Kim’s Style Guide for the Kinaesthetic Boffin: An Exercise in Anti-Communication

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Author’s Note: The following article refers to a performed paper, Did the Paradigm Shift for You, Darling? given as a collaboration between John Cumming, Yoni Prior, David Ritchie and me at the Double Dialogues Conference, Lines of Flight, at Theatreworks in Melbourne, November, 1997. The performance involved the staging of a mock analysis of a section of my choreographic work, Kim’s Style Guide for the Kinaesthetic Boffin, by three fictitious ‘critics’. The performance functioned as an implicit critique of three different approaches to interpreting dance. This article explores a theoretical position which supports that critique.

The attempt to interpret a dance rests on the idea that dance is primarily communicative in nature. If interpretation is possible, desirable, then there must be something to interpret. There must be information to be transmitted. That information may be objective or subjective, concerned with facts, histories or individual experiences. It may be assumed to be essentially univalent, that is, concerned with a single concept or frame of reference. Alternatively, it may be assumed to be multivalent, that is, concerned simultaneously with a number of disparate references drawn from a multiplicity of sign systems and frames of reference. For example, codes of dance technique may be referenced at the same time as dynamic qualities which indicate particular emotional states, gestures which indicate particular social interactions, idiosyncracies in performing style. These draw attention to the identity of a particular performer and choreographic structures which reference particular choreographers and situate the work in particular historical traditions.

In either case, dance analysis becomes the attempt to define the codes of representation by which a dance communicates. These codes may be envisaged as relatively cohesive, so that there is a sense of convergence of multiple elements of meaning around identifiable areas of content and significance. They may alternatively be envisaged as relatively chaotic, so that a cacophony of significance is produced carrying both information, which is consciously chosen to be cohesive and comprehensible by an audience, and information, which is unconscious and unintended and yet is just as valid in terms of determining the ‘meaning’ of the work.

My intention here is to explore the idea that this understanding of dance as the transmission of coded information, while a valid undertaking, fails to take into account a whole realm of meaning in choreographic work which has to do with the realisation of desire. The kind of desire I am talking about is not the Freudian notion of ‘lack’. I am engaged instead in an exploration of desire drawn from the work of philosophers Gilles
Deleuze and Félix Guattari in which desire is presented as a positive force, an act of production, rather than the Freudian negative or absence (1987: 154-155). Two aspects of Deleuze & Guattari’s theory of desire are particularly relevant in exploring aspects of choreographic practice. The first is the heterogeneity of desire, that is, the ability to draw together elements of meaning from diverse and even incompatible frames of reference. The second is the sense in which desire is not a representation of something else, but an action by which something is produced and something happens, specifically the production of a unique subjectivity.

The big phrase in the dance starts by reaching out, out, out. I can go so far, a bit farther, as far as I can. Its expansive, outward looking, optimistic, an affirmation of possibility. When I first made this phrase it seemed to me a reaction to all the very careful, restrained dancing I kept seeing. Later, when putting Style Guide together, it seemed so appropriate because it encapsulates a certain joy in moving that was central to this last section. Both arms extend wide in the space. It isn’t just the shape of the arms that is important, signifying as it does flight, openness, crucifixion, but the quality of the relationship between the arms and the space. My arms take me outwards. I am as expansive as I can possibly be. At the same time I'm on one leg, on half toe, and my right leg is turned in, the foot sickled and tucked in at the ankle like a reverse ballet position. I barely even notice that this reversal is taking place because it feels so easy for me to do. It's like a Freudian slip and I don't even notice it.

Desire, in the sense that Deleuze & Guattari understand it, is not limited to single fields of reference. Desire is not necessarily coherent in an ideological sense because it is heterogeneous, the linkage of a number of divergent elements: "What defines desiring machines is precisely their capacity for an unlimited number of connections, in every sense and in all directions" (Guattari, 1995: 126). The machine, as Guattari describes it,

must be capable not of integrating, but of articulating singularities of the field under consideration to join absolutely heterogeneous components. It is not by absorption or eclectic borrowings that this can be achieved; it is by acquiring a certain power, which I call, precisely, "determinization" – a capacity to hook onto deterritorialized fields. I'm not keen on an approximative interdisciplinarity. I'm interested in an "intradisciplinarity" that is capable of traversing heterogeneous fields and carrying the strongest charges of "transversality" (1995: 40).

Understanding desire as machinic in this sense conclusively separates desire from ideology. No one system of meaning or political perspective is able to contain desire entirely within its borders. In all contexts in which desire is activated, it is produced by a diverse range of not necessarily related factors including ideologies and systems of meaning together with a range of other factors such as personal histories, circumstances, biological and socio-economic factors. Guattari writes:

But, in my opinion, the analysis of the economy of desire implies a multivalent logic that legitimates the coexistence of discourses that cannot have an axiomatic homogeneity. If you object and say that this is not what I said ten years ago, I answer, "Too bad," or even, "So much the better." Perhaps this is a good sign! Expressions of desire can simultaneously signify formally contradictory things, because they refer to various universes of reference (1995: 41).

This understanding of desire places it in direct opposition to regimes which aim to homogenize all meaning within their own conceptual parameters. Deleuze & Guattari critique capitalism and psychoanalysis as the two major regimes which function in this way. Guattari writes about capitalism, "It only selects and...valorizes those things that fit its specific needs. Everything else is devalued, polluted, massacred" (1995: 44). They apply the same arguments to any ideology which presents itself, either implicitly
or explicitly, as prescriptive and definitive of meaning. Deleuze & Guattari call these regimes ‘fascist’ because they seek to confine meaning to one particular structure.

When dance is understood to be concerned primarily with communication and expression, it also begins to become a fascist regime. Movement is constructed so that all the connections flow in a single direction towards a single intertextual reference, be that reference an emotion (or the movement dynamic which is code for that emotion), a dance technique, or a choreographic genre. Everything in the body is understood to be channelled to signal in that one direction. Or, rather, everything which does not signal in that direction is ignored, repressed and hidden. What becomes important is that a single coherent emotive or conceptual effect be produced. This privileges one meaning or set of meanings. Consequently, other meanings, other connections between the performer and the movement material which do not contribute to these privileged meanings, are resisted.

What disturbs me about this is the repression of the resultant multivalency of the body. All the histories, all the events leading up to that dancing moment and all the circumstances which impinge during that dancing moment are devalued by the pursuit of univalent clarity. It is as if the actual moment is lost, or at least underprivileged, in favour of the rehearsed story, the pre-made, and the pre-packaged. For me, it is as if the body were being used to say, ‘See how important this is?’ ‘See how much more important these particular emotions, these particular meanings I have chosen, are than any others?’

As a dance artist, I find myself resisting this understanding of dance because it locks me into functioning only in certain ways, only valuing certain parts of my experiences. I do not like it as a mover as it limits the ranges within which I can explore my moving body. I do not like it as a choreographer because it seems to take me back to a kind of modernist, universal expressionism in which certain parts of ‘the truth’ are taken to be the whole.

More importantly, however, is the fact that for me, as a dancer, it does not work. I cannot do it. My body cannot remember exactly which feelings, which connections, which meanings it is supposed to be locked into the same way every time. New ones keep emerging in successive rehearsals and into performance. A key aspect of choreographic method could perhaps be defined by whether one cultivates the multiplicity of connections which emerge in the moment of moving, allowing the meaning of the work to shift accordingly, or whether one resists the complexity in favour of something more focused and more temporally stable, which perhaps can therefore be confidently described and predicted in programme notes.

In my practice, I am concerned to reveal the plethora of influences on a dancing moment, hence the constant shifts in reference and the refusal to stay with one particular mode of representation, one particular code of meaning in the way I put my dances together. This is why I resist the reduction of my work to narrative and to intertextual references, which were embodied in the three ‘critics responses’ staged at the Double Dialogues conference. It is not so much the narrative or intertextuality I find problematic. I make explicit use of these elements in my work. It is the tendency for each of these elements to be read as the whole meaning of the choreography that I distrust, because this narrows and stabilizes meaning in the work by masking other more ephemeral, more transient connections made in the body.

My work is therefore more appropriately understood in terms of Deleuze & Guattari’s concept of desire (rather than in terms of any particular content) in which a multiplicity of not necessarily coherent, compatible or stable elements is valued. Desire, my personal desire to make a dance, to be a dancer, is the unifying element. This desire brings together a diverse range of elements (of meaning, signs, circumstances, personal history, medical history, dance training, dance philosophy, etc.) which do not necessarily imply any message or any consistent means of representation. My desire
brings about the dance, and this desire is not confined to any one ideology or means of communication although it may partake of many.

Then I step to the right and draw my left leg across my body. It just falls outwards. I lean to the left, over the leg, and draw my arms and hands, one in front and one behind my body in a twisted, gnarled, exaggeration of a fourth position. I saw Molissa Fenley dance some years ago and the determined distortion with which she simultaneously eschewed conventional technique and asserted her own boundless energy and drive to move has always stayed with me. This movement is my response to her, my affirmation that distortion can be beautiful, exciting. There is too much energy, too much excitement brimming over, way beyond what is needed for the actual movement. This is because this is a celebration of the right to move how I want which goes way beyond the movement itself. It is an illocutionary statement. I celebrate in the act of moving.

A second difficulty with the idea that dance is primarily communicative is that this understanding creates an illusion of objectivity. It is as if what is communicated can be separated from who speaks (choreographs, dances) and from what power is being exerted by means of acts of normalisation and universalisation of certain codes (of corporeality, of ideology, of psychology).

Deleuze & Guattari argue that language is never simply communicative, but always implicates action and the exertion of power:

Language is neither informational nor communicational. It is not the communication of information but something quite different: the transmission of order-words, either from one statement to another or within each statement, insofar as each statement accomplishes an act and the act is accomplished in the statement (1987: 79).

Their position is based on the argument that the idea of language as primarily communicative gives way when the performative and illocutionary aspects of language are considered, that is, what is accomplished by saying it and what is accomplished by the grammatical structure of what is said. Performative and illocutionary functions of language are actions. Something changes and this is not a result of the statement, but is actually brought about as the statement is articulated. For example, to say 'I promise' is to promise. This is a performative statement. To say 'What are you doing?' is to ask a question. This is an illocutionary statement which accomplishes something implicitly in the act of speaking. The existence of the performative and illocutionary functions of language makes possible, at least potentially, their involvement in any act of enunciation. This makes it impossible to conceive of language as simply the transmission of information as there is always the possibility of a performative or illocutionary aspect to any utterance. Deleuze & Guattari claim:

The theory of the performative sphere, and the broader sphere of the illocutionary, has...made it impossible to conceive of language as a code, since a code is the condition of possibility for all explanation. It has also made it impossible to conceive of speech as the communication of information: to order, question, promise, or affirm is not to inform someone about a command, doubt, engagement, or assertion but to effectuate these specific, immanent, and necessarily implicit acts (1987: 77).

Deleuze and Guattari further argue that, since actions are immanent in language, pragmatics is not peripheral to language or isolated cases of specific uses of language, but is inevitably involved in defining meaning in language. They write:

Pragmatics ceases to be a "trash heap," pragmatic determinations cease to be subject to the alternative: fall outside language, or answer to explicit conditions that syntacticize and semanticize pragmatic determinations. Instead, pragmatics becomes the presupposition behind all of the other
dimensions and insinuates itself into everything (1987: 77-78).

The fact that I do this and not someone else is significant. The fact that I have a physical disability, the fact that it is subtle and might have just as easily been masked as revealed, the fact that I currently run a tertiary dance course, the fact that I fought so hard to dance, all of these facts are significant.

The actions immanent in my choreography have a pragmatic purpose, which is to produce a field of subjectivity. This is more than just talking about subjectivity, or communicating different pre-agreed models of subjectivity, although this takes place as well. I do not just tell you these things, I perform them. In this way, they are realised. Something has happened, something has changed, at least in me. Everyone else can listen, be interested, be bored, be angry, it does not really matter. I have taken action, combined a unique set of forces, meanings and directions to produce, assert and perform a new and uniquely constructed subjectivity.

It is also more than simply reflecting or articulating a certain identifiable subjectivity which is ‘me’. It is my active response to making dance in a particular time and place. It includes the things which seem important to me to emphasise at the moment, the things which seem to me to be in most need of shifting in response to my own interior universe and to the external events which impinge upon me. There is no temporal stability implied. I am not revealing some essential ‘self’ which is stable over time, but acting on the needs of this particular moment.

This action is the result of desire. In order for there to have been action, in order for me to have produced a dance, there must have been desire, which is realised in the dance. This desire is pragmatic and eclectic. It is not confined to any one ideology or dance philosophy and its purpose is not primarily to communicate any coherent message or information. It is rather concerned with the combination of a set of diverse elements of meaning which produce a unique, danced subjectivity which reflects the needs of this particular choreographer at this particular moment. This means that the heterogeneous and often contradictory elements of my dance practice, which include references to such things as genetics, history, training and personal circumstance, can be apprehended as meaningful at the same time as implicit and explicit coded meanings, and can be apprehended as an active realisation of subjective desire rather than the relaying of information.

Then I'm turning again, focused only on moving fast. My arms and torso are distorted again, signaling simultaneously that I'm dancing and that the technique isn't normal. My arms lead into a huge jump. For me the arms are crucial because my legs are weak, but the jump itself is so big, I go so high in the air, that you would never know that unless I told you. It's explosive, it comes out of nowhere, and it hangs and changes direction in the air. You can't translate it because it is unique, not just every time I do it, but because of all the things that only I can bring to it.

Then I swing back to the left. My arms are extended wide again as I sail around. The right is trailing, of no importance compared to the sweep of the arms and the manic twist of my torso in the direction of the spin. I'm in motion again and enjoying it. There's no transition. I just go straight to the next thing. There's another sweep and a few fluid steps before "what's wrong with this picture?" I stand on my right leg, rotated all the way in to 90 degrees, the left leg in passe, as if there was nothing to it. The references are simultaneously the ideal of the ballet position, the joke of reversing the rotation of the leg and the fact that this is so easy for me you barely notice I've done it. I'm smiling. Look what I can do.

REFERENCES: