

SERENA MASSIMO

C. ROQUET
VU DU GESTE. INTERPRÉTER LE MOUVEMENT
DANSÉ

Among the latest publications on the analysis of dance movement, Christine Roquet's *Vu du geste. Interpréter le mouvement dansé* distinguishes itself for its ability to provide an overview of the experience of dancing that offers important insights for those who are interested in investigating the dance from the perspective of aesthetics. Although Roquet is not a philosopher, a great part of her theoretical framework consists of the theory of *corporeité* elaborated by Michel Bernard, whose thinking is strongly influenced by French phenomenology. However, Roquet's principal theoretical reference is the qualitative approach introduced by Henry Godards' functional analysis of dance movements in the early 1980s, focusing on how dancers perform their movements and explore different ways to perform the same movement, emphasising the dependence of the expressive quality of these movements on modifications in the dancers' kinaesthetic sense. Roquet applies this approach in her attempt to explore the origins of the expressivity of dance movements in the dancers' own interpretation of them.

Echoing Simone Forti's claim that the distinctive trait of a dancer is the ability to 'read' a movement rather than to 'move well', Roquet argues that the ability to read – i.e. interpret – a movement coincides with the ability to interpret the gestures underlying one's own or another's movement. Far from being a mere transposition of a given gestural sign, interpretation is, in fact, a process of incorporation of gestures, i.e. what precedes and underlies the movements and the seat of the creative potential of the dance. Moreover, the gesture is «l'axe *transdisciplinaire*» (p. 18) that coordinates the cooperation between the history of dance, aesthetics and dance anthropology and the analysis of dance movement is therefore «une *mouvance* qui [...] traverse» (p. 19) and encompasses all these disciplines.

Before focusing on the dance gesture, Roquet clarifies that her analysis is rooted in rejection of the Cartesian dichotomy between body and mind. She therefore assumes Bernard's notion of *corporeité* – «un réseau matériel et énergétique mobile et instable de forces pulsionnelles et d'interférences d'intensités disparates et croisées» (p. 23) – and especially Godard's conception of anatomy based on how one learns it by moving and interacting with others, therefore as an entity consisting of interconnected rather than separate parts to which the body is reducible. It follows that all Roquet's considerations on anatomic parts of the body have to be conceived as caused by the experience of a 'lived' body interacting with other 'lived' bodies within a 'lived' space. However, an explicitation of the relationship between the physical body and the lived body is necessary, otherwise there is a risk of reducing the affective dimension to modifications within the physical body.

An important point of reference of Roquet's analysis is Godard's theory of the four structures of corporeality, which are only methodologically and not ontologically separated: the 'somatic' structure, represented by the anatomic body and its mechanics, the 'coordinative' structure, concerning the spatial and temporal mode of organisation of body parts during a movement, the 'perceptive' structure, based on the movement of perceptions and responsible for the construction of a culturally determined image of the body, and the 'symbolic' structure that concerns the meaning unconsciously given to body parts inferable from certain idioms.

According to Roquet, the common underpinning of these structures is gravity, namely the 'fundamental experience' of the dynamic management of this force, to which one pays full attention only when dancing. Roquet's basic thesis, in fact, is that dance begins with the acceptance of «d'un déséquilibre fondateur du notre rapport au monde» (p. 189), namely with the perception of gravity and with the use of this force together with the reactive force provided by weight according to the influence of surroundings such as music, the partner and the spectators. Dance pivots, therefore, on the internal perception of the way one is affected by gravity and by the surroundings continually reorganising their gravitational alignment through a remodulation of the posture. At the level of postural muscles, in fact, a 'dialogue' between tension and dilatation occurs, realised

by a series of pre-movements, the most important of which is the one that informs respiration and the infinitesimal variations of postural dynamics. Rooted in our posture, i.e. in the tonic-affective background of the body, pre-movements are indicative of the peculiar 'postural attitude', i.e. the orientation towards gravity assumed by the person in question.

According to our 'tactile' relationship with the world (haptic system) and thus depending on the way we touch and are 'touched' by our surroundings (haptic function), we carry ourselves and are carried in different ways in the world (phoric function), remodulating our postural attitude but maintaining our own identity. According to Roquet, the gesture is neither a pre-movement nor a movement understood as a displacement from one point to another in space, but indicates exactly «comment nous portons et sommes portés – *gero, gerere*, d'où vient le *gestus* latin – dans notre relation au poids, à l'espace, à l'autre» (p. 51). Therefore, the gesture is the source of the expressivity of dance movements because, by designating the way through which the surroundings affect our relationship with gravity, it influences the way in which movements are performed and thus their specific expressive quality.

These considerations show that the dance reveals processes that remain unnoticed in ordinary life, that are instead used by dancers to invent new gestures and unprecedented modes of relating with their surroundings. Emblematic, regarding the difference between dance gestures and dance movements, is Roquet's reference to Baryshnikov's claim that the most difficult movement for a dancer is walking, whereas it comes naturally in everyday life; it is so because in ordinary life we only realise the effects of gravity on us when we are walking and in this case we perceive it as a force to be counteracted, whereas dancers discover it already simply by standing, in the pre-movements that compose posture and, accepting this foundational imbalance, they have to discover how to exploit this force, conferring to each movement a different expressive quality.

The «travail de la sensation» (p. 13) of dancers seems therefore to lie in making themselves receptive to the solicitations of their surroundings, continuously reinterrogating their kinetic instances – the sensations of how their feeling is affected by their surroundings and by gravity – in order to invent new gestures. The language used in dance schools is indicative of this 'work': by

asking students to 'breathe' through the spine or to 'see' with the sternum, students learn to perceive what underlies their gestures, thus to change their 'tonic' organisation and, correspondingly, their way of 'acting'. Another example of this kind of 'work', is Roquet's account of her experience in Senegal, at the *École des sables* of Germaine Acogny, author of the modern African dance technique. This technique, which presupposes dancing outdoors, barefoot, surrounded by nature, shows how the quality of the dance gestures depends on the dancers' receptivity of the stimuli coming from the environment, assimilating in their movements the way of moving of animals – an undulatory movement of the back that is inspired by giraffes' movements – and referring to and imagining the sternum as the 'sun', the backside as the 'moon'.

To describe this perception of gravity and of the stimuli coming from the surroundings, referring to Bernard's chiasmatic conception of the *corporeité* and to the neuroscientist Marc Jeannerod's analysis of the sensory-motor system, Roquet introduces the notion of «perceptaction» (p. 82). Moreover, she stresses the reciprocal influence between perception and movements; by exposing themselves to the stimuli coming from the surroundings, dancers explore new ways to move, which, in turn, affect the way in which they perceive their surroundings, e.g. 'seeing' and 'hearing through the skin'. This implies a modification of the imagery underlying the dance gesture, giving access – also thanks to a metaphorical language – to a somatic, spatial and kinaesthetic image of the body corresponding to the relationships with the surroundings so created.

This last aspect and, particularly, the role of the otherness in dance, is the focus of the second part of Roquet's analysis, beginning with the description of the 'exchange' between dance partners conceived as a dialogue between spheres made up of the movements of the peripersonal space between the dancers. The analysis of dance couples from ballet's *pas de deux* to the partner dance between Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers through the notions of *accordage*, *accordanse* and *états de corps* allows Roquet to show how the exchange between partners occurs at the level of the tonic-affective background according to the continuous swapping of roles between who leads and who follows the movement. Turning to the description of the interpretative skills of certain dancers, Roquet dwells on the concept of presence, which emerges both as the ability to radiate energy from the

sternum and fill space with it, magnetically attracting the gaze of the spectators, and as the state of being in the here and the now, the only condition to doing «faire du muscle geste» (p. 177), i.e. to make every part of the body expressive.

Connecting presence is the haptic function, as it reveals how both dancers and viewers are 'touched' respectively by the gestures of the other dancers or of the dancers on stage, Roquets investigates – too briefly – the role of emotions and of empathy in dance. As regards emotions, they are expressed both in the dancers and in the spectators in bodily sensations of opening or closing, attachment or detachment, tension or relaxation of the postural muscles. Whereas, with regard to spectators, Roquet only claims that each of them may feel a different emotion, she performs an interesting analysis of the reconstruction of a dancework by Dominique Bagouet. Following Antonio Damasio's claim that perception is always accompanied by an emotional reaction, she notices that the desire to remember the dancework was enhanced by the desire and pleasure to share it and that the process of remembrance was characterised by the unconscious stimulation of emotions through the reawakening of the impressions, sensations, the feeling of a specific dynamic related to gestures that dancers experienced before they were even aware of it. Roquet's account on empathy is inspired by Alain Bertoz's claim that the empathy felt between dancers and by spectators in viewing dancers, is a spatial modification of the point of view that, thanks to a specific neuronal mechanism elicited at the view of the postural attitude of the dancers, which presumably leads to the adoption of the same postural attitude.

An aspect that requires clarification in reference to the relationship between the dancers and the spectators, are the notions of autoaffection and alloaffection. The first refers to the way through which dancers' movements affect the dancers performing them, eliciting in them a sense of reappropriation of their own bodies and, at the same time, reawakening in spectators their deep sensorimotricity. As regards alloaffection, it refers to the way through which a fictive partner or spectator is included in the dancers' gestures, feeding the phenomenon of autoaffection. No further explanation of this phenomenon is provided by Roquet, who also neglects to illustrate how spectators contribute to the interpretation of a choreography through the attribution of meaning to the movements staged. Roquet merely underscores

the idea that the meaning of the movements changes in relation to the social and cultural context, and that the gestures create their own meaning as they unfold, accordingly to the dancer's pre-movements activated by the perceptual, imaginative and motor engagements of the dancer within the surroundings.

Roquet concludes her essay with an original analysis of the potential mutual contribution between stage dance and ballroom dance, in the attempt to explore «comment la danse tente-t-elle d'*inventer de la relation*» (p. 288). At this regard, Roquet emphasises how ballroom dancing, more than stage dancing, focuses on the direct encounter between people, expressing the ethical function of the dance, i.e. the ability to include the 'other', overcoming generational, social and cultural limitations.

Ultimately, the notion of relationships seems to be one of the most relevant aspects of this analysis, although it requires more in-depth study, both with regard to the relationship between dancers and spectators, and possibly also including other elements, such as music and props.

Roquet C., 2019: *Vu du geste. Interpréter le mouvement dansé*, Pantin, Centre national de la danse, pp. 317.