Alea (iacta est) – Dance of Presence

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Abstract

In this paper, I present an overview of the notion of presence in dance works. I give an analysis of the dance piece *Alea (iacta est) – the die has been cast* created by the Italian choreographer Simona Bertozzi, then follow with a comparison of dance productions that utilize motion capture.

In my analysis I define, or perhaps redefine, the concept of presence in performance within technology and human interaction, specifically Mo-Cap. The definition of presence that I propose is related to the notions of intention, attention and memory of the performers, as well as their relationship with space. The phenomenon of presence can be defined as an expansion of the body, rather than an overlapping of it; hence, my argument is that presence requires a physical body as a starting point. To be present means to maintain a certain degree of tension between the dancer's body, his or her intention and the performance space.

The research is driven by several theoretical and methodological approaches, such as: phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, historical explorations, and my own experience as a dancer.

Keywords

presence, dance, phenomenology, choreography, awareness, Simona Bertozzi, performance methods, motion capture, interactive media arts, Alea (iacta est), Homo Ludens

Introduction

'Presence' is a controversial and multifaceted term that cannot easily be defined since it has been used in a wide variety of disciplines, such as theatre, cinema and dance. I claim that the phenomenon of presence, in dance and performance, occurs when dancers/performers have a clear intention and a strong attention that allows them to become aware of the space through their bodies. This awareness creates a relationship between time, space, body and audience.

The rising trend of the use of technology in dance and performance has changed the way we conceptualize liveness and, consequently, presence. Since I argue that to be present means to maintain a certain degree of tension between the projection of movements and their actualization in the space, I pose the question: Is the physical presence of a body necessary in order for presence to be manifested? If so, how can the notion of presence be redefined in an interactive media-art performance?

In the first section of this article, I investigate the dance piece *Alea (iacta est)*, third episode of the project *Homo Ludens* created by the Italians Simona Bertozzi and Marcello Briguglio. *Alea (iacta est)* exemplifies what I intend as the phenomenon of presence, defined from a phenomenological perspective, in a non-technological dance piece.

I then investigate the same phenomenon in interactive media-art performances, specifically in pieces that use the motion capture (Mo-Cap) system. I argue that *presence* can be defined as the expansion or the projection of the body into space. This definition allows the use of the concept of presence in a technological environment because it considers presence as exceeding of the body rather than an overlapping of it.

Alea (iacta est) and dance productions utilizing motion capture produce different results in the manifestation of the dancers' presence, but they share the same principles: strong intentions and attention of movements. To conclude, I argue that in order to create the phenomenon of presence, defined from a phenomenological perspective, a physical body is always necessary as a starting point.

Alea (iacta est) – Dance of Presence

In colloquial language, 'presence' defines someone or something that is in a specific time and place. Usually, the word 'presence' is linked with the idea of 'liveness' and of the presence of a physical body. However, in the field of art, especially in disciplines like theatre and dance, this term usually describes the characteristic of a performer being present on stage and being open to an audience. This implies that performers must have an awareness of the intention of the movements and be conscious of the relationship between their bodies and the space. According to the phenomenology of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 – 1961), the body has a tendency to exit and open up to the world. This inclination is comparable to the projection I indicate as the source of presence.

The phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty can be seen as an attempt to explain how the intention of an artist (the invisible) becomes visible in a work of art. Merleau-Ponty describes the invisible not as "the contradictory of the visible"; instead he states: "the visible itself has an invisible inner framework (*membrure*), and the in-visible is the secret counterpart of the visible, [appearing] only within it."[1] From this perspective, the

notion of presence represents neither the physical body nor the feelings of the performer; rather it is an expansion of body into space. Presence does not overlap the physical body; instead it transcends it. As Merleau-Ponty describes it, presence is the invisible.

The definition of presence that I propose is related to notions of intention, attention and memory of performers because "presence implies temporality, too – a fulcrum of presence is tense and the relationship between past and present."[2]

Based on these premises, we can make an analysis of the notion of presence in the dance piece *Alea (iacta est)* (2010-11). *Alea (iacta est)* is the third episode of the project *Homo Ludens* (2009-2012) choreographed by the Italian dancer and choreographer Simona Bertozzi. This project consists of four dance pieces, each dedicated to a different character, which refer to the categories of play as defined by Roger Caillois in his work *Les jeux et les homes* (1958), based upon the book of the same name written by Johan Huizinga in 1938.

The first piece, titled *Ilynx* (2009), represents ecstasy, vertigo and the idea of the vacuum; the second is *Agon* (2010), where Bertozzi examines competition and challenge in sports; in *Alea (iacta est),* the third episode, Bertozzi investigates gambling and games in which everything is left to fortune; and in the last piece, *Mimicry* (2012)*,* she focuses on mimesis and fantasy.

Alea (iacta est) is a duet, originally created in collaboration with the English dancer and choreographer Robert Clark, then interpreted by the Italian dancer Manfredi Perego. The piece clarifies the important role of intention, attention and memory; it also exemplifies what I defineas "invisible dance".

Bertozzi considers the body as an instrument that is always collocated in a specific time and space. The body is open to an environment and inhabits movements; therefore it becomes a witness of the space. In other words, there is an intertwining between the inside and the outside of the body; there is an exchange between the space and the performer. Dancers' actions find space both inside and around their bodies; presence cannot be seen outside the dialectic between the projection of movement and the reiteration of the bodies' action. It is in the subtle space between the visible and the invisible, between the movement and its projection, that the phenomenon of presence becomes visible.

In *Alea*, the audience sees wandering bodies moving into space, leaving their movements' marks on the stage. As Bertozzi writes:

> Starting to move only some parts of the body slowly so as to avoid leaving a deep mark into the space; it is necessary to feel its organic nature. To cut through it by connections, by casting lines between the various points of its material consistency, so as not to seal it inside a

choice of physical depiction that is aesthetically pre-established.[3]

Let us consider the moment where the two dancers, Bertozzi and Perego, blindfold their eyes with their own hands. They explore the space as if it were the first time they had entered it. They constantly change levels, from standing vertical to lying on the ground; these transformations leave traces of movement that create geometries of space. Dancers construct the space through the signs of their movements; this allows the storage of gestures into the memory of spectators. Bertozzi states:

> Gestures are actions of the body that fuse a before and an after […] I experience movement as a multiplicity of figurations and possible events with the intention of generating a dialogue between the visible material and its corresponding element in absence. Presence and ghosts. Gesture and movement, thus enacted, measure themselves against a perception of time based on quality. [4]

An analysis of *Alea* allows us to reflect upon human behavior because the two dancers become participants in a play in which they are deeply involved. The play evolves as a dialogue between their bodies until it dictates the rules of the choreography.

The awareness of body and space is such an important feature of Bertozzi's aesthetic that it also inspires her teaching methodology. Her dance workshops focus on the intention and attention of the dancers using different strategies, such as somatic practices, clear thinking, and the dancers' ability to put thoughts into words. Using the information that she gives, dancers can expand their imagined, dilated bodies. Bertozzi usually asks her dancers and students to imagine their bodies and to visualize their anatomies projected into space before the movement takes action in the tangible world.

This process generates what I define as the phenomenon of presence. Presence in dance is an ability to project movements and bodies into space in order to create a tension - between projected bodies, actual bodies, and movements - which makes the phenomenon of presence visible.

Interactive media technology

I would now like to introduce and discuss the definition of presence as it relates to performances that include interactions with technology, specifically motion capture. The integration of multi-media technologies into dance and performing art requires a redefinition of the concept of presence because the use of motion captures, as well as of digital projections, has transformed our understanding of the notion of presence.

As discussed previously, the phenomenon of presence in dance means a tension between an actual movement and its projection, as well as between a physical body and its dilation in space. The definition of presence that I presented oversteps the physical body; therefore it allows the term to be applied to a technological environment. I argue, however, that the phenomenon of presence always requires a physical body as a starting point.

The use of Mo-Cap makes it possible to receive information regarding performers' movements that would otherwise be impossible to reveal; for example, a virtual movement can be read as a trace, a phantom, or as presence - as defined it in the previous paragraphs. The use of digital supports makes it possible to explore new paths, to open the field of the possible without restricting or binding the body to a predetermined order.

First of all, it is important to emphasize, as the performer and philosopher Susan Kozel notes, that there is a distortion of the term virtual. It can occur as something "embedded within the virtual-real duality and used to qualify an action, object, space or emotion that is distinguished from the real." [5] In this case, the term virtual is used to highlight the dichotomy with reality.On the contrary, when I argued that the notion of presence does not overlap the physical bodies of dancers, but concerns their virtual bodies, I was referring to a dilated body, which is an expansion or an image of the physical one. The virtual body, both reproduced by movement sensors and intended as dilated, does not identify with the physicality of the dancer; rather, what is created is a dilation of it that opens up new horizons and possibilities of movement.

In an interactive media environment, the 'physical presence' of the performer can be replaced with its virtual reproduction. Giulia Tonucci explains that, in this situation, two different processes are ongoing: the "doubling of presence" and the "amplification of presence". The former is referred to as a scission between the physical presence and its digital double; the latter is defined as "the movements captured, elaborated and then digitalized and amplified, in real time or in post-production." [6]

Tonucci's clarification is useful for analyzing creative practices, as the introduction of technologies has changed the manner in which choreographers and artists compose. The scenic composition, as Tonucci claims, becomes a new environment: new technologies offer new tools to analyze and compose it. Nevertheless, I disagree with her definition of presence because I believe that what she defines as "amplification of presence" has nothing to do with presence; rather, what she describes is the power of new technologies, considered as an instrument for learning about movements and for breaking down dancers and choreographers' habits.

On the same topic, in her book *Closer* (2007), Kozel states:

When I encounter my digital self I discover that it is not simply me. […] The figure with which I perform is always at the same time both my own body and another body; […] If we follow Merleau-Ponty, perception is more than just the neurophysiological mechanism by which I apprehend the world. Perception is constitutive of who and what I am.[7]

In other words, the digital body is not the double of the body; it is not a different and separate entity. The digital body is the materialization of presence, interpreted as an expansion and a projection of the body and its movement. It is evident that in order to talk about the phenomenon of presence, the physical body is necessary.

However, if we consider Bill T. Jones' piece *Ghostcatching* (1999), I suggest that, in this case, the digital body can be considered as a double of the physical one because the performer was not on stage. In this digital art installation, created in collaboration with Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar, the dancer's physical body is separated from its movement; movement is withdrawn from Jones' body.

The use of motion capture changes the relationship between the performer and his or her body. The description of Kozel's experience as a dancer in the event *Real Gestures, Virtual Environments* (1998) reveals similarities and differences with Bertozzi's aesthetic. Although Kozel interacted with visualized data, whereas Bertozzi established a dialogue with mental images, she performed "with visual movement data projected in real time on a surface adjacent to the performance space […] so that the visualized data becomes a partner in the space." [8] In a similar way, Bertozzi danced with space, creating imaginary shapes into it and transformed the projection of her own body into a partner.

Conclusion

This article has presented the notion of presence through the lens of dance studies and an analysis of the dance piece *Alea (iacta est)* choreographed by the Italian artist Simona Bertozzi.

I have presented a definition of presence that does not overlap the physical body, but rather oversteps it. From this perspective, presence is the invisible as Merleau-Ponty defines it; it is the ability to project dancers' movements and bodies into space. In other words, the phenomenon of presence is made visible on stage by the tension that dancers create between their actual movements and their intentions or, in the case of productions that utilize motion capture, by the digital/virtual body.

My argument is that Bertozzi can be considered new and innovative, even though she does not use any kind of technology in her works; instead she uses dance as an image-making technology. She creates and composes with mental

images in dialogue with the body and the space. Although there is no use of technology in her dance pieces, the intentions of her movements are extremely clear so that we can see the expanded/dilated body moving in space. In both Bertozzi's works and those of interactive technologies, presence transcends the actual dancing body and becomes 'visible' on stage.

Through the strong focus and attention that Bertozzi places on movements, spectators can recognize traces and signatures of her dancing body without the aid of technologies, as if her pieces were interactive media-art works where virtual figures can be perceived, touched or felt as if they were projections of dancers. The phenomenon of presence exceeds, or at least corresponds with, the performers' bodies.

Acknowledgements

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