objects become more than emergent.

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The centrality of movement in Samuel Beckett's works

In Beckett’s works, the body and movement are the prerequisites for being and cognition. What the characters actually do or do not do in terms of physical movement is therefore as important as what they say, yet there has been a

tendency within Beckett criticism to focus more on what is said than what is done. This paper aims to redress the balance by analyzing and exploring the nature of Beckett's kinetic art in his oeuvre.

In both Beckett's prose and plays, a large amount of the text is devoted to descriptions and explanations of physical movements and, especially in the prose, to discussions regarding their significance. Interestingly, the explanations of movement in the prose texts reveal that Beckett's use of movement is fairly consistent. For example, the discussion regarding a specific physical movement in Beckett's trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, may, when applied to one of the plays, provide a "gloss" that explains the use of the same movement in that play and thus shed new light on the play in question. The elaborate explanations of movements that are found in the prose texts also reveal a lack of relation between what may be considered to be the purpose of a movement and its particular mode of execution. Even the common assumption that there is a purpose to every movement does not hold true for Beckett's characters, who do not move to fulfill a purpose or make this purpose the reason for performing that movement.

Furthermore, Beckett's works frequently present characters that "mis-move", e.g. have a tendency to walk in a strange or peculiar way so that the walking falls slightly short of what would normally be expected. Such mis-movement while drawing attention to its execution, are presenting not only the idiosyncrasy of the character but also making explicit how inevitable assumptions about the purpose and meaning of the movement are, for the characters' mis-movement indicates how inappropriate such a movement would be in order to attain what seems to be its apparent purpose.

Although many of Beckett's characters seem to be performing a series of meaningless movements, the manner of their execution remains and can be analysed. Thus how a certain movement is performed becomes significant in itself.

In developing a theoretical framework for the analysis of how movements are performed in dance, Rudolf Laban, asserts the importance of effort and quality to the execution of movement and foregrounds the elements of space, time and weight as aspects of movement that are important for being and cognition. Laban's categories may be usefully applied to explore and analyse the kinds of movements that recur in Beckett's work.

Beckett's unusually deliberate and specific focus upon movement in his works is extremely relevant to how human beings' immersion in life is determined by their physicality.