

Issues of Control and Agency in Contemplating

Cunningham's Legacy

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During January and February 2010, Laban students learned Cunningham's 1967 work *Scramble* from the Cunningham dancer and teacher, Patricia Lent. Planned before Merce Cunningham's death, the project took on another dimension as those involved contemplated his legacy. This, then, is the context for the following discussion of *Scramble* that considers Cunningham's significance to a new generation of dancers. While it is informed by the views of Patricia Lent and the students (including a very short, voluntary, student questionnaire), it must be made clear at the outset that this account is also shaped by issues that are of concern to this writer. Current historiography would suggest that I acknowledge how my own interests in relation to embodiment and agency bring certain issues to the fore (Carter, 2004). However, reading others' accounts of Cunningham's work, and listening to the students' discussions of their experiences of *Scramble*, also suggests to me that it is almost impossible to write about his work without revealing something of one's own ideas about dance. This perhaps relates to the particular ethos of Cunningham's choreographic practices which, by virtue of his not seeming to present a particular idea beyond the activities on stage, leave the audience to make sense of his works for themselves. Hence, the following account is offered as a particular perspective on Cunningham whilst recognising that it is just one view among many.

Scramble 1967- 2010

Scramble the fleet
Scramble the code
Scramble uphill
Scramble eggs
Scramble in flight
space or scientific jargon

Cunningham, 1968

Scramble, contains all the hallmarks one would expect of a Cunningham work, and a few surprises. Some aspects of indeterminacy meant the students had to make choices in performance, for instance in terms of when or where to perform certain actions. However, in exercising some limited freedom of choice, the dancers had to be very precise and acutely aware of the other dancers. That the piece comprises up to eighteen sections, which are not all presented in each performance and can be organised differently, was highlighted by the fact that the two casts had different performance orders which did not use all the same sections. In the Cunningham manner, not dancing to the music¹, or not even rehearsing with sound, was a new challenge for some students; without musical signals on which to rely they had to work with rigorous attention to their own and each others' rhythm. Similarly the formal demands of the choreography in combination with aspects of indeterminacy meant

they also had to pay particular attention to their relationship to others in the space. While for this project the set was not recreated, the dancers were aware that the movable strips of colour Frank Stella designed would have added spatial complexity and another layer of indeterminacy to the performance.

In contrast to there being clear elements of indeterminacy in *Scramble*, in relation to Cunningham's famous use of chance procedures, there is no evidence that he used them to create the movement sequences in this work.² But we do know Cunningham's stated intention was 'to make a dance without flavour' (Cunningham, 1968) and the sensibility that informed his use of chance is evident. Given the indeterminate structure, no one sequence could be thought of as belonging to a particular place in the duration of the whole and there is a juxtaposition of actions that look as if they might have been borrowed from sources as diverse as a Graham lift or a Vaudeville number³. Further, some of the combinations have that lack of habitual organisation that is often associated with movement sequences created through chance procedures. For example in the beginning of the *slow trio* there is a strangely disassociated combination of small movements of hip, leg and head that looks as awkward as any combination derived through rolling a dice. In the aptly named *fast dance* section, there are many actions that might now be expected in a Cunningham sequence; but as a ballet trained dancer who came late to contemporary dance, I can remember experiencing how performing these leg actions so closely related to ballet was initially hard to do because the phrases broke up those movement patterns that had become habitual. The use of the torso at the end of the *fast dance* seems particularly tricky and indeed it was the use of the upper body that the students, experienced in basic Cunningham step patterns, found difficult to get right. This aspect of the choreography perhaps signals an approach to thinking of the relationships between actions of different body parts that became increasingly complex from *Torse* in the 70s to *CRWDSPCR* in the 90s and is in keeping with the choreographic implications of this statement:

you do not
separate
the human
from the
actions he
does, or
the actions
which sur
round him.
but you can
see what it
is like to
break these
notions up
in differ-
ent ways, to
allow the
passion, and
it is pas
sion, to ap-
pear for each

person in his
own way.

Cunningham, 1968

Roger Copeland (2004) has discussed how breaking up what comes intuitively can be interpreted as a means of questioning cultural habits, or even as resisting pressures to behave a certain way. In the context of late capitalism, today's students may find it difficult to comprehend a time when it was thought possible to resist the lure of advertising, but the potential for chance to be used as a tool to unleash less habitual movement patterns is now an accepted part of their education. This perhaps highlights how Cunningham's position as a canonical figure in the dominant narrative of contemporary dance history means this new generation of contemporary dancers come to his work with a number of preconceived ideas about it. However, some of their expectations were challenged by actually learning a piece of repertory; for instance in *Scramble* the students commented that the movement was less 'robotic' than many had expected. Admittedly the students had only a little prior knowledge of Cunningham's work: they knew of his use of chance, had seen recent work, and had learned some technique. But their reaction suggests his work is vulnerable to becoming understood as a series of mechanical demands made of the body that constrain the person of the dancer.

Dancing Cunningham

The manner in which the work was taught by Patricia Lent was very important in counteracting students' preconceptions. Lent, one of the trustees of the Cunningham 'Legacy Plan' is able to distinguish between being clear in relation to the formal demands of Cunningham's work and being 'rigid'. In teaching *Scramble* she also revealed something of how, in Cunningham's choreographic process, his dancers are the ultimate 'problem solvers' (Personal communication, 5th February, 2010). By studying with someone able to communicate Cunningham's way of working, the students seemed to come to terms with the formal requirements of the choreography without losing a sense of personal agency.

Some students also valued the opportunity to focus, in a contemporary context, on what, when and where to move. This for me emphasised the difference between them and the generation of British dancers who teach them. Dancers from a previous era may have encountered the radical innovations in contemporary dance that emanated from America in the 1960s and 70s as exciting challenges to the accepted conventions of both ballet and modern dance. For my own part it was only late in my dance life that I recognised how the technical and qualitative limitations of my dancing might be 'freed up' through 'release' or a somatic approach. Those of us who tensed all the 'wrong' muscles in the 70s became determined to free our students of extraneous effort and provided exercises and images aimed at developing a bodily awareness that can aid movement efficiency. While many students have thrived on this approach, in this project, others seemed to enjoy the freedom *not* to have to feel a particular sensation as they moved or to worry about having to find a particular point of movement initiation. There is a generation for whom the experiments of the past have now become part of the curriculum. Hence some of them were able to see Cunningham as offering one of many alternative approaches to dancing. Teachers who work from a somatic approach may feel their work is marginal in relation to dominating discourses in dance (Fortin, Viera and Temblay 2009). However, it can be argued that for today's students in an

institution such as Laban, the foregrounding of a somatic approach has been an essential ingredient of the current episteme that informs their training. In this context, some students seemed to discover aspects of Cunningham's approach to be quite liberating. For those who have struggled with the demands of a Cunningham technique class, freedom may not be the first thing that comes to mind; but it was a word he used:

Our ecstasy in dance comes from the possible gift of freedom, the exhilarating moment that this exposing of the bare energy can give us. What is meant is not license but freedom, that is a complete awareness of the world and at the same time a detachment from it.

Cunningham, 1997/1952

While some students really did not know what to make of these words, others offered comments such as:

That we can have a kind of freedom in this 'controlled' technique.

Whilst performing Cunningham 's work I felt freedom from the music which took pressure off exact timing and put an energy into feeling the rhythm on stage...It was a much more exciting energy to watch and feel the movement around me.

The work is a focus around the movement of the whole body and keeping it alive and yet free, instead of focussing on order.

...the freedom of dancing gives us an awareness of the world.

...he is talking about all the elements that make up a piece...and being able to have them co-exist...

For Patricia Lent, the difference between licence and freedom was an important distinction. She described Cunningham dancers as 'striking a balance between accuracy and pushing the movement as far as it would go'. This however had taken her some time to achieve:

In the beginning, just managing the phrases and getting everything correct, the counts all right, was all I could manage. As time went by I began to see places where I could push the movement.... It was freedom, not licence, but it was interesting.

Personal communication, 5th February, 2010

Freedom, control and agency

It was this sense of enjoying the challenge of managing the demands of Cunningham's work that, in relation to my interest in embodiment, provided a fresh perspective on how dancers might be thought to embody a sense of agency. For many dancers control is a matter of daily concern. Today's Laban students are thus often quick to see similarities between previous or traditional training models

(especially in ballet), and Foucault's (1977/75) description of the 'projects of docility' that he presents as emerging in the eighteenth century:

...an uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity rather than the result and it is exercised according to a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement.

Foucault, 1979 /1975, 137

This then raises the question of whether the precise technical demands of Cunningham technique demands 'docile bodies'. In contrast, a whole rhetoric that, from Duncan onwards, has valued the freedom of personal expression and the 'natural' movement of the individual body suggests dance can embody the spirit of freedom. Talking to Patricia Lent, it became apparent that she understood how a focus on formal clarity in Cunningham technique had, in the recent past, alienated those dancers who sought a more process-based, individualised approach. Form, she commented, had come to be seen as 'bad' as opposed to the 'good' of release (Personal communication 5th February, 2010). But does the change of focus to the dancers' awareness of internal sensation serve to shift the locus of control rather than evade the ensnarement of the body within power relations? That is, rather than the teacher monitoring that their students' actions are accurate in space and time, are today's dancers encouraged towards an internalised self monitoring that may be thought to parallel Foucault's (1979/75, 202) description of the effects of panopticism?

For contemporary dance students studying a combination of ballet, release, Cunningham, Graham, Limon or even Jooss techniques, perhaps what Foucault offers is the recognition that freedom and control are not polarities that can be embodied in opposing forms of technique. Rather how someone dances might manifest a specific relationship in which, at least since the onset of Modernity, normative controls and agency are inevitably intertwined. It is an oft made criticism of Foucault that while he suggested power was productive, he described its effects in largely negative terms. Certainly, in much of *Discipline and Punish* (1979/75) the body seems to be presented as the passive object of power operations; the epistemic shift Foucault describes suggests a change in the locus of control from the body to the mind that controls the body. However, in the context of the 1970s, this may be accounted for by reading *Discipline and Punish* as questioning the attitude that modern democratic societies are indeed 'free'. It can also be argued that how the organic body is a source of power is a theme that emerges, even in this text:

The body required to be docile in its minutest operations, opposes and shows the conditions of functioning proper to an organism. Disciplinary power has as its correlative an individuality that is not only analytical and 'cellular', but also natural and organic.

Foucault, 1977 [1975], 156

Foucault noted how early disciplinary methods which attempted to consider the body as a machine resulted in an awareness of bodily nature, which in turn could be utilised towards efficiency. Hence even in *Discipline and Punish* it can be argued that there is already an understanding of the potential for a sense of embodied agency⁴ which also recognises how even this can become enmeshed in the operations of

power. However, for those who seek some sense of political engagement with the social world, such a formulation of agency is limited. Terence Turner, for example criticises Foucault for situating resistance to power in bodily rather than social engagement.

“Resistance” is thus explained as a sort of natural (i.e. pre social and apolitical) emanation of the body, as “power” is conceived as a natural (trans-historical and trans-cultural) emanation of society. Neither has a definable political purpose or specific social or institutional source. In being thus depoliticized and desocialised, Foucault’s resistance thus ironically becomes, in effect, a category of transcendental subjectivity situated in the body.

Turner , 1994, 36

For Turner, this is related to the sense of disengagement from any actual political strategy that he criticises in Foucault. From a similar perspective, Cunningham is similarly vulnerable to the criticism of seeming little interested in the potential of dance as some sort of strategic political intervention. This has been countered variously by Moira Roth’s (Roth and Katz, 1998) contextualisation of his and his associate’s work in terms of cold war politics, Jonathan Katz’s (1998) further discussion of the performative aspect of ‘having nothing to say and saying it’ (Cage cited in Roth and Katz, 1998, 62) and Roger Copeland’s (2004) suggestion that freeing the audience’s perception was similarly political.

Speaking from a dancers’ point of view, perhaps the issue is that dancers recognise only too well how the organic body is enmeshed in power relations and that they seek self discipline as a means to assert a sense of personal agency within structures over which they may feel they have little overt control. In later writings and interviews Foucault focussed more on forms of ‘consensual’ discipline and it his discussions of technologies of the self that have been welcomed by some practitioners of somatics and performance (Fortin et al 2009 and Chance 2009). Yet the kind of ‘self mastery and ascetic practice’ that they discuss, for me relate to my own experiences of dance training -even in ballet- and to what I understand in Cunningham’s statement that ‘dancing is a spiritual exercise in physical form’ (1992/1952, 39).

One issue today’s dancers confront is that this kind of self discipline has become increasingly associated, less with ascetic concerns, than the pursuit of the body beautiful as a commodity. However in a Cunningham performance, the manner in which the movement can face the dancer this way and that mitigates the potential for the self conscious presentation of body as object, as does the rhythmic precision in which there is little opportunity to indulge in a sense of dynamic excess. As Patricia Lent pointed out, in a Cunningham work dancers are ‘too busy’ dancing to be thinking about much else (Seminar discussion 26th January, 2010). In this way what may sometimes seem an impersonal approach to dance perhaps allows for dancers to retain a sense of personal agency in the face of consumerist pressures to conform to a ‘desirable’ look.

It has been commented that by the mid 1990s Cunningham dancers seemed to have lost that sense of agency visible in performers in his early works. (Franko, 1995)⁵. Certainly, over time Cunningham became more distant from increasingly younger dancers (Brown 2007, Franko 1995) and it is also worth noting that as

Cunningham became more established dancers entered his company having been trained in his style and thus with perhaps less obvious differences in the ways they danced. Moreover as technical training in Cunningham developed in terms of virtuosity and precision, elsewhere, a new generation pursued ways of moving such as release and contact. In their performances, in contrast to Cunningham's by now larger, highly trained company, the person of the dancer was more easily visible and this perhaps affected how dancers in the now more established Cunningham company were perceived. However, according to Patricia Lent, Cunningham, always present in rehearsals, remained constant in his response to his dancers as individuals, even if as the company became bigger and he got older he could not respond to them all in this way at any one time⁶. Significantly Lent suggests that Cunningham enjoyed the opportunities a larger company provided in choreographing for groups and this interest can be seen in *Scramble* which grew in numbers with the company. Even in the early versions (Cunningham [motion picture] 1968 and 1970) it is fascinating to see how groupings become ordered and scrambled up again.

For someone who in making *Summerspace* (1958) nearly ten years previously had shown he was perfectly aware of how to utilise a non-hierarchic or decentred space, that Cunningham had choreographed a circle dance around centre was one of *Scramble's* surprises; more so when you consider that in an early version (Cunningham [motion picture] 1968) he danced a solo on absolute centre within it. Some members of the recent audience took this to show how Cunningham's work had only later developed in terms of decentring space. In relation to my own preoccupations with agency and control, it struck me that it might also relate to a view of order and chaos as interrelated. Cunningham is known to have been interested in how physicists were conceiving of the world in new ways (Brown, 2007). One of the students, considered the relationship between Cunningham's' approach to choreographic structures and the ideas of scientists such as Turing, Lorenz and Mandelbrot For them order and disorder were to be conceived not as polarities but as part of the same processes in which simple, ordered equations when feeding back on themselves give rise to unpredictable complexities (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2010).. For dance perhaps this could suggest how the possible permutations of basic actions could lend themselves to various unpredictable organisational possibilities, only some of which would be recognised as ordered. Consider the different approaches to order in two sections of *Scramble*: In the *huddle* dancers scramble to keep up with a preordained, code like sequence of moves and holds; whereas in the *slow walks* simple instructions might, or might not, give rise to seeming moments of unity. For Cunningham such ideas could well have also resonated with his and Cage's interests in Zen. Another student pointed my attention to Cage's title for a text he read in performances with Cunningham in the same year *Scramble* was choreographed: *Diary, How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)*.

Cunningham's legacy

In contemplating Cunningham's legacy, I have suggested how the opportunity for students to learn *Scramble* revealed some key aspects of Cunningham's approach to dance. Contemplating his significance to a new generation of dancers I have also touched on some issues of agency and embodiment in part to emphasise the significance of encouraging students to enjoy Cunningham's work as a series of challenges in a new context. By virtue of its indeterminacy *Scramble* is a work that, within clearly defined limits, sets its own legacy in motion. Patricia Lent commented

in her introduction to the Laban performances of *Scramble* that she

...tried both to insist upon form and accuracy and to welcome the variations in how each dancer accomplishes the movement. My aim has been to offer the dancers an authentic experience grappling with the challenges of Merce's work, and at the same time to allow the dance, *Scramble*, to shift and evolve.

Lent, performance introduction, 2010

Watching Patricia Lent guide the students towards performance suggested to me that while Cunningham ultimately faced the issue of not being able to predict what would happen to his work, he set up the means by which he could trust what did happen would be 'interesting'.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Patricia Lent from the Cunningham Dance Foundation who was so generous with her time and knowledge and to Laban BA2 students who engaged themselves whole heartedly in the project.

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¹ The music for *Scramble* was an indeterminate score, *Activities for Orchestra*, composed by Toshi Ichiyanagi. The Laban performances used an archive recording of a live performance.

² Although since Patricia Lent stated that she could not find any notes for *Scramble* there is nothing to prove that Cunningham didn't subject movement ideas to chance prior to rehearsals, even though Calvin Tomkins (1978) discounts this.

³ For example, Susan Sentler, a former Graham dancer recognised the male female meetings in the slow walks as the basic structure of a Graham lift, while Cunningham's 1968 solo seems to have steps from a jazz /tap number along with a balletic circling of the space and a screaming action.

⁴ Which would be further explored in later works as discussed by McNay (1994) and Chance(2009).

⁵ Franko seems to suggest that this was due to the dancers' sense of what had become recognised as the Cunningham aesthetic.

⁶ Lent also pointed out that with Cunningham ever present the one thing dancers had little freedom to do was to introduce a way of dancing his work that *he* didn't find interesting and therefore his aesthetic was not being undermined by his dancers.

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