

# Decentring dance dramaturgy—a proposition for multiplicity in dance

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## Abstract

The last decades have revealed how dance artists can recast the body in dance through multiple points of view, genres and styles. The outcomes offer a challenge to the means of engagement with performances that mine from multiple sources and inspirations. This paper proposes that the means by which to engage with and understand the dramaturgical reasoning in these contemporary works is through a decentred perspective. In considering the contemporaneity (Agamben, 2007) of current dance practice, together with cultural, scientific and philosophical inquiries into order from chaos or complexity theory, the paper invokes Derrida's use of the term decentred—used to reposition the dynamic aspects of cultural structures, with Deleuze's suggestion of rhizomatic thinking—which goes even further in delineating structure—to describe a somewhat idealistic proposition that may enable contradictory practices within dance to inhabit the same philosophical space.

Keywords: dramaturgy, decentred viewing, changing perspectives

In this paper, I consider the challenge set out by contemporary dance artists over the last decades to recast the body in dance through multiple points of view, genres and styles. I suggest that multiple approaches in contemporary performance and in dance performance in particular, are part of a contemporary (philosophic, cultural and artistic) perspective in which the non-hierarchical and fluid structure of concepts and multiple points of entry into perception are crucial. Consequently, I argue that to best facilitate an approach to the process of making as well as the analysis of dance performance, and thus 'performance' in a wider context within the contemporary field, dance and its dramaturgical structures (which has the body as its defining agent), should be viewed as a decentred practice that works with, as well as from, simultaneous perspectives. To do this I invoke Derrida's use of the term decentred—used to reposition the dynamic aspects of cultural structures, together with Deleuze's suggestion of rhizomatic thinking—which goes even further in delineating structure as a philosophical proposition.

As examples, I refer to the productions *Gudirr Gudirr* (Dalisa Pigram, 2013) and *I Don't Believe in Outer Space* (William Forsythe, 2012), both of which, despite their difference as dance genres, fall into the paradigm of contemporary decentred practice. The recognition that I would like to establish between these two performances demonstrates a conceptual understanding that tracks deeper than mutual respect for innovation, cultural diversity, hybridity and risk; it suggests that there is a shared reconsideration of the means through which performance is constructed and dances are made. In 'contemporary' dance, spatiality, temporality and physicality have come through a process of deconstruction to manifest a praxis not bound by a particular dance or theatre convention, but bound by a search to realise ideas as dance material.

## The uncommon as common ground

In the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the convergence of multiple inputs and collaborative engagements in new dramaturgical and 'conceptual' productions has opened up cultural and disciplinary exchanges that have integrated what were often considered contradictions in style, genre or discipline. In dance performance, concepts previously deemed dualistic have come to be seen as interconnecting: the form-versus-content cliché that had been seen as a binary in relation to the work of Merce Cunningham (conceptualization and form), and Pina Bausch (content and emotion), are both currently acknowledged as conceptually important in dance dramaturgy. Aesthetic boundaries and contradictions broken by Hijikata Tatsumi are currently explored further in the work of Alain Platel, Meg Stuart and La Ribot. The artistic connections that have been made among dance, text, music and media have become overlapping performance 'experiences' in the work of major artists like Jan Fabre, Wayne McGregor and Kris Verdonk, all of whom use multimedia as devices in their work.

In a performance and dance studies discourse that engages specifically with notions of hybridity, cross-disciplinarity and autonomy in creative practice, it may not be, to borrow a phrase from Jonathan Burrows (2010), necessary to 'find common ground in a field of broken conventions' (p. 14). However, a concern that has been developing among theorists and viewers leads me to consider that common ground as a means of seeing performance might be useful.

## Analysing fragments or fragmented analysis

In a keynote address at a conference in Ghent (2012), Patrice Pavis identifies a problem with the fragmentation and unstructured assemblage of elements in contemporary performance. He was referring specifically to the postdramatic, which owes much of its development to dance and the integration of physical language within theatre practice (Lehmann, 2006). Pavis considers that the diverse elements offered to the viewer in the postdramatic performance mode, requires them to form an analysis from a vast array of disciplines that have found their way into the performance discourse. As Pavis (2012) suggests, aspects of disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, history and psychoanalysis make up the content of what we now see in current performance, and are, thus, to be analysed and understood as part of the performance. The weight of such potential analytical material has caused a 'crisis in dramaturgy' (p. 3) for the maker as well as the viewer. Pavis questions if it is still possible to 'dramaturgize' (p. 4) the 'fragmented dramaturgies' (p. 4) of current postmodern and postdramatic practice that present fractured assemblages of material that cohabit within a variety of propositions. The breadth of discourse required for the conceptualization as well as for the analysis can become constricting, not only for the director, but also for the viewer. As a consequence, Pavis warns, such an assemblage of disciplinary and creative probabilities may cause the dramaturgy and consequently the dramaturg to exist in a state of crisis.

Recent history of the avant-garde in dance however, established and demonstrated by the artists mentioned in the previous section (and many others, that this paper does not have the space to acknowledge), is witness to how dance has functioned at its most effective when moving into a state of crisis. What Pavis perceives as

indecipherable may, I suggest, require a shift of perception. A decentred perspective averts a sense of crisis as the fluidity of the elements gain their own dramaturgical formation. Maaïke Bleeker (2009), as well as Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006), and theorists from Performance Studies such as Reinelt (2011), Eckersall (2011), Laermans (2004) and Heathfield (2006) suggest that the spectator is currently more at ease with accepting a performance that is deconstructed; that is, he/she is more comfortable in the knowledge that they may not understand, and may not need to understand each element. I will show that dance dramaturgy offers the same potential to engage with the disparity of concepts in dance, not with a sense of crisis but with one of imagination and confidence.

## **Decentred as a means of looking**

There are a number of ways to use the term decentred in dance. Decentred can be used to describe the movement dynamics that make up intercultural and interdisciplinary or contemporary works, as in the work of William Forsythe, Alain Platel or Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, all artists who use ballet, contemporary, urban and cultural dance as interlocking movement language. Guy Cools (personal communication, 18 November, 2008, 2014) suggests decentred as the position that the dramaturg takes in each production as they adapt to specific rehearsal procedures, choreographers and dancers. He also invokes the term to reference non-centralized aspects of constructing and working on performance. Decentred can describe dramaturgical structures that are developed in postdramatic and new dramaturgical process oriented productions, those in which montage and 'in process' methods are used (I am thinking here of choreographers like Anna Teresa de Keersmaecker, Pina Bausch and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui as well as Meg Stuart, Jérôme Bel and Miryam Gourfink), rather than a narrative of classical dramaturgical structure such as in ballet, Martha Graham or Matthew Bourne. I extend the meaning of decentred to accommodate a philosophical articulation of dramaturgy that constitutes a way of seeing and engaging with performance for the maker as well as for the spectator.

## **Moving the reading from the text to the body**

The suggestion of Bert O. States (1985, p. 13) to 'think of performance as a way of seeing—not, that is, the thing seen or performed [...] but seeing that involves certain collaborative and contextual functions between work and spectator which are highly elastic', remains valuable. It provides a perspective from which to imagine 'seeing' as an 'articulation' that is evocative, rather than an act in the search for definitions. Maaïke Bleeker (2012) also proposes that the interaction between the act of seeing and that which is being seen is key to perceiving how we understand performance. In her research on visual semiotics and the phenomenology of the body, she examines how the embodied individual gaze is enmeshed within the concept of kinaesthetic empathy. Bleeker suggests that concepts, sensations and knowledge experienced in the viewing of theatre 'are incarnated or effectuated in our bodies' (p. 14), thus influencing (and contradicting) 'the way thought happens' (p. 14). Our gaze is as much a physical experience as a visual one. This opens an invitation to the viewer to engage in the visual experience of spectatorship as an embodied experience, one that can be conceived of as a form of thinking. John Martin's notion of metakinesis,

a term he applied in 1932 to what our bodies experience as a response to seeing movement, Susan Langer's (1946) insights into the virtual experiential body and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's (1998) description of the pre-kinetic body, have brought into focus dance as a kinaesthetic consciousness, which produces affect when one watches another person dancing (and by extension moving). Langer and Sheets-Johnstone argue that the empathetic connections in consciousness, a process of symbolic thinking, must still retain a place in the 'virtual' or 'pre-linguistic' aspects of the unconscious. Later theorists such as Collette Dunagan (2005) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994), similarly develop the notion of a body that holds within it an inherent connection and understanding with movement as a form of knowledge.

In the context of art forms and practices that have generated change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the proposition of the body as the site through which critical reflection of a performance can be focused has broadened. As theorists such as Marianne Van Kerkhoven (1994) Patrice Pavis and Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006) have stated, an important part of contemporary theory and practice in the period of postmodern and postdramatic theatre viewing practices—in which the position of literature and narrative in the context of performance has been challenged—has been the move from the 'text and stage concretization' to an emphasis on 'the body in movement and the space-time where it is to be found' (Pavis, 2006, p. 7) as that which invigorates perception. In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Lehmann (2006) identifies a shift in the perception of the body and its connotation as a theatrical sign. Explaining the aesthetical logic of contemporary theatre, he articulates how artists 'present the body's visceral precedence over the logos' (p. 145) to stage a body that has the potential to overcome (and possibly subvert) 'the semantic body' (p. 162).

The dramaturgical model of a performance like William Forsythe's *I Don't Believe in Outer Space* (2011), with its use of simultaneous and often contradictory layers in the making and the playing of the performance, demonstrates that cause and effect in dance dramaturgy no longer has need of linearity. As a collaborative ensemble, Forsythe's dramaturgical practice requires that he share ideas, forms, styles and thoughts from his company members (Albrecht, 2014; Forsythe & Noë, 2009; Vass-Rhee, 2011). In this choreography, as one dancer exclaims text and distorts her body and her voice to illustrate a suburban housewife in conversation with a predatory wolf, another throws scrunched up balls of gaffer-tape around the stage space; balls which later get woven into the choreography at various points as detritus, footballs or whatever we, or the dancers, might imagine them to be. In Forsythe's production, the movement dramaturgy, the way that the body articulates or establishes movement phrases, has no set behavioural method; neither does the dramatic arc of the production have an identifiable conceptual logic. Yet, as the choreographer and dramaturg Michael Klien (2008) notes:

choreography and dramaturgy are consistently associated with ordering processes [such that] the philosophical inquiries into order from chaos theory to complexity theory and cybernetics invite us to rethink the very notion of order as something non-linear/unfixed and far beyond our ability to measure or control (p. 2).



This raises a number of questions. Is there a way to rethink order in dance outside linearity, and is this the role of dramaturgy? Does order out of chaos become the topography on which the dramaturgy might seek a structure? Can the dramaturgy of a dance depict a perfectly controlled chaos? We might see such order in one of the scenes in *I Don't Believe in Outer Space* where the dancers form a line across the stage, each moving in a particularly idiosyncratic fashion. In this scene one wonders if the dancers are being character driven, personally expressive or thematically associative. We may never know, yet, the combination of difference and unity in this frenetically danced section epitomizes the chaotic come to rest in a bizarre form of cohesion.<sup>1</sup> The understanding that chaos is a form itself from which various orders are to be explicated has become something on which we rely; evidenced for instance by the world-wide web, which presents a chaotic yet coherent set of elements that form continuously as they expand. Recent experiments by neuroscientists are beginning to discover that the brain functions as a dynamic dictionary that shifts continuously as it makes room for new meaning (see Cross & Tecini, 2011). And as biophysicist Kelly Clancy (2014) determines, '[c]haos is not the same as disorder. While disorder systems cannot be predicted, chaos is actually deterministic' (n.p.).

As performances like *I Don't Believe in Outer Space*, and others, such as Sidi Larbi Cherakoui's *Myth* (2010), Alain Platel's *Pitiè* (2011), or Pina Bausch's *Palermo Palermo* (1989) demonstrate, order and chaos within a dramaturgical structure may not present a dualism but rather a dynamic. A moment of chaos might be indistinguishable from that of order and only definable at the moment in which it becomes actualised in performance. To break with the duality of order and chaos the dramaturgy may not seek a structure but shift between multiple possible structures. Derrida's notion of 'decentred' may be helpful to articulate the chaotic and yet ordered, the connected yet different propositions that sit within dramaturgies such as these. Derrida (1978) suggests that in contemporary structures which have been reconfigured by multiple influences—and he draws from a wide political context here—we need to find a new 'structurality of structure' (p. 280). To do this, he proposes the notion of decentred. The centre of a structure, argues Derrida, has hitherto been seen as resolutely 'constructed' to be outside of permutation and variability. However, Derrida suggests; if structures are to respond to the evident shifting cultural paradigms arising from contemporary mediatised cultures, permutation, variability and difference become essential in understanding how centres exist beyond 'structurality'. Centres are transformative, and can therefore be as much 'outside of the structure as in it' (p. 280) suggests Derrida (1978); questioning whether indeed, a structure needs a centre. Transformation denotes the possibility of constructing difference in performance. The totality—the structural concept—can be seen to have its centre or centres moving between the inside and (a permeable) periphery. In a dance dramaturgical context how far would the periphery stretch and what would it include? Janet Lansdale (2008) maintains that 'decentred dance' (p. 3) (which she locates first in the work of Cunningham's spatially deconstructed chance performances), realigns the centrality of space between the podium and its extremities. The multiple spatial perspectives in Cunningham's choreographies invite the audience to constantly shift their perception and their focus.

As an object of shifting centres, the body also has multiple meanings, readings and points of positioning. It could be argued that the body has one centre, or that the body, central (or so we might assume) to the dance, is always within its own centre—an outline of skin moving within gravitational forces. We could also think of the body not only as corporeal—made of bones, flesh, neural pathways and organs, many of which are not under our conscious control—but as perceptive; one that is lived and experienced as a ‘phenomenon’ rather than an object. Contemporary choreographers such as William Forsythe, Kader Attou, Wayne McGregor and Anouk Van Dijk deconstruct notions of gravity in order to accent the multiplicities of possible physicalities and possible centres. They use perception to enable the dancer to de-position their central point of gravity, so that it has no centrality, inside or outside the body in action. The act of dance in McGregor or Van Dijk’s choreography is configured to destabilize centrality and in doing so draw attention to the body’s dialectic in a conversation with gravity. By highlighting its instability, the invisible centre becomes visible as a point of tension, situated in and outside of the body, in and outside of the spatial and gravitational references, and in and outside of hermeneutic references. By moving centres to the periphery and perhaps beyond, the referential signs become permeable, less definable, and perhaps, closer to the conceptual and the rhizomatic.

The rhizome is used by Deleuze and Guattari to describe a thought mechanism, with multiple points of entry and exit that run somewhat like a burrow. Counter to the arborescent construction of a tree or the architectural structure of language analysis ‘which plots a point and fixes an order’ (Deleuze and Guattari use Chomsky’s linguistic structuralism to argue against as a form of arborescent development), the rhizome is ‘an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 6) with no original moment and no defining end. The rhizome has no ultimate climax or cathartic illumination. It is however, like the system that names it, dense and penetrative. A rhizomatic dynamic, can also be seen as an alternative linearity, a means with which to view the chaotic and yet ordered, the connected yet different propositions that sit within different contemporary presentations of dance.

This can be seen in the moment that a gesture becomes a movement, such as in Pina Bausch or Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker’s choreographies, where the prosaic gesture of brushing aside the hair, smoothing a piece of clothing or tripping in high shoes becomes an extended movement which sets out a new trajectory in which we organize our memory and association. The logic of a sequence that progresses from gesture to movement shows the gesture as a signifying moment that travels and accompanies the movement passage as it develops. Once underway, the movement phrase can develop its own identity—at this point it becomes non-signifying. In both cases the practical and the theoretical can leave us with the notion of something having sense to end up as non-sense and vice-versa (Palmer, 2010). The result is that the likely or just as unlikely genesis of meaning is to come out at a premise, which as Helen Palmer (2010) suggests, may provide us with the unexpected, ‘that something which may not *have* meaning may be able to *give* meaning’ (para. 2).<sup>2</sup> For the artist the notion of meaning is a highly individual one—there is no obligation for art to answer to particular criteria measured out by an institution or an academic’s concerns. The public, we are reminded by Jacques Rancière (2009) in

*The Emancipated Spectator*, is capable of discerning sense in order to make their own dramaturgical and kinaesthetic connections to the material.

Thus, the rhizome describes an active and mutating structure that, with its intrinsically continuous characteristics, communicates through various forms. Subsequently, a rhizomatic dynamic in the process of doing, thinking and seeing, creates a volatile space of possibilities, and markedly so in the space of dance, which, referencing Klien once more, invites us to rethink what we understand as order and chaos.

## Decentred identity

I would like to consider a section from a solo work by the Australian dancer Dalisa Pigram, called *Gudirr Gudirr*.<sup>3</sup> This work encompasses a different kind of decentred dramaturgical structure to that of Forsythe's *I Don't Believe in Outer Space*. The production confronts the highly complex area of indigenous performance and the compounded cultural discourse that resides around it. It uses the chaos of history as a starting point to uncover a perspective suggesting many centres of reference and portals to the politics of identity. Sitting alongside the cultural and political discourse, I refer here to the performance in relation to its position as a contemporary work that incorporates multiple perspectives from which to enter into the dramaturgy. For an insightful discourse on the integration of western and indigenous cultures see the article by Rachel Swain, artistic producer of Marrugeku, in *New Dramaturgies* (2014).

Dalisa Pigram is part of the artistic team of Marrugeku, a company developing intercultural dance theatre based in North West Australia. In this solo Pigram presents a cultural identity politicized by her complicated cultural heritage as an Indigenous Australian of mixed Aboriginal, Malaysian and British heritage. It is a performance in which the dramaturgy displays a combination not only of multiple cultural contexts, but also fragmented histories, emotions and stories of a nation with a divided cultural heritage in deep states of denial. As a dramaturgical manoeuvre, the performance has no central point of history but expresses an ongoing history that exists before colonization and extends out to the future hopes of possible communities. It has no narrative, but stories weave through the structure as thoughts and feelings make up the fabric. Text, image and the physical body share the stage, and take over from one another as each issue finds its voice through a different materiality. We see no pointed or highly arched feet, no 180-degree leg lifts, no balances or complex turns and no supple extreme contortions of limbs. The movement belongs to no particular genre and as Pigram (2014) explains, it 'draws from different disciplines, contemporary, gymnastic, Malay martial arts that she learned from her grandfather, memories of traditional dance of Arnhem land and her own inherent cultural movement coming from the Yawuru nation' (n.p.).

As Pigram works towards creating choreography, her movement input changes according to the political, cultural or emotionally generated material. In a scene throwing us back into indigenous cultural territory Pigram moves along culturally sensitive lines. To choreograph these sections, she asked permission from elders in the community to use particular dances and movements, which indicates that the dance, here, is immersed in cultural protocol. However, as an audience watching her present the animal like and earthy movement, we assume indigenous authenticity

but have no idea of the severity of the authentic protocol, nor do we understand how Pigram (2014) negotiates ‘movement protocols which change according to different groups or different mobs’ (n.p.). Depending on where the performance is held, many in the audience will have little knowledge of the cultural meaning or an understanding of the cultural or political complexities of the movement. Pigram’s performance, however, sensitises the viewer with movements that impact our perceptions. The sense of smell, sound and energy that move through the space are viscerally transposed onto the skin of the audience; as is her sense of outrage and frustration as she stands sweating, seething, hurt and immobile while the teenage boys in the video projection above her head begin their endless fighting. To the spectator, her dancing body translates the perceptions of being ‘in skin’, in politics and in culture, in such a way that we might need to find, what Colebrook (2005) refers to as ‘a way of thinking beyond the teleological understanding of action’ (p. 8). That is, we might need to come into the piece from any way we can, mustering what knowledge we might have of the issues and leave with impressions of generations of misunderstandings.

Developed together with Pigram and co-choreographer/director Koen Augustijnen, the dramaturgy, Swain (2014) explains, uses the ideas of ‘new dramaturgy’ developed by Marianne Van Kerkhoven (1994, 2003) in her dramaturgical work and in her writing. A principle of new dramaturgy is to keep the work open—without a devised script but formed through collection of ideas. During this process the director or choreographer start off with various ‘collected materials’ [and],

in the course of the rehearsal process he/she observes how the materials behave and develop; only at the end of this entire process do we gradually distinguish a concept, a structure, a more or less clearly outlined form; this structure is by no means known at the start and is by no means definable at the end (Van Kerkhoven, 1997, p. 20-21).

The materials and the manner in which they are used and interpreted in *Gudirr Gudirr* have been applied from three different perspectives: that of Pigram, from within indigenous culture, Swain from a broader Australian perspective and Augustijnen, who comes to the process with the eyes of an (European) outsider. Pigram, her dance situated within this decentred dramaturgical thinking, moves her body through the perspectives of all those involved, at the same time generating space for the viewer to enter and exit according to their divergent experience and perception. From these different dramaturgical perceptions—the body is recast as the generator of ‘physical thinking’ (Forsythe, 2009, n.p.), to present the fragmented attributes of our thoughts and feelings into momentary realities and perceptions. Casting and re-casting the body as a shifting centre, in space and concept, the body transmits action to be read as it is performed—a translation of inner and outer worlds, identifiable from our many points of entry.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I suggest that we might conceptualize the various kinds of dramaturgical propositions in contemporary dance as decentred and from a decentred perspective. I have shown how decentred dramaturgical structure have been fostered in dance performance where we see not just one centre but many,



in which the spatial, temporal, physical and by extension the interdisciplinary and intermediated is present in the work. I have suggested that a rhizomatic mode of thinking acknowledges (the wider field) of dramaturgy as a decentred proposition and moves towards a more appropriate means of engagement with performance: one that can be inclusive of the unexpected and of difference.

In considering the spatially and contextually decentred dance of Forsythe in which the body flits between an individual and a designed chaos, and the culturally and genre-decentred body that Pigram displays, we see that different definitions of the body as a cultural and historical space within a continually developing identity has seen the body recast with immeasurable possibilities. Possibilities that acknowledge decentred modes of seeing to accommodate different types of practice. In short, I have suggested a somewhat idealistic proposition that may enable contradictory practices within dance to inhabit the same philosophical space.

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1. Vimeo clip of William Forsythe: *I Don't Believe in Outer Space*, Posted by Herbst Remix (2010) <https://vimeo.com/15468072>

2. Helen Palmer (2010) is referencing Deleuze's discourse on Antonin Artaud and Louis Carroll in which he suggests that sense can be made out of nonsense, the more so the better. For instance, Artaud's extreme lack of syntactic and linguistic construction in his radio play leaves the space even more open to create various types of 'sense'.

3. Vimeo: Gudirr Gudirr—6 Minute Clip, Posted by Stalker Theatre and Marriageku, 2014 <http://vimeo.com/62533669>

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## Biography

Anny Mokotow worked as a dancer, performer and theatre-maker in the Netherlands and Europe. She completed a PhD at the University of Melbourne on dance and dramaturgy and has a Master of Creative Arts from the University of Melbourne which examines dance and interdisciplinary practice. Anny works as dramaturge and lectures in theatre and dance. Her interest in the historical developments of 20<sup>th</sup> century dance and its social and cultural implications in relation to interdisciplinary practice and postmodernity forms the basis of her academic research.

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