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Re-creation of Historical Dance: A Legacy of the Collective Imagination of the Screen?*

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The aim of this paper is to cast light on the collective imagination that has formed around the phenomenon perhaps erroneously defined as “historical” dance, and to propose a new field of research and reading for its interpretation. In particular, I shall analyse the Renaissance as a cultural movement and its contemporary portrayal. Renaissance culture has enticed the scholars, artists and intellectuals of various periods of history, highlighting the language and artistic expression of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For example, the Renaissance revival of the eighteenth century led to the rediscovery of Palladio and his architecture; in the nineteenth century, the Pre-Raphaelites and Nazarenes undertook an almost philological recomposition of Raphael’s painting technique in order to renew the artistic and social message of the period, while Carlo Blasis designed dancers’ movements according to the aesthetic ideal of Renaissance statues and pictures:

That particular position technically termed *attitude* is the most elegant, but at the same time the most difficult which dancing comprises. It is, in my opinion, a kind of imitation of the attitude so much admired in the *Mercury* of J. Bologne. A dancer that studies this attitude, and performs it in a chaste manner, cannot but be remarked as one who has acquired the best notions of his art. Nothing can be more agreeable to the eye than those charming positions which we call *arabesques*, and which we have derived from antique basso relievos, from a few fragments of Greek paintings, and from the paintings in fresco at the Vatican, executed after the beautiful designs of Raphael¹.

In music too, even the twentieth century has not escaped the fascination of this period, with the rediscovery of polyphonic composition techniques, together with the modal system that governs them².

Each of these revisitations, however, has exercised a conscious or unconscious transformation of the original style. The Pre-Raphaelites and Nazarenes loved Raphael’s early work, as also his predecessors such as Giotto and Beato Angelico who, at the end of the *Quattrocento* and beginning of the *Cinquecento* – the period of the painter from Urbino – were considered archaic and their technique absolutely surpassed. In actual fact, the Pre-Raphaelites were not interested in Raphael’s aesthetic canons, strongly linked to those of Vasari: what I mean is that they were not attracted by the ideals on which Raphael created his best masterpieces. Carlo Blasis was not interested in the art of Giambologna, or in the physical culture of the sixteenth century, but only in the forms and lines of his sculptures, to be imitated and adopted in the body of a nineteenth-century ballet dancer.

Closer to our own times, the ’sixties and ’seventies of the twentieth century were particularly eager to recover the ‘ancient’ tradition of a musical and dance repertory no longer performed, or performed rarely in concert halls and theatres. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, several dance manuscripts had already been transcribed in diplomatic editions as unpublished curiosities and even as complimentary publications for the wedding of some kinsman or friend³. Fifteenth century French and Burgundian manuscripts roused

the interest of major musicologists in the 'fifties and 'sixties of the last century, and the most important studies of the *basse danse* are still today based on their interpretations⁴. Although the phenomenon of *Early Music* appeared slightly before that of *Early Dance*, both coincide in the chronological period of our subject repertory, i.e. of music and dance works created between circa 1400 and 1750 or 1800⁵. In particular, the revival of Renaissance dance aims at reinterpreting and reconstructing a forgotten repertory, both in theory and in practice.

The 'seventies were especially animated with regard to practical productions of fifteenth and sixteenth century dance repertoires⁶. This pioneering work led to growing interest, particularly in Italy, and to the setting up of new groups within the so-called historical dance movement, transforming many country festivals into so-called historical commemorations or reenactments, i.e. collective celebrations in memory of local events, or even legends. At such festivals, folk dances were often replaced by ancient court dances.

Most members of historical dance groups are *dilettanti* or amateurs in the original sense of the word, meaning that they amuse themselves by performing this kind of dance in their free time, and not because they are professionals or do it for gain. Despite their amateur status, several groups have acquired a fair technique in fifteenth and sixteenth century steps by attending courses on this repertory and have gone on to entertain audiences with their skill. It must be said that, as a rule, such courses teach the 'greatest hits' of the repertory and are little interested in, or prepared to undertake, reconstruction, specialist efforts notwithstanding. However, quite often, after a few lessons some of these amateurs open a school, and "teach" what they have half-learned, transmitting defects in technique and errors in interpretation that are difficult to correct. Many of these associations also act like any dance company trying to arrange bookings: they have a web page with

an image gallery exhibiting their flashy costumes, a repertory and a "manager".

A rapid search on YouTube – the web site most visited for musical promotion purposes – or on Google, utilising the terms «historical dance», «renaissance dance», «danza storica», etc., will as a rule provide results that are far from the almost philological vision of the Pre-Raphaelites or Nazarenes, and in no way transport our mind to the iconography of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The costumes shown do not look like the paintings of Carpaccio, Bellini or Bronzino. Despite their teachers' reconstruction work, today's historical dance groups act like pseudo Pre-Raphaelites of the nineteenth century: although diligent in executing the choreography, their attention is drawn by what they imagine to be the Renaissance, by the fascination that Renaissance culture has had historically, as also its impact on cinematography. Although these companies pay attention to executing the steps correctly, like the Pre-Raphaelites, they are uninterested in the high ideals that led men such as Domenico da Piacenza or Cesare Negri to create their choreographies.

Doubtless, the cinema of the 'sixties and 'seventies also drew its inspiration from the pseudo-mediaeval and pseudo-Renaissance gestural art of the Romantic and neo-classical ballet that has come down to us⁷. Today, reconstructors of the dance of the *Quattrocento* and the *Cinquecento* are aware of how subtle a thread separates early from folkloristic dance, with which it shares the use of costumes and some traditional musical instruments, as well as amateurism, in most cases. Moreover, this ambiguity between the historical and the folkloristic may be based on the mistaken idea that the court repertory of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was easy to perform and suited to all social dance.⁸ There is no doubt that this repertory can be defined as social dance owing to its link with the ballroom as a venue for presentation, to the social nature of such choreographies and to the fact of their being performed by noblemen, although this does not always

mean that they are simple and easy to execute. The problem is not how the fifteenth and sixteenth century repertory should be defined, but how we reconstructors, to use such a general definition, may distort the meaning of *Quattrocento* and *Cinquecento* performance. For this reason, the social aspect – often confused with the popular – has transformed a repertory like that of the *bassadanza*, requiring a style and technique that are anything but ‘easy’ and «not for persons that dirty the page»⁹, into a dance routine suited to the marketplace, the public stage, as well as to those historical reenactments in which social context is firmly rooted. In other words, this ambiguous concept has certainly helped place what was an elite repertory – unsuited to «the masters of trivia and the foot stompers» in the words of Antonio Cornazano¹⁰ – in places and on sets devoted to social gatherings, as occurs in the case of folk dances, i.e. in squares and on streets, or on temporary outdoor stages. This has resulted in much confusion in the public mind, unable to discern the difference between the mediaeval world and the Renaissance, between the noble and the popular, between social and theatrical, between a fancied Middle Ages and Renaissance and real history. The absence of any informed judgment among audiences saturated with television shows is not due to ignorance or lack of preparation, as often affirmed in a rather superficial and dismissive manner, but to the lack of awareness and knowledge of those who stage such performances, falsely and wrongly defined as historical. Indeed, most of the theatrical elements employed in such cases are drawn, not from the iconography or sources of the period, but from the cinema – particularly American cinema – which has in turn influenced many other cinema traditions, but first and foremost has played enormously on our imagination.

It is impossible not to remark on the trend taking place in early dance. The vulgarization of the events linked to the dance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is not merely a passing fashion: it requires an in-depth and conscious analysis of how dance is “made”. It

must be admitted that most cases linking the Renaissance and the dance are simply bad taste – often *kitsch* – to such an extent that they are not deemed suitable for the theatre.

I should like to discuss the very concept of *historical* that is attached to the pre-1800 dance repertory. As a rule, *historical* is the definition given to Renaissance and Baroque dance, i.e. repertories whose tradition has come to an end. Indeed, from the *Quattrocento* onward, dance has continually renewed its language in an on-going search for independent artistic performance that expresses itself and moves its audience through the body alone. Furthermore, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, several performances of the same work or theatre show, as is customary today for “classical” music, dance and theatre, would have been unthinkable. Renaissance and Baroque performances were for the most part unique, or for a particular celebration. Musical and dance creations were already deemed *passé* after their first performance. From the *Quattrocento* to the *Settecento*, the dance audience consisted of the court and the nobles belonging to it, who, as stated above, were also in most cases the performers themselves. The court, the courtier with his continually exhibited skill and grace and the dance master serving the prince’s education and image, no longer exist in today’s world and have necessarily lost their *raison d’être*.

For such reasons, this early repertory is usually defined as «historical dance». It is highly significant that the same adjective is not used in parallel arts. Botticelli’s painting, Michelangelo’s sculpture and the music of Josquin are not defined as *historical*, yet no one today paints, sculpts and composes in their style. Certainly, their works are well known, better known than they would have been at the time. Botticelli’s *La Primavera* was known to a few privileged persons at the Court of Lorenzo the Magnificent, whereas today its reproduction is found everywhere. Unlike pre-1800 dance, Romantic ballet has so far enjoyed constant public attention and theatres always keep classical and neo-

classical ballets in their repertoires. Are we, however, really certain that academic ballet follows the same tradition today as outlined by the aesthetics of Theophile Gautier in the nineteenth century? Filippo Taglioni composed the choreography of the *Sylphides* thinking of his daughter's body with its over-long arms. With few exceptions, such as Lacotte's reconstruction based on Taglioni's documents¹¹, can we consider or claim today that we are seeing the same *Sylphides* or the same *Giselle* as in the nineteenth century? Even the ballerina's body is no longer like that of Maria Taglioni or Carlotta Grisi. So why do we use the term *historical* only for Renaissance and Baroque dance? If tradition is the handing down, from one generation to another, of memories, information and testimony about a repertory¹², then the term *historical* should certainly be employed for classical ballet, or for most repertoires that require reconstruction after their first performance, as in the case of Nijinskij's *Le sacre du Printemps* in 1913¹³. Have we ever wondered whether what is actually the unenviable position of *Quattrocento* and *Cinquecento* dance is really due to this mistake in terminology and consequent ranking that opens the door to amateurism? My analysis does not aim to demolish the work of my predecessors and contemporaries, but merely to refocus our point of view on early dance and give it a more suitable place.

On reading an early choreographic text, not everything is useful in making an accurate reconstruction. Very often, the ancient language, the translations, the absence of stage and choreographic directions lead us to add our own personal interpretation that escapes any scientific and philological methodology. The text brings to life the external scenic values, meaning the steps, costumes, allusions to the gestural art, but it is the internal scenic values produced by the deductions of the reconstructor that actually make it possible to stage an early dance. Such problems of reading make one even more aware of how little there may be that is *historical* or authentic in the actual performances¹⁴. The only "truth" in the early

text is the lack of information about the dancing body of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

It may be the starting point that has to change if we do not want our performances to look like productions seen on the Internet, or like the pseudo Pre-Raphaelites of historical dance who followed the romantic collective imagination regarding the Renaissance. Not only is it necessary to respect the sources, but we should also reconsider the original meaning of the performance. It is in such a context that deconstruction, as a reading strategy, can help change the point of view of the reconstruction¹⁵. All the ingredients of a choreography can be dissolved, separated and fragmented in postulating the origin of dance performances in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

I believe that, after recovering the sources and meticulously analysing each element in order to reconstruct the steps of ancient dances, we reach a moment when we can propose a deconstruction of the related repertory that will force us to accept other points of view and provide a new stimulus to theoretical and practical research. Deconstruction is usually perceived as destruction, but the concept of deconstruction proposed by Jacques Derrida aims at highlighting the hidden prejudices and contradictions in both language and culture of which we think we are wholly aware. Deconstruction is actually a reading strategy to underline the aporias and ideological discontinuities in the texts and render uncertain the unitary and classificatory system of its very interpretation. The hermeneutics employed so far on early dance texts have been based on exploring the inner and outer articulations of the choreography so as to restore, together with their structure, the historical world that fashioned them. The *Grammatology* of Jacques Derrida may assist us in overcoming a stage of analysis that leads only to *re*-construction. Just like Derrida, it is essential to create a hermeneutics no longer considered as a reading of clear and coherent texts, but as an analysis of caesuras, divergences and the fundamental non-

transparency of a tradition that no longer belongs to us and, perhaps, never did. Jacques Derrida does not consider the text as “spiritual truth”, but as material or, to use his terminology, as traces. Thus, hermeneutics does not reconstruct the past, nor does it wish to integrate it with the present as such, as in Gadamer’s model: on the contrary, it deconstructs it, marking the difference and distance between our interpretation and the early texts¹⁶. The aim of this research is thus not only to indicate the meaning of a tradition or the legitimacy of an interpretation, but rather to let the “institutional” models shift, dissolve and scatter so as to reach an interpretation.

Like a new Domenico, or rather, a post-modern Domenico da Piacenza and his aspiration to raise his discipline to that of the liberal arts, we have to re-set the dance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and to do so, we must deconstruct it. In actual fact, Domenico da Piacenza is the first deconstructor. He deconstructed his contemporary dance repertory in order to create a new one that could be recognised by everyone as such. Although still linked to the Middle Ages, his production is born from the separation, the fragmentation of early elements to create a new and noble style¹⁷. I feel that Domenico did not create from nothing the Italian *Quattrocento* repertory of the *bassadanza* and *ballo* described in his treatise *De arte saltandi et choreas ducendi*¹⁸. Domenico probably used mediaeval dance steps as a basis, without limiting himself exclusively to copying them. The fragmentation and separation of cognitive elements is an essential methodological stage in deconstruction. Domenico may indeed have separated out all the ingredients forming a traditional mediaeval choreography so as to create something new making it possible to observe that same choreography from another point of view and demonstrate that the dance is as much an art as music is. It is certainly a personal opinion and, in some way, a provocation to consider Domenico da Piacenza as the first deconstructor. Clearly, Domenico could not have thought of

deconstruction in the Derridian sense of the term, but – not by chance – he triggered a new reflection on the dance: a century later, Trissino ranked some *Quattrocento* choreographies on the same level as «Jannequin nella musica, Leonardo nella pittura, e Omero, Dante e Petrarca nella poesia»¹⁹.

It should be recalled, however, that deconstruction operates beside hermeneutics and nothing can be separated, fragmented or dissolved without the original characteristics of the text and related aesthetic, philosophical, anthropological, historical and sociological skills required for such an analysis. Up to the present, the texts of the *Quattrocento* and *Cinquecento* dances have been interpreted through a strict reconstruction that may have distracted our focus from what was the original idea of the dance. If we have a duty nowadays, it is not that of respecting existing steps and choreographies, but of creating new metaphorical systems to portray the world.

Notes

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¹ PAPPACENA, Flavia (ed.): *Il trattato di Danza di Carlo Blasis 1820-1830/Carlo Blasis' Treatise on Dance 1820-1830*, (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2005): 202.

² Some twentieth-century composers have purposely sought alternative composition techniques in mediaeval modes and Renaissance polyphony. Cf., in Italy, the generation of Gian Francesco Malipiero (1882-1973), as well as more recently the Estonian Arvo Pärt (1935).

³ MESSORI RONCAGLIA, Giovanni: *Della virtute et arte del danzare et di alcune opportune et necessarie particelle a quella pertinenti. Trascrizione di un manoscritto inedito del XV secolo esistente nella Biblioteca Palatina di Modena corredata di note ed appunti*, for the Taviani-Santucci wedding (Modena: Tipografia dell'Immacolata Concezione, 1885); MAZZI, Curzio: "Una sconosciuta compilazione di un libro quattrocentesco di balli," *Bibliofilia* 1, (1914-15): 185-209; ZAMBRINI, Francesco: *Trattato dell'arte del ballo di Guglielmo Ebreo Pesarese. Testo inedito del secolo XV* (Bologna: Gaetano Romagnoli, 1873; facs. Bologna: Forni, 1968).

⁴ CLOSSON, Ernest (ed.): *Le Manuscrit dit des basses danses de la Bibliothèque de Bourgogne* (Brussels: Société des Bibliophiles et Iconophiles de Belgique, 1912); ID.: "La Structure rythmique des Basses danses du mst. 9085 de la Bibliothèque royale de Bruxelles," *Sammelbände der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft* 14 (1912-13): 567-78; BLUME, Friedrich: *Studien zur Vorgeschichte der Orchestersuite im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: F. Kistner & C.F.W. Siegel, 1925); SCHOLDERER, Victor (ed.): *L'art et instruction de bien danser (Michel Toulouze, Paris)*, (London: Royal College of Physicians, 1936); BUKOFZER, Manfred: "A Polyphonic Basse Dance of the Renaissance," in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Music* (New York: Norton, 1950): 190-216; JACKMAN, James L. (ed.): *Fifteenth Century Basses Dances* (Wellesley, Massachusetts: Wellesley College, 1964); HEARTZ, Daniel: "The Basse Dance. Its Evolution circa 1450 to 1550," *Annales Musicologiques* 6 (1958-1963): 287-340; ID.: "A 15th Century Ballo: Rôti Bouilli Joyeux," in JAN LA RUE (ed.), *Aspects of Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Birthday Offering to Gustave Reese*, (New York: Norton, 1966): 359-75; ID.: "Hoftanz and Basse Dance," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 19 (1966): 13-36; CRANE, Frederick: "The Derivation of Some Fifteenth-Century Basse-Danse Tunes," *Acta*

Musicologica 37 (1965): 179-88; ID.: *Materials for the Study of the Fifteenth Century Basse Danse* (New York: Institute of Medieval Music, 1968); MEYLAN, Raymond: *L'énigme de la musique des basses danses du quinzième siècle* (Berne: P. Haupt, [c.1968]).

⁵ About the term "early music" and the concept of authenticity, cf. COHEN, Joel: *Reprise: the Extraordinary Revival of Early Music* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1985); KERMAN, Joseph: "The Historical Performance Movement", in J. Kerman, *Contemplating Music. Challenges to Musicology*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985): 182-217; HASKELL, Harry: *The Early Music Revival: a History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988); KENYON, Nicholas, (ed.): *Authenticity and Early Music: a Symposium* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995; SHERMAN, Bernard D.: *Inside Early Music: Conversations with Performers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); HAYNES, Bruce: *The End of Early Music: A Period Performer's History of Music for the Twenty-First Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; HASKELL, Harry: "Early music", in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.library.msmnyc.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/46003> (accessed January 27, 2010); BUTT, John: "Authenticity", in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.library.msmnyc.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/46587> (accessed January 27, 2010). The Early Dance Circle considers that «Early Dance (or Historical Dance) is a term that covers the dances current in Western Europe, in courts and country houses, in taverns and theatres, from the Middle Ages up to the end of the 20th century. Information about these dances is derived from original and reliable secondary sources». In <http://www.earlydancecircle.co.uk/>.

⁶ Important figures in reconstruction in Italy, such as Barbara Sparti and Andrea Francalanci, have carried out a patient and meticulous task of study and experimentation.

⁷ In the Italian context, one of the most significant films showing the fascination of the romantic view of the Renaissance is, without a doubt, Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 film "Romeo e Giulietta".

⁸ For a complete definition of social dance, cf. BRAINARD KAHRSTEDT, Ingrid: *Social Dance: Court and Social Dance before 1800*, in *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, ed. by S. J. Cohen (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5: 619-621.

⁹ Antonio Cornazano, *Libro dell'arte del danzare*, Roma, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Capponiano 203 [1^a re-ed. 1455; 2^a re-ed. c. 1465].

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *La sylphide*, choreography by Pierre Lacotte after Filippo Taglioni, Paris, Ballet de L'Opéra National de Paris, TDK, 2005.

¹² *Vocabolario della lingua italiana. Il conciso*, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana fondata da Giovanni Treccani, 1998.

¹³ *Le sacre du Printemps* was re-presented to the public on 30 September 1987 at Los Angeles as a ballet reconstructed by Robert Joffrey (1930-1988) with his Company, *Joffrey Ballet*, under the guidance of Millicent Hodson, an American dance historian, and Kenneth Archer, an English art historian.

¹⁴ In presenting my paper «*La danza histórica no es histórica: Perfil de una deconstrucción*» at the Congreso Internacional *La disciplina coreológica en Europa: Problemas y perspectivas* (Valladolid, 27-29 novembre 2008) I showed how, in one of my apparently philological reconstructions of a *momería* by Francesc Moner, performed for the inauguration of the Conference together with students of the Escuela Superior de Arte Dramático de Castilla y León, the reconstructor's many subjective inputs may alienate us from what we believe –and wish to

make others believe– to be authentic or historical. As a rule, no reconstructor presents his own work to demonstrate his aporias to a specialist audience, such as that of a Conference. I hope it may serve as an example for further self-criticism of our own reconstruction work.

¹⁵ On the concept of deconstruction, cf. DERRIDA, Jacques: *Of grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); ID.: *Aporias: dying--awaiting (one another at) the "limits of truth" (mourir--s'attendre aux "limites de la vérité")*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); ID.: *Archive fever: a Freudian impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); ID.: *Dissemination* (Chicago: University Press, 1981); ID.: *Writing and difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). For studies on Derrida, cf. KAMUF, Peggy (ed.): *A Derrida reader: between the blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); CAPUTO, John D. (ed.): *Deconstruction in a nutshell: a conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997); WOLFREYS, Julian (ed.): *The Derrida reader: writing performances* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

¹⁶ GADAMER, Hans Georg: *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1960 (transl. *Truth and method*, New York: Continuum, 1993).

¹⁷ Cf. the most recent study on this figure: PONTREMOLI, Alessandro: "La danza di Domenico da Piacenza tra Medioevo e Rinascimento," *Il castello di Elsinore 19/53* (2006): 5-23.

¹⁸ Domenico da Piacenza, *De arte saltandi et choreas ducendi*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, f. ital. 972 [c. 1450-55].

¹⁹ GIAN GIORGIO TRISSINO: "Poetica. Quinta divisione (1549)," in B. WEINBERG (ed), *Trattati di poetica e retorica del Cinquecento*, II, (Bari: Laterza, 1970): 12 (6v).

