

Metasocial Choreography: Magic Entanglement / Unsettling Embodiment

I. Introduction

My title of course refers to Andrew Hewitts concept of social choreography, by which he attempted to connect dance/choreography with cultural and social dynamics and ideologies. He argued, that in modernity dance and choreography have an intense relation to biopolitical body regimes: on stage, social modes of moving bodies are being developed and rehearse, but also critized and counteracted. Just think about expressionist dance as an answer to the militarization and disciplining of bodies in the beginning of the 20th century. In Hewitts concept body, social order and dance/choreography are entangled, they are echoing or reflecting each other. For this talk I will though go in a different direction. I will try to sketch a relation of dance/choreography and the political, not of dance/choreography and the social. What is the difference? What we call the „social“ is a historically configured and culturally encoded association of humans (a state, with it's political and economic system, a village with it's social rules). I would like to think of the political as quite the opposite of this: The political is the very moment, when an organized form, a social order is called into question. The political event is the very moment, when an agent, that is not included into the collective, or included in equal terms, speaks up, demands to be heard. That's what happened when slaves, when women, when immigrants demanded to be heard, to be accepted as equals in a collective. Or in other (Latourian) words: „the social“ is an already associated collective, the political is the process of association. So, if I talk about „the metasocial“ I don't mean some abstract force, some power, that organizes the social, but the moment, when a social order is challenged, when some entity demands to take it's part, when it's own criteria of inclusion are transcended.

With respect to this idea of the political it is important, not to read the history of democracy as a success-history of some kind of universal, rational social order. Yes, the slaves, the workers, the women demanded their rights by showing that they are rational enough to participate, but no: at the very core of modernity lies a different process: With our practices we include ever more entities into our collectives; entities that are not human, but take part in our lives. One can conceive of the sciences as of a big machine to socialize non-human entities. For example, one has to find, describe, cultivate a neutrino, in order to make it work for us (to produce nuclear energy). That's the core idea of Donna Haraways book “When species meet”, which – as You all know – was very important for Antonia's last performance. In this book,

Haraway shows, how animals are socialized in different areas: as part of our nutrition, as study objects, as workers (guide dogs), as sports companions. Her main argument is, that animals are part of the social, but they are rarely treated as if they were socialized, as if they were co-workers, as if they were companions. Her argument is about the recognition of the fact, that animals are already part of our society. We already live in nature-cultures and we should better take on the responsibility that comes with this.

A second strand of Haraway's thinking is targeted against the Enlightenment idea, that only rational, sovereign subjects can have the whole range of rights. She argues, that every entity that can articulate some kind of speak-back, should be heard; or better: that we are very bad listeners; we are much too fast in qualifying somebody or something as "passive", irrational etc. With this argument we arrive at a similar situation as with the political in the strong sense: politics is about making entities heard, felt, that are not included, that are treated as objects, that don't have rights.

II. Choreographies

It is interesting to see, that Haraway alludes to "choreographies", choreographic figures to strengthen her key-arguments. Her famous Cyborg-Manifesto from 1985 ends with the words: "Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess." In the manifesto she fought for an idea of feminism, that is not restricted by any essentialisms, such as the idea that women are better humans. It was a plea for what one could call „inclusive feminist politics“; it is a text that fights for freedom and equality of possible agents, of agents whose existence we might not even know of. This struggle is a dance between substance (the goddess) and potentiality (the cyborg), because our needs, thoughts, desires are torn between our historically and biographically constituted bodies/minds and bodies/minds that are in *statu nascendi*. That's a very Spinozian way of thought. Spinoza famously said: "We cannot know, what a body can do."

The other dance is the one Haraway describes as her sports-activity with her dog Cheyenne: They are exercising together in agility sports, and the focus of her description is the reciprocity of human and non-human movements, the ways to communicate beyond the syntax of human language, figurations and relations that build in the course of the training. It is, I would like to argue, a choreography for what Thomas Macho calls „inclusive humanism“: a kind of score on how to be re-sponsive to non-human agents; and re-sponsivity is of course related to responsible. Now, Donna Haraway is often misread as a

prophet of an „affective turn“; as a representative of an idea of a richer, deeper, more intense connectedness with the world. I am kind of skeptic towards this. I am skeptical exactly because the sphere of emotionality and of a richer/better sensorial perception of the world has since the romantic era been attributed to the arts (and to women); and I want to argue, that it is a dangerous way to take, because it easily leads to the notion of arts as being the unrealistic fantasy-counterpart to the “hard and real world”; the romantic idea, that the realm of the art makes us survive the cold world out there, the pudding that makes us take the pill but does not question the need for the pill.

Before I come to the point, why I think such an intention is wrongly attributed to Donna Haraway, I will introduce another thinker, from whom I borrow an idea of “magic”. She is an historian of science and a Deleuzian thinker; and she is a good friend of Donna Haraway: Isabelle Stengers. In her texts on how contemporary sciences ignore and/or dominate whatever they cannot define, she argues for the power of imagination and the power of magic. For example, she takes up Denis Diderot's famous fictional dialogue with the mathematician d'Alembert. In this *Conversation* Diderot says to the scientist: “Do you see this egg? With this you can overthrow all the schools of theology, all the churches of the earth”. And Stengers comments: „He does not ask D'Alembert to observe the egg, but to accept *seeing* the egg, seeing the developing embryo, the small chicken who breaks the shell and comes out. What Diderot asks D'Alembert is that he *give* to the egg *the power to challenge* his well-defined categories.“ (*Isabelle Stengers* 373) This resembles the power, Haraway wants to give to animals: To give them the power, to challenge what we are used to see, feel, think. It's a kind of magic: giving something the power to do something to me/to somebody else. Also it is important to note that both thinkers are very materialist thinkers: It is the egg (Stengers) and it is the very concrete chicken of mass production (Haraway) that stimulates imagination. One could say, it is a version of what Kant (neither Stengers nor Haraway would agree with me here) called „radical imagination“: it is the faculty of imagination, that can go beyond what is already recognizable, categorized, proper knowledge. And also for Kant, this is the moment of politics, of political change. So, even for Kant, this specialist of proper knowledge, imagination is the big mover in history, not rational thought. So, if Haraway talks about responsibility, affects, entanglement this is not in order to privilege „emotions“ over „thought“, it is about letting oneself be shaken in one's convictions, about giving some entity the power to change the way we see the world. So to some extent, one could say, they attribute to neutrinos and dogs what we usually attribute to art: the power to challenge our perception, our thoughts, our well defined, orderly ideas. But – like with the arts – this does not yet make a “better”

world, it gives us the sense, that it could be otherwise.

III. Human-animals choreographies

What does all that mean for choreography? To be honest: I can only guess. The following is pure thought experiment, as I have no experience whatsoever with choreography and dance. But I had – of course – the chance to see many performances, such as Antonias, and I was also lucky enough to share some rehearsal-work. So, the first thing to say is that dance and performance are probably the artistic genres, that have re-sponsivity at the center of their aesthetics. Both are artistic forms that put bodies into a an artificial space to experiment with it's responsiveness and it's relations; they experiment with the responsiveness between concrete bodies but also with the magic responsiveness of an audience, that takes part in the movements without moving; performance and dance trigger *the imagination of other bodies*, of other relations; but on the other hand, if we keep the sociological place of the arts in mind, there is always a danger of outsourcing these other bodies, these other relations on a remote space, we call the stage or utopia. My idea of the place of the arts with regard to the political is different though: I think, that performance art is not about showing a better, richer world, it is about challenging the idea, that there is only the one established disorder; it shows, that what we perceive as the given is nothing but a small fragment of what is possible. It does not represent a richer world, it insists on the fact, that there can be another world. The arts can be considered an agency that calls new (political) entities into the arena of perception.

This is world of epiphenoma; the term is used by Alfred Jarry and later by Gilles Deleuze to cut across idealist and materialist philosophies: An epiphenomenon is what gives itself to see; it's neither idea nor positive entity, it's always particular, it's not subsumable under any category. For Deleuze, and I share this view, the arts can and shall expose ever more ephiphenomena, ever more “percepts” to enrich our imagination, to enrich our sense of possibilities. In such a perspective, the arts have a more interesting account of the world then the sciences, because they are constantly experimenting with the faculty of imagination. (By the way: One of the most impressive “proofs” for the existence of the power of imagination is Samuel Beckett's short prose: “Imagine Dead Imagine”. It demands from the reader to imagine that his imagination is dead. You cannot not imagine.)

I want to talk about a real piece to exemplify what that means for performance practice: The Slovenian performer Janez Janša developed, together with students from the Free University Berlin, a performance on a feminist art-collective called Küche 11 (kitchen 11) that was

founded in the 60ies in Berlin; they researched documents, interviewed witnesses and reconstructed an opera the 11 women had performed back then. Also, they found out, that the female artists conceived of ants as their co-workers. As a result of their research, the students finally produced a show to present their investigation. They exposed films and documents, they developed an ant choreography (img) and re-enacted parts of the opera. This way, they recreated the artistic and intellectual context of a group that had never existed. During the research the students had of course to study (and re-imagine!) a lot of things in detail: the feminist movement, the aesthetics of performance in the sixties, the history of unpaid labor. That they included ants was a double move: it was a hint towards “minor” (unpaid, affective) labor of women in the typical West German household, but it was also a move of acknowledgement towards an animal that does not even have a very proper place within the zoologicon of the West: When we talk about animal rights, it is mostly about mammals, about very beautiful or about domesticated animals. Insects such as ants – although they are of course part of the human worlds – are only rarely of interest. And coincidentally (really?), the ant is also the heraldic animal of Actor-Network-Theory. ANT is the abbreviation for Bruno Latours method of doing research in labs, of his method of following the actors of a process. He describes his ethnography of sciences by the ways of the ant who follows a path and thereby points toward structures.

There is a beautiful video by Rivane Neuenschwander that elaborates to the epistemic qualities of ants-movement-patterns: In her film with the title „Ash Wednesday, the ants follow, they map, the the structure and path of the celebration of the humans. And (again, no coincidence) the ants are „cleaning up“ after carnaval in Brazil (Rio?); so a minor dance/choreography mimics the major dance.

Img

The film also points to a line of thought, that has been recently discussed under the keywords animism or speculative realism; a concept that has the same “drive” as Donna Haraways claim to accept the fact, that not only humans are working, producing art, articulate themselves. The idea is not some romantic idea of going “back to nature”, to rediscover an unspoilt relationship with nature, to discover the generative power of nature, but it is about the acceptance of the fact, that we (the West) have for a long time neglected all kinds of knowledge; we have neglected all kinds of being in the world, modes of existence in the favor for one reductionist (and local) version of the world that we call reason. That does not mean, that thinking and reason are not important – quite on the contrary, they are heavy magic to control nature – but to insist – like Diderot did – that there is more to the world then the small

little bit that can be understood in scientific terms. So we are back to the idea of “inclusive humanism”.

Another animal dancer is very popular in an idea of aesthetics beyond the human scale. It is the Australian bower bird. Deleuze and Guattari spoke about an undoubtedly artistic practice in the *Scenopooetes dentirostris*. They develop stages with *objets trouvés*, each of them very individual for their mating dances.

Video

Now, the Darwinian explanation for this would be all too obvious: The dance should attract the female partners and secure the best selection of genes. But even for Darwin it was quite complicated to explain the circumstantial and laborious efforts of these birds. Even more so, as Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-inventor of the idea of female breeding selection, had documented, that sometimes the birds of paradise would dance in an all male group. Male birds of paradise would meet for „dancing-parties“ high up in the trees. Even if such a ritual is part of reproduction, it cannot be explained, why it has to be so complicated, why there are so many different varieties, so many ways to do it, so many detours to do it.

III. Registering reciprocity

My next example will make a connection to a topic that is of importance for this context: It will talk about how to register animal subjectivity, about a very important score in animal psychology and about how dogs and humans become doghumans or humandogs.

One of the most important zoologists of the early 20th century was the German Jakob von Uexküll, who developed a whole new glossary to describe animal subjectivity and meaning making. He subverted Kant’s philosophy of consciousness by including animal subjectivity into the latter’s system. In Uexküll’s idea though, this was not meant as a subversion, but an extension of Kant. He was interested in the specificity of animal perception but also in the question of shared experience between animals and humans as an epistemological problem: How can a human researcher „understand“ an animal, if he lives in a totally different sensory world, in a different sensorial milieu? If understanding is related to sensory perception on the one hand and existential valorisation of the perceived on the other hand, how can we even have the slightest

idea of what is important for a non-human being? Uexküll's ideas of how the senses and the milieu constitute meaning subsequently became very influential for behavioural zoology (e.g. Konrad Lorenz) but also for "Gestaltpsychologie"; I will today only present his research on guide dogs, that he conducted with his student Emanuel Sarris in the 1930ies and that led to an innovative training program for guide dogs for the blind; and they also invented an artificial man.

In their paper *Die Umwelt des Hundes* (the dog's environment) they start their argumentation from the grounds that the sensorial basis of humans and dogs are not that different at all. They interpret the relative similarity of the organisation of their organs as hints for quite similar visual perception. Also, the sense of time in humans and animals is supposedly similar. The proof for this interestingly can be found in contemporary media: As the moving image is tailored to human perception, it can be considered a proof of similarity, that dogs are able to identify other dogs in movies.

The biggest difference in the dog's and the human's sensory economy is the significance of smell over vision in the dog's perceptual landscape. But as important as the physiological differences is the difference in the valorisation of the perceived: A raw piece of meat and a blanket have comparable but significantly different meanings to the dog. In order to make the guide dog then sensitive for the human world, the amount and valorisation of his „Merkzeichen“ („mental notes“) must be changed.

Uexküll had a while before (in the 1890ies) developed a concept of signs, perception and action as a „functional circle“ (Funktionskreis). He explicitly set his model against Pawlow's behaviourist reflexology.

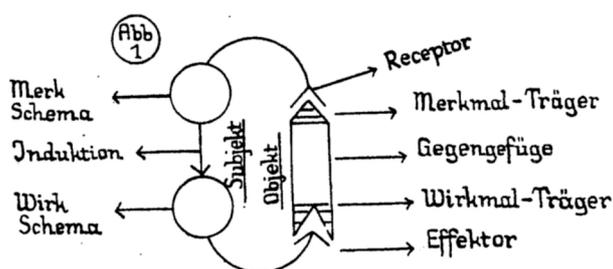


Abb: Funktionskreis aus Sarris/Uexküll, *Umwelt*, 1930.

Pawlow's idea of the „conditioned reflex“ was based on a mechanistic idea of stimulus and response. Every stimulus triggers one specific response, conditioning was possible by connecting some simple stimulus-response chains. Uexküll -- on the opposite -- proposes a dynamic model: Already the perception of the stimulus is complicated

here. He conceives of the sensual organs as „Fugen“ („joints“) and the perceptual organ dynamically corresponds to the thing perceived as a counter-joint: They constitute each other. On the side of cognition a „Merkschema“ (a pattern, memory built from experience) corresponds to a „Wirkschema“ (a pattern of action). The translation between the two is indirect and non-deterministic. It is not an automatic reflex, but a process, that Uexküll calls „Induktion“. Instead of automatic reactions to the environment, Uexküll observes „strange, psychoidal“ processes in the animal.

Emanuel Sarris started to experiment with the possibilities to teach new signs to dogs by trying to understand how dogs made sense. He could make dogs give a different meaning for example to a chair: His dogs came to use it as a tool to reach for food, not because Sarris told them to do so, but by the dogs problem-solving competence. Learning of animals (at that time, and probably up to now) usually fell under the spell of mere training and manipulation. Uexküll and Sarris therefore make a big effort to proof that the dogs are not simply “imprinted”. In their words, learning bears the character of „autodressage“/autotraing; they declare the dogs agency as central. Also, they insist, that with the chair something genuinely new is added to the dog’s subjective perception of the world. Only out of an ignorant perspective his active agency could be denied. Consequently, they consider the education of seeing-eye dogs as a process of mutual learning between animal and human. Both parts have to change their perceptual patterns, they are each others extensions, each others media. Only a very dumb dog-owner, they add, will act on his dog, as if it was an object; because he would then relinquish the chances of mutual learning and a better way of living together. They rhetorically reverse the anthropocentric perspective by describing the dog-owner as the dog’s property. And they stress aspects of reciprocal „usage“.

Es sieht geradezu grotesk aus, wenn ein kleiner Rattenpinscher durch ein leises Kratzen seines Pfötchens an der Wand des Hundefängnisses, das wir Menschen Zimmer nennen, dem riesigen Ungetüm Mensch ein Wirkmal erteilt, das diese große Muskelmaschine in Bewegung setzt, um ein riesiges Loch in die Gefängnismauer zu schlagen (was wir Tür öffnen nennen).

It appears straightaway grotesque, when a small dog gives a sign of action (Wirkmal) to the big monster, „the human“, by lightly scratching the wall of his dog-prison that we humans call a room/chamber and by that sets in motion this big muscle-machine, who makes a big whole in the wall (which we call „opening a door“.)

-> “inverted” choreography, who moves whom?

With their conceptual moves they open a possibility to think about semiosis much in the style Gilles Deleuze/Félix Guattari have later proposed.

ABB By the way: The French edition of Uexküll's popular work on animal worlds appeared in the Editions Mediations (1956) which later became the place where a lot of poststructural research was published (Deleuze, Derrida)

Uexküll proposes a model of meaning making that focuses on the constant reworking of associations and interconnections, meaning making and perception are closely knit together and meaning is not restricted to human agents. This model trusts the ever unforeseeable assemblage of beings to be productive, self-learning. Deleuze/Guattari – and Uexküll/Sarris – put into question what or who acts when something third, a medium (be it a living being or a thing) comes into play.

ABB Artificial Man

The consequences of their considerations can be seen in their proposition for dog training. They invented a so called „artificial human“ to teach the dogs „human perception“: The dogs were trained by attaching a construct human size to the leash, that should enable them to dynamically „autotrain“ themselves: e.g. to learn that a human cannot pass under an open window.

To make it short now: Sarris and Uexküll criticized the traditional way of training that relies on verbal and physical violence and coercion to enforce obedience. They stressed self-learning effects and the necessity of incorporation of meaning for reliable guide dogs. It was for these reasons, they proposed methods of how to extend human perception into the dogs perceptual patterns. In order to maintain the possibility of life-long-learning in dogs and humans they developed methods of dynamic modification of patterns of perception and meaning and of a shared learning between human and animal. They proposed a model and methodology that conceptualizes the human agent and his living auxiliary medium symmetrically, reciprocally: No longer is there an autonomous, consciously acting human on the one side and a mere functional tool on the other hand: Dynamic adaptation guarantees both their autonomy. Becoming autonomous with a dog means no longer to establish his/her subjectivity against the animal (to impose it on the animal) but to generate a common field of

experience, to establish modes of reciprocal learning. To use Donna Haraway's words: to live in a common world with a companion species. Uexküll's model of learning is about the coming into being of a new entity that is neither dog nor human; we can speak of "emergent ontologies" here.

Conclusions

Metasocial choreography can mean either to map the multiple paths we humans cross with non-humans; or it can map aesthetics beyond the human scale (the bower bird). Metasocial in my understanding also means metarational, the acceptance of the unknown as a trigger to overthrow what we perceive and know; giving the material world the power to challenge our convictions; metasocial choreographies do not have to include animals or non-humans on a figurative level though. By triggering the sense of possibilities, the sense that it could be otherwise, an artistic practice is in its core a means to unsettle culturally encoded embodiments, to mess with what we have learned to believe is true, to show not in the first place *what else a body can do*, but *that we can never know, what a body can do*.