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Listening Through Seeing

Aspects of the perception of music and dance

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Choreomusical work opens a world of images and signs beyond language. The expressiveness of what is heard and seen merges with the tacit-knowing-view of the viewer and the listener. Meaningful resonances and processes of understanding develop along the structure of the work and within the individual construct of implicit and explicit knowledge of the audience. In this process, perception plays a major role. Aside from the obvious processing of acoustic and visual stimuli, this paper will look at the role of proprioception, especially the kinaesthetic sense, with regard to its role as intermediary and creator in the process of perception.

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Beauty is not a thing but an act

Friedrich Theodor Vischer (1922)

To stumble is to perceive

The ability to arrange and connect sensory impressions in such a way that the brain can generate meaningful perceptions, emotional reactions, thoughts and motor actions appropriate to a situation is continuously formed during the first seven years of a child's life.¹ Accordingly, it is a learned skill to use this interplay of all levels of perception, called *sensory integration*, as a source of understanding and meaningful response, which expands and differentiates with new experiences. However, contemporary music/dance performances, which shift, decouple or even negate what is being seen and heard, put precisely this hard-won skill to the test.

The refusal of the mutual confirmation of hearing and seeing began radically with John Cage and Merce Cunningham and was subsequently explored in the most diverse forms. At the same time, the synchronicity of music and dance, and with it the certainty of the meaning it conveys, lived and lives on seemingly unbroken. Cage and Cunningham did not seem very interested in how their performances affected perception: The unravelling of visual and auditory impressions caused by their aleatorically conceived works makes sensory integration impossible. And yet a strong desire to bring seeing and hearing together remains. A strange moment of satisfaction or brief inner relaxation occurs when a musical and a dance gesture coincide in time and energy - even if it is "just" coincidence. This is how reactions can be interpreted when viewing Cunningham's choreographies, in which only the duration of the pieces or individual phrases was agreed upon with the composer beforehand.

Merce Cunningham impressively describes the freedom of perception found at that time through its systematic overtaxing. In 1952, a 45-minute event took place at the Black Mountain Summer School, with David Tudor at the piano, poetry recited, white monochrome paintings by Robert Rauschenberg on the walls (who in turn played records himself), John Cage presenting texts and Cunningham dancing. The audience sat diagonally across from each other in the middle of the room, making it impossible to see everything that was happening. "Nothing

¹ Jean Ayres: *Bausteine der kindlichen Entwicklung*. Berlin 1984, p. 37

was intended to be other than it was, a complexity of events that the spectators could deal with as each chose.”² They were after all interested in the effect of their works on perception, perhaps even more than those dance creators who favour representing music in movement, so-called “mickeymousing”.

Sixty years later in his texts on theatre, the composer and director Heiner Goebbels calls for the expectation space of spectators not to be “blocked with images of unambiguity”³ and quotes the French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman: “to give something to be seen always means to disturb seeing in its act, in its subject” and adds that this also applies “to hearing - and even more, to the sum of both.”⁴ In this case disturbance is not to be understood as a sensation of threat, but rather as a disquieting, as a motor for paying attention and activating action-oriented thought resources.

In the pedagogy of the musician Heinrich Jacoby, efforts are made in the spirit of reform pedagogy to promote the development of the senses and “the forming of an alert relationship [...] on the basis of a conscious perception of the current condition.”⁵ Jacoby called such awareness “stumbling” and urged his students to break habits and “be ready to stumble.”⁶ The call for refined perception and a readiness to stumble runs through the fields of aesthetic education more or less until today. The dancer and psychologist Detlef Kappert describes the search for meaningful confrontation as essential for personal growth and artistic maturation in the context of his reflections on a teaching style that equally enables performance, sensitivity and artistic development. Kappert introduces the concept of “productive uncertainty” for this purpose.⁷ This means a kind of shock that releases productive energy into the dialogue between taught content and oneself. Ursula Brandstätter names the ability to differentiate, tolerate difference, irritation and the questioning of the familiar as an opportunity in aesthetic education.⁸ And Heiner Goebbels writes in his publication “Aesthetics of Absence”, which culminates in reflections on education for the performing arts:

Our perception reacts where intensity is *evoked and produced* - this can also be a blank space. An observation at the edge, something that lacks conclusiveness because

² Peter Gena and Jonathan Brent, *A John Cage Reader*, New York 1982, p. 111

³ Heiner Goebbels, *Ästhetik der Abwesenheit*. Berlin 2012, p. 85

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁵ Heinrich Jacoby, *Jenseits von begabt und Unbegabt. Zweckmäßige Fragestellungen und zweckmäßiges Verhalten – Schlüssel für die Entfaltung des Menschen*, Hamburg 1994, p. 19

⁶ Walter Biedermann, *Entfaltung statt Erziehung. Die Pädagogik Heinrich Jacobys*, Freiburg 2003, p. 18

⁷ Detlef Kappert, *Tanz zwischen Kunst und Therapie*, Frankfurt 1993, p. 11ff

⁸ Ursula Brandstätter, „Differenzen als ästhetisches und pädagogisches Potenzial“ in: *Positionen. Beiträge zur Neuen Musik*, Heft 61 / November 2004, p. 2-7

it does not fit together or denies visibility and completion. As spectators we want to bridge distances and instinctively wish to close gaps.⁹

Every child has the ability to tolerate gaps in order to use them as a springboard for one's own fantasies, conclusions and interpretations. As an adult, it often has to be regained. Aesthetic experiences can provide numerous starting points to explore the spectrum of perception in which the self and the other fall into each other¹⁰ up to the consciously experienced pleasure of not understanding.¹¹

Excursus on empathy

The concept of empathy, researched at the beginning of the 20th century by Theodor Lipps especially in the field of psychology and aesthetic perception, can be considered as fundamental for our ability to connect with what we perceive.¹² According to Lipps, empathy occurs in a bodily way, in that what is perceived is involuntarily followed as a micro-movement and subsequently experienced as a projection into the other. He did not distinguish between inanimate objects and living beings. For him, aesthetic experiences of things, be they landscapes, objects or architecture, as well as living events were objects of empathy, because “generally every sensual object imposes on me to be active“.¹³

Automatic empathy often occurs unconsciously or below the threshold of perception and is today supported by the theory of mirror neurons as the basis of empathy. With regards to the reception of music (and dance), physical empathy shows itself, for example, as swinging or rocking along, provided that the formative elements such as rhythm, phrasing and dynamics can be sufficiently anticipated. Lipps developed the model of empathy broadly. It also includes the active, intentional process, which is based on the recognition of fundamental, bodily experienced, dynamic processes, which are described by him as

[...] free-flowing or inhibited; easy or forced; unanimous or opposed; tense and loosening; concentrated in one point or diverging in manifold life-activities and 'losing oneself' in them¹⁴

⁹ Goebbels, *Ästhetik der Abwesenheit* (s. Anm. 3), p. 85.

¹⁰ Siri Hustvedt, *Embodied Visions: What Does It Mean to Look at a Work of Art?* München 2010, p. 57

¹¹ Wicki Bernhardt, „Warum machen die das?“, in: *Rhythmik – Musik und Bewegung. Transdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, ed. by Marianne Steffen-Wittek, Dorothea Weise and Dierk Zaiser, Bielefeld 2019, p. 420

¹² Dargelegt in Theodor Lipps, *Grundlagen der Ästhetik*, Hamburg 1903

¹³ *Einfühlung. Zur Geschichte und Gegenwart eines ästhetischen Konzepts*, ed. by Robin Curtis and Gertrud Koch, München 2008, p. 16

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17

In a reassessment of this concept, Karsten R. Stueber differentiates between immediate bodily experience as a "basic" form of empathy - described by Lipps as "mimicry" - which he links to the activity of mirror neurons, and the process of "reactive" empathy.¹⁵ This second, reactive form involves cognitive processes such as comparisons, considerations and imagination, which make it possible to understand the causes of behaviours or events. Vittorio Gallese also sees the mirror neurons as part of a multi-layered process that enables empathy and imitation. In his view, several mechanisms of synchronisation intertwine.¹⁶ He emphasises that experienced analogies include all aspects of what can be perceived and are to be understood as a multi- or intermodal system.

The distinction between "basic" and "reactive" empathy can possibly be transferred to kinetic listening as an involuntary physical reaction to beats and catchy rhythms, and kinaesthetic listening, which is able to reflect impulsive bodily reactions and differentiate them into different levels of perception.¹⁷

The following example illustrates how movement perception and hearing can also develop in cultural contexts. Dancer and movement analyst Cary Rick describes the effect of his solo dance "Sodom" from the cycle "Totem" based on descriptions from the Old Testament. The theme is sensual pleasure. He performed soft undulating movements with his arms and spine, while his legs moved quickly and rhythmically. This was accompanied by drum music (unfortunately not described in detail). While the European audience watched the performances in silence, the audience at a dance festival in Tabarka, Tunisia "enthusiastically began clapping along to the rhythm of the percussion accompaniment"¹⁸ and demanded a repetition of the piece. Apparently, the kinetic effect of the music and the dancer's movements, intensifying into trembling, had literally swept the audience off their feet. In contrast, the European audience, not used to visible physical participation in concerts or dance performances anyhow, sat completely paralysed, presumably triggered by the sublimity of the religious theme.

Daniel Stern addresses the phenomenon of displacing affects in his infant research.¹⁹ Rather than using emotion labels, he works with dynamic, kinetic terms such as "'surging', 'subsiding',

¹⁵ Karsten R. Stueber, "Rediscovering Empathy" in: *Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge 2006

¹⁶ Vittorio Gallese, "The Roots of Empathy. The Shared Manifold Hypothesis and the Neural Basis of Intersubjectivity" in: *Psychopathology* 36, 2003, p. 175 <https://www.karger.com/Article/Abstract/72786> (last access on 06.12.2021)

¹⁷ Stephanie Schroedter, „Musik erleben und verstehen durch Bewegung. Zur Körperlichkeit des Klanglichen in Choreographie und Performance“ in: *Musik und Körper*, ed. by Lars Oberhaus und Christoph Stange, Bielefeld 2017, p. 223

¹⁸ Cary Rick, „Das Auge des Betrachters“ in: *Tanzbüro Lehrtexte I und II* ed. by Claudia Jeschke and Cary Rick, München 1991, p. 67

¹⁹ Daniel Stern: *Die Lebenserfahrung des Säuglings*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2003

'fleeting', 'explosive', 'swelling', 'bursting', 'dragging on',²⁰ to describe so-called "vitality affects", which are recognised at an early age due to the simultaneous (amodal) perception of time, form and intensity. The physicality of these energetic states (or Gestalten) can later become a connecting link in the perception of aesthetic products and turn it into a bodily experience. The extent to which consciousness and reflection can deepen the process of perception and thus empathy depends, especially in the case of the so-called (contemporary) time-based arts of music and dance, on how they are made. If the audible is not clearly oriented towards the visual, if music and dance don't happen at the same time or are separated through other non-congruent means, it becomes more complicated – and possibly more interesting. It is pointless to try to determine how perception reacts in detail, since it will never be identical between two people, fed by individual experiences of hearing, moving and seeing as well as current sensitivities. It may rather be of interest which clues awaken and guide the processes of listening and seeing by vitality effects or "stumbling blocks". This could possibly lead to a new richness of expressiveness in the connection between music and dance, like how listening is deepened through seeing.

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²⁰ Ibid., p. 83