

An Aesthetic of Cognitive Embodiment and Emergence

Cook is an associate professor at Story Brook University in Long Island, NY. Her focus of study is cognitive science and its application to theories of performance. In her article, *Bodied Forth: A cognitive Scientific Approach to Performance Analysis*, Cook surmises that what she is seeing in contemporary performance art is the staging of embodied and distributed cognition (524). She elaborates on a one woman performance, "Lay Me Down Easy" by Anna Deveare Smith, digesting Smith's acting method. Smith's grandfather told her when she was young, "If you say a word often enough it becomes you" (525). Smith explains that her method is to repeat words until her body remembers them instead of her mind. Cook calls this embodied cognition, as it is a practice and not something theorized. She argues that our western concept of mind and body as two separate entities, even our idea of 'embodied mind' or mind/body,' doesn't have the full connotation of what she says is "a dynamic organism that is fundamentally inseparable" (527).

Likewise, Royd Climenhaga in his exaltation of Pina Bausch's work called *A Theatre of Bodily Presence: Pina Bausch and Tanztheater Wuppertal*, grapples with and opposes the perspective of separation between mind and body. He examines the classical dance perspective as a form of subjugation of the body that, in effect, objectifies the body from the beginning. His adulation of Bausch's work is in her ability to approach choreography with bodily experience, describing her work as a 'theatre of experience' which captivates him, for it is out of our senses

that we develop our 'self' and even are able to form and comprehend ideas. He writes, "Our bodies are never just objects that encase ourselves as subjects, but are the very means by which we come into being as subjects through our engagement with the world."

I agree with both Cook and Climenhaga in their idea of 'embodied cognitive' practice or 'theatre of experience.' I find these to be what moves me viscerally as both an audience member watching such an engaging performance as well as a performer engaged in the movement itself. We come to an understanding of what is happening during a performance on a feeling level before an intellectual one. It is important for me to note that though Cook or Climenhaga both object to the separation of mind from body mentality, and both champion unconventional methods of dance composition, neither pursues discourse with postmodernist abstract work as championed by 20th century dance pioneers such as Merce Cunningham and the founders of the Judson Dance Theatre. For me, abstract art is an acquired taste, but one I find more enjoyable and beneficial the more I participate in it as either spectator or student in practice. Without narrative or theme in the postmodern form of dance, the human body, in movement, still holds a wealth of experience I find fascinating. It is possible to argue that because post modern dance does not try to convey a story, the cognitive machination is more visible in its practice. Improvised dance does not elude the intelligence of it's medium, in fact, it often accentuates it, especially in collective performance.

Cook addresses contemporary Ethic's professor, Jonathan Haidt's idea that humans are 10% bee, meaning we are 'groupish.' Yet we are novel because we come together without family ties and with complete strangers unlike any other species. Digging further into this anomalous

trait, C.S. Lewis' expounds on a particular kind of love relationship between people in his book, *The Four Loves*. He defines philios as the least natural kind of love. It is a bond of friendship that requires neither, biological, instinctive, or ties of necessity. He examines that it is this kind of bond that is freely chosen. I believe this essence of choice-love, this 'bee-ness', is something I long to see and be a part of artistically, it is an underpinning to or the under-pining of my aesthetic. It is the element that I understand with embodied cognition, the practice that I both am doing and am seeking. Cook extrapolates more clearly. In a viewing of *The Rest Is Silence*, Cook is taken on a multimedia performance in which the audience becomes part of the action, much like my own experience as an audience member for *Sleep No More*. She says that within this performance cause and effect is de-linearized and becomes part of a network, a dispersion of cause and effect agents during the play. She sums up: "We emerge in the power to come together and bring something to life: we emerge in the network" (539).

'Emerging' has become a key word for my personal aesthetic. I long to see interaction between artists in a performance, the essence of being, embodied cognition, a theatre of experience, the individual in relation to the group, the cohesive rhythm, motif, embodied spirit that expresses humanity's 'bee-ness,' the human capability for philios. I want to see the dynamic organism of self and the dynamic organism that is many selves emerging as part of a whole. This is illustrated in Alvin Ailey's famous piece "I Been 'Buked" in his 1960 *Revelations*. The moment of outstretched arms in a tight-knit group, the encircling torsos together, and the resolve by a deceleration back to different stacked body levels is one such moment of emergence. In this case the solidarity and togetherness of people, not oneness or singularity, but the cohesive group formed by many, conveys shared experience. It is something felt and mutually experienced by

the audience preceding intellectual perception. The music comes from spirituals rife with experience of suffering, overcoming, sadness, and hope. They are messages derived from freedom theology in tandem with Jewish slaves during the Cook is an associate professor at Story Brook University in Long Island, NY. Her focus of study is cognitive science and its application to theories of performance. In her article, *Bodied Forth: A cognitive Scientific Approach to Performance Analysis*, Cook surmises that what she is seeing in contemporary performance art is the staging of embodied and distributed cognition (524). She elaborates on a one woman performance, "Lay Me Down Easy" by Anna Deveare Smith, digesting Smith's acting method. Smith's grandfather told her when she was young, "If you say a word often enough it becomes you" (525). Smith explains that her method is to repeat words until her body remembers them instead of her mind. Cook calls this embodied cognition, as it is a practice and not something theorized. She argues that our western concept of mind and body are separate entities, even our idea of 'embodied mind' or 'mind/body' doesn't have the full connotation of what she says is "a dynamic organism that is fundamentally inseparable" (527).

The last movement of Paul Taylor's 1975 *Esplanade* is an exuberant display of leaping, spinning, and sliding to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Taylor was inspired by watching people in a busy city try to catch transportation. This dance uses mostly 'natural' movement, running, jumping, skipping, yet requires the most well trained dancers to execute. I love the playfulness, like human popcorn the ensemble fully commits to this over ecstatic moment, Taylor's concept allowed for each dancer to have their own goal, a quest to down stage Left or a quest to circle around, yet each person is aware of the other dancers, sometimes coming together to form a simulated group, other times to make connections as they jump into each other's arms.

There is a kinetic urgency, a shared experience, that is done in front of us as an audience, not symbolically but in actualization. They are truly running, jumping, and sliding before our eyes.

Created on the second centennial of Mozart's death, Jiri Kylian set his choreographic work *Petite Mort* on the Nederlands Dans Theatre in 1991 for the purpose of celebrating the Baroque composer in Salzburg. At the start of the 17 minute piece six men walk backward from upstage to down stage as the lights fade up, swords balanced on one fingertip above their head. Intriguing from the start, before Mozart's trickling contemplative piano even begins to cascade into the piece, we hear the virilous swish of the swords slashing through the air. The six men continue to maneuver in challenging balance techniques with the sword and the weight of their bodies. Kylian synchronized this moment of the piece for the awe-inspiring effect of watching a whole group of people execute difficult motion and balance together. As I watched this work again, I realized that, in his unified phrasing for the men, their gender seems highlighted and the difference between sexes in this piece is polarized. Referencing the 18th century through costume and sword play imagery Kylian accentuates male and female diversity. As the piece spins into different sets of couples we are already conditioned to see a specific dominant male dancing figure picking up and manipulating a female dancing figure. How each couple relates and intertwines is new, though not challenging to gender roles. The choreography is unique. It is not something we see in the natural realm of movement like Taylor's piece, and not at all what we normally see in the codified steps of ballet. In this piece, the cognitive embodiment of each couple as they interact brings a new form to life. The quality, musicality, and phrasing with which they move, is uncommon and surprising. Weight is entangled and intertwined, new shapes

of movement dazzle the eye. Their stories do not speak, they unfold, crumpling up, and straighten back out again.

Originally choreographed by Balanchine in 1936, *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* was reimagined by Gene Kelly and choreographed for the film *Words and Music* in 1948. It is an exquisite relic from its time of dream ballet sequences. The set and costumes are consciously overdone as well as the movement taken into a type of symbolic state that seems avant garde for its time. This piece is entirely unlike *Revelations*, *Esplanade*, and *Petite Mort*. It seems to me inorganic, and ungraceful in a way that may repulse Climenhaga or Cook, yet the stylization in itself is what captures my attention. *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* is its own uniquely stylized world that operates in its own dance dimension. It is representational, and intends to be so. Within this conscious framework the dance loses itself in its own iconicism. The way Vera Ellen and Gene Kelly move in this piece is not codified or commonly seen in jazz or ballet. I enjoy the mystique of the two, their movement and their interaction with each other, and the entire parody of reality and the commitment to this specialized dance form, both these leading artists make.

In summary, all four dance works are performed by artisans who are exquisite athletes and committed to the choreography. As created works of art, each piece is detailed, requires group embodied cognition, and relational interaction. They refrain from pantomime or a typical sequence of codified steps. Shapes are simple and clear, while quality of movement fluctuates between bound and free with phrasing that interprets rhythm and music through ingenious use of sustained and sudden movement. The first three choreographies are works that create an organic 'togetherness' during performance and allow me, as an audience member, to engage, with feeling,

the embodied cognition they are experiencing. Slaughter on 10th Avenue changes the rules of performance by creating its own eccentric aesthetic, the dramatization of which I enjoy.

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