Fitness for Function and Dance Aesthetics

Eric C. Mullis
Queens University of Charlotte, mullise@queens.edu

Fitness for Function and Dance Aesthetics

Eric C. Mullis

Abstract

This essay discusses the manner in which the appreciation of fitness for function can be applied to dance aesthetics. Drawing on Allen Carlson and Glenn Parsons' work, the essay considers the problems of indeterminacy, translation, and dysfunction as they pertain to the appreciation of dance movement. It then argues that fitness for function can be used to critically assess post-modern task dances and contemporary dance works that do not rely on the execution of codified dance technique.

Key Words
dance, fitness, function, task dance

Allen Carlson and Glenn Parsons have argued that appreciating function can enrich the appreciation of natural objects and artifacts that are encountered in everyday life.[1] This essay develops that approach as it considers the manner in which dance movement can be seen as fit for manifesting a particular choreographic approach to movement. This discussion sets up an examination of issues that arise in discussions of fitness for function, including the problem of translation, the problem of indeterminacy, and the aesthetics of dysfunction. Further, fitness for choreographic function can be used to critically evaluate the post-modern "task dances" discussed by Sally Banes and Noël Carroll and contemporary dances more generally.[2]

1. Fitness for function, dance movement, and choreographic style

The extension of fitness for function to dance aesthetics bears consideration before proceeding. Carlson and Parsons focused on the appreciation of everyday artifacts and public architecture and, although they briefly discuss sport, do not consider whether fitness for function is relevant for dance appreciation. This leads one to ask whether it is appropriate to apply aspects of their approach to dance movement since it is unlike a hammer, automobile, or building. It will become clear, however, that dance movement can be viewed as intentionally designed to realize choreographic ends and can be aesthetically appreciated as being fit for realizing such ends.

Still, one may insist that the analogy between the fitness of an artifact and the fitness of dance movement is tenuous since construing fitness as a dance value entails viewing a rather fleeting process as contributing to something even more intangible, namely, a broader choreographic approach to dance values. It is much easier to see how a shovel is fit for digging than it is to see how a dancer's movement is fit for choreographic function since the shovel is a physical object. However, beyond philosophical convention, I see no reason why the ontological difference between an object and a series of actions justifies restricting the appreciation of fitness for

function to the former for, in either case, an organic relationship between part and whole can be appreciated. It will become clear that one can readily appreciate that relationship even if neither part nor whole is a physical object.[3]

With these points made, we can begin by noting that the kind of functionality that is the subject of this essay can be appreciated in two interrelated ways. First, the body of the dancer can be viewed as being fit for function since dancers generally present bodies that are efficient at executing a wide range of movement: bodies that are visibly strong, flexible, and otherwise athletic. Following Carlson and Parsons, "looking fit for function" entails that the object under consideration falls within a particular category that is characterized by standard and variable features indicative of functionality.[4] The standard features that characterize the human form are necessary for the appreciation of functionality since a body that includes such features can demonstrate the fullest range of movement and thereby indicate the body's general kinetic potential.[5] Further, the body that looks fit for dance also exhibits variable features that are indicative of dance movement. For example, a broad frame is indicative of the dancer's presentation of movement to an audience, long supple limbs signify the ability to fill space with movement, and muscular legs are indicative of the ability to jump and bear weight. Hence, one can appreciate the dancer's body as looking fit for function if it exemplifies the general human form and exhibits variable features that are suggestive of dance movement.

Considering the body alone does not get at the heart of the appreciation of functionality in dance aesthetics since athletes of many varieties exhibit standard and variable features of the human body that are necessary for the completion of their sports. Further, if their sport is geared toward performance, then they may also exhibit variable features that are akin to those of dancers. Many gymnasts and ice skaters have bodies that are characterized by variable features that are necessary for performance: broad frames, long limbs, muscular legs, and so on.[6] This points to the fact that, in order to further develop an analysis of the appreciation of function that is particular to dance, one must go beyond the appreciation of the body and consider the relationship between dance movement and a broader choreographic approach.

A global aesthetic property arises when controlled and efficient movements are exhibited within the context of a somatic practice that takes a clear stance on dance values. Not unlike the athlete's movement, the dancer's movement is indicative of a practice that outlines the kinds of movement that are necessary for the realization of its ends. In athletics, these ends include achieving specific goals that are necessary for successful competition. The wide-receiver's leaping catch is indicative of the goal of moving the ball downfield to score points and can be seen as graceful if it successfully manifests the economy of movement that is necessary for realizing that goal. Further, any movements that are contra-standard to manifesting that particular economy will appear unsightly since they often result in the failure to realize the relevant goal.

Dance is distinct from sport in that it generally is not oriented toward competition. However, the dancer's performance can similarly be appreciated if it does not include extraneous or uncontrolled actions that detract from the clarity of movement sequences necessary for a given dance. In order to say something more about the standard or contra-standard features that pertain to the appreciation of an economy of movement, we must briefly consider dance styles, since such categories outline particular stances on dance values that inform the development of their respective economies of movement.

As David Best noted, dance movement can be appreciated without being aware of the relevant categories of dance but, in order to fully appreciate the manner in which movement articulates a choreographic approach to movement, a dance must be situated within its relevant stylistic context.[7] One can appreciate the movement presented by a classical Indian dancer's dance as one attends to the flowing manner in which she articulates complex hand gestures and as she moves easily from one difficult sculptural pose to the next. However, to fully appreciate the choreographic approach that her movement contributes to, one must understand how those movements are indicative of the style of Bharata Natyam.[8]

Also, one may consider the manner in which traditional ballet outlines how posture, carriage, and spatial orientation should be presented on stage. The tradition is known for its frontal orientation and its emphasis on maintaining an erect torso and the precise movements of the limbs. This orientation is captured in standardized positions such as the arabesque, basic movements such as the pirouette, and movement sequences such as the *glissade*, *jeté*, and *bourreé* that are demonstrated in classical ballets. This stance frames the appreciation of ballet movement, as it clearly outlines the movement qualities that are necessary for realizing the balletic approach to dance movement. This can inform one's appreciation of fitness for function, since the dancer who succinctly articulates ballet's characteristic movement qualities will manifest ballet's distinct choreographic approach and, consequently, will be seen as fit for performing ballet movement.[9]

Similarly, the style of Bharata Natyam emphasizes the dancer's frontal orientation, erect torso, and articulate use of limbs. It advocates a clear presentational approach that is codified in specific postures (*karanas*) and elaborate hand gestures (*mudras*), and the movement sequences that are used to connect them. This style is distinct from ballet, however, in that it generally emphasizes a low center of gravity that is used to draw attention to the body's connection to the ground. The Bharata Natyam dancer's movement can be appreciated as fit for expressing the choreographic approach that characterizes the style if the dancer is capable of presenting codified postures, gestures, and movement sequences.[10]

Ballet and Bharata Natyam exemplify the relationship between the fitness of dance movement and a choreographic approach to dance movement since they both present codified systems of bodily presentation that include assumptions about the

nature of the performing body, the utilization of performance space, and the purpose of dance technique. With this said, it should be noted that the current stylistic categories of dance are not as hard and fast as they once were. There are repertory companies that focus on particular dance styles and traditions. However, many contemporary dance artists and choreographers draw from a wide range of dance traditions and styles as they study, perform, and create dances. The appreciation of fitness for function in dances that do not present codified movement systems will be discussed at the end of Section four.

2. The problems of translation and indeterminacy

Carlson and Parsons noted that two criticisms are commonly leveled against those who argue that fitness for function is a valuable aesthetic property: the problem of translation and the problem of indeterminacy. It is worth bringing these objections into the discussion at this point as they reveal an important difference between fitness as it pertains to the appreciation of artifacts and the appreciation of dance movement, and because they encourage us to consider the issue of proper function as it pertains to dance as an art form.

The problem of translation centers on the observation that awareness of an object's function can alter the aesthetic qualities that the object is perceived to have. Carlson and Parsons noted that "it is unclear how awareness of, and attention to, a non-aesthetic function can *alter* or *influence* aesthetic judgment." When something is functionally good, it entails that the function of the object somehow "translates into" the perceptual experience of the object. It is difficult to say how this translation takes place, however.[11]

Roger Scruton articulated the problem of translation by focusing on the aesthetics of architecture. With the functionalists who emphasize that architectural form should follow function, Scruton asked how function translates into architectural form.[12] For example, a strainer arch—the arch that is used to keep two walls from leaning toward one another—may look fit for the function of bearing a substantial load, but it is notoriously difficult to explain exactly how. One can point out that it looks fit for function since it does not exhibit defects that would mar its functionality but, nonetheless, it is difficult to say which aesthetic properties of the arch express functionality. This observation led Scruton to assert that function is a confused notion that obscures a clear understanding of the aesthetics of architecture.[13]

The problem of indeterminacy centers on the observation that it is often difficult to distinguish between the proper function of an artifact and the ancillary function(s) that it can perform.[14] For example, one can say that the proper function of a hammer is to drive nails but a hammer can be used to perform any number of tasks, including cracking walnuts, bracing open windows, and scratching initials into wood. The hammer can be viewed as being fit for fulfilling any of these tasks, and one is left wondering how the notion of function can clearly inform an aesthetic of artifacts if it is difficult to say which function should be attended to. In order to avoid this problem, the advocate of the aesthetic

appreciation of functionality must articulate an account that is able to demarcate the proper and ancillary function(s) that the object performs.[15]

When considering functionality within the context of dance appreciation, the problem of translation misfires. Since the medium of dance is the human body, and since movement is generally a characteristic feature of that medium, fitness for function can be directly manifested and appreciated as the dancer performs. This points to the fact that the problem of translation arises when one considers artifacts, such as strainer arches and hammers, that utilize media not clearly connected with the functions performed by the artifacts that they constitute. However, aesthetic properties presented in human movement, such as fluidity and vitality, are indicative of the body in that they demonstrate aspects of its general kinetic potential. Indeed, dance can be viewed as an art form that continually explores and presents the manner in which the kinetic possibilities of the human body can be developed and refined so that they may be rendered aesthetically significant for an audience.[16]

The problem of indeterminacy turns attention to the question of proper function in dance. I have suggested that dance movement can be viewed as being fit for realizing choreographic ends. Is this the proper function of dance movement? What is the relationship between choreographic function and other ends that dance movement can achieve? Indeed, does dance as an art form have a proper function in the manner of a hammer or bridge? Carlson and Parsons argued that the proper function of particular works of art, such as buildings, can be determined but they also noted that it is quite difficult to nail down the proper function of an art form writ large.[17] But doesn't one need to be clear on the proper function of dance in order to be clear on the manner in which dance movement can be appreciated as fit for function?

I think not. Dance allows for the appreciation of choreographic ends, including the aesthetic properties of movement, the expression of internal states, the development of themes and narratives, and so on. Such factors, in turn, contribute to the appreciation of artistic and social ends that characterize a given dance as a whole. This essay focuses not on such ends but instead on the appreciation of the means that are necessary for the realization of those ends. In order for artistic and social ends to be realized, a successful fusion of the dancer's movements with choreographic structure must take place since the dancer who cannot successfully execute choreography will invariably undermine the development and appreciation of any narrative or thematic content.

The fusion of movement and choreographic structure can readily be observed in "pure movement" dance work, such as that of Merce Cunningham, Yvonne Ranier, and Trisha Brown, that often intentionally presents choreography devoid of clear character roles, emotional expressions, or narrative content. One's attention is readily focused on the relationship between movement and choreographic structure since no internal states or narrative content is presented. However, one can appreciate the manner in which choreography is skillfully executed in, say, a romantic ballet that includes theatrical

character roles, emotional content, a particular narrative, and so on. Cunningham's work draws attention to the relationship between particular movements and an overall choreographic approach to movement but this relationship exists in any dance that advances a systematic approach to choreography.

Is this fusion of a dancer's movement with a choreographic approach the proper function of dance? My examples demonstrate that it is wrong-headed to answer in the affirmative since doing so would be to ignore choreographic intent and important differences between dance styles and traditions. One can say that it is proper to view Cunningham's work in terms of the organic relationship between movement and a broader choreographic approach, but one hesitates to say that one should primarily view *Swan Lake* this way since to do so would entail missing the appreciation of the romantic values that characterize its choreography and overarching narrative. Again, one can appreciate how a particular dancer's movement expresses the choreographic approach to the ballet, but solely focusing on that relationship would be to miss something essential to the work.[18]

Hence, we can say that the kind of fitness that this essay considers can be appreciated and is necessary for the realization of ends prized by many dance audiences. However, we cannot say that it is the proper function of dance, since to do so is to ignore the wide range of artistic and social ends achieved by many dances. At the same time, I believe that it is clear that the fitness of dance movement for executing particular choreography can be appreciated even if it is not the proper function of dance and, more generally, if the proper function of dance cannot be nailed down. The rest of this essay will demonstrate the details of such appreciation.[19]

3. The aesthetics of choreographic dysfunction

Carlson and Parsons noted that an aesthetic that emphasizes fitness for function must say something about the issue of dysfunction.[20] If fitness for function is a valued aesthetic property, then how do we assess those instances in which the object under consideration does not fulfill its function? Because they are manifestly unfit, are such objects necessarily aesthetically poor or unsightly? With regard to dance, is movement that is not fit for choreographic function always aesthetically poor? In order to answer this question we must consider the ways in which dysfunction pertains to dance performance.

Drawing on the points made above, we can note that movements that do not realize well-known choreographic standards will be viewed as unfit and, consequently, as aesthetically poor. The movement of the ballet dancer that does not successfully manifest ballet's canonical movements will be seen as aesthetically flawed. As discussed, this can, in turn, hinder the development of other ends that are important for the development of the piece as a whole. Hence, in this context, dysfunction is necessarily an aesthetic flaw since the movement is not fit for realizing well-known choreographic standards.

But what of work that does not rely on such standards? There

are many modern and post-modern dance works that appear dysfunctional in that they present fragmented choreography that often produces feelings of uneasiness and disorientation in viewers. In such cases, one cannot appreciate the relationship between movement and well-known choreographic standards. Further, the movement that is presented is not characterized by pleasant aesthetic properties, such as grace and elegance, that characterize the movements of more traditional dance forms, such as ballet and ballroom dance. For example, Troika Ranch's *Loopdiver* (2009) is a contemporary dance work that features dancers who repetitively perform movement sequences that were choreographed using computer software.[21] The observer finds the piece uncomfortable to watch as the dancers appear to be stuck in repetitious loops composed of awkward movements that often require a great deal of energy to perform.

On further reflection, however, dances like *Loopdiver* only appear dysfunctional since the dancers who perform in such pieces learn the relevant movement sequences, rehearse them, and perform them for each showing of the piece. Indeed, true choreographic dysfunction, in this context, would entail that a dancer make a grave error that would threaten the realization of the choreography, such as tripping, falling, or otherwise getting seriously injured. But if *Loopdiver* is to succeed choreographically and thematically, then these kinds of errors must be avoided. Viewed in terms of a functional aesthetic, *Loopdiver* includes a particular movement vocabulary that manifests qualities of movement that inform its systematic approach to movement.

The movement qualities that characterize the repetitious and fragmented movement sequences often produce a sense of discomfort but they can, nonetheless, ground a sense of fitness for function since one can view the dancer's movement as being fit for expressing the general choreographic approach of the piece, and as being fit for realizing the thematic content of the work. *Loopdiver* demonstrates that particular movements that are not aesthetically pleasing may be appreciated as fit for choreographic function if the choreography of the piece is characterized by a systematic approach to disjointed, fragmented, or even grotesque movement. That is, one may appreciate the functional relationship between movement and choreographic approach even if the particular movements produce a sense of discomfort.

As another example, Tom Johnson's post-modern dance *Running out of Breath* (1976) is intriguing in that it intentionally presents genuine choreographic dysfunctionality. The original performance of the piece featured a solo dancer who performed basic running with unpredictable changes of direction in a performance space. While running, the dancer recited a "text-score" from memory that described the process of getting tired, of trying to conserve energy, and, ultimately, of being unable to continue the performance. Johnson noted that:

> If due to a cramp, injury, or complete exhaustion, the performer is unable to finish the dance, he/she should simply stop, say "I'm sorry,

> that's as far as I can go," and exit. The dance will then end in defeat rather than triumph, but its most important feature, literal truth, will be preserved.[22]

The piece is designed to end in failure and yet presents the dancer's running commentary on the process of trying not to fail. This focuses the audience's attention on the manner in which dance performance generally prizes the successful execution of technique and conceals the physical struggle that often lies behind it. *Running out of Breath* highlights choreographic dysfunction by presenting a dancer who gradually becomes less fit for completing the dance.

Is the lack of fitness that is presented in *Running out of Breath* aesthetically poor? It seems not. The dysfunction is intertwined with the aim of the piece because Duncan's growing inability to continue performing succinctly focuses attention on a widely-held expectation concerning dance performance. This works well for *Running out of Breath* since the end of the piece facilitates the realization of Johnson's intention. However as discussed above, for any dance that did not stress this particular stance on the audience's expectations and could not be completed, the dysfunction would consequently be viewed as an aesthetic flaw. Hence, it is not the case that dysfunction in dance performance is necessarily an aesthetic flaw but that most dances will be negatively affected by such dysfunction since it would undermine the realization of the overall choreographic approach and can, in turn, hinder the development of artistic themes and narrative content.[23]

Parsons and Carlson argued that dysfunctional artifacts are always aesthetically flawed since they are incapable of realizing the ends that they were designed to procure. It is generally the case that dysfunctional dance movement is aesthetically flawed, but we find that a choreographer may intentionally incorporate dysfunctionality into a dance work in a way that draws attention to the very manner in which dances are generally designed and performed by dancers. This indicates a self-reflective post-modern approach to choreography that we will discuss further in Section 4.

4. Task dances, function, and choreographic normativity

In this section I will consider the post-modern task dances of the 1960s that draw attention to the functional fitness of everyday movement. This emphasis on the value of everyday movement brings the normative force of fitness for function into relief by demonstrating that appreciating fitness for choreographic function is often contingent on the normalization of movement since normalization is necessary for the realization of choreographic standards. This will then lead to a discussion of alternatives to such normalization.

Carroll and Banes have argued that the post-modern task dances present ordinary movement as an object of aesthetic appreciation.[24] Pieces such as Yvonne Ranier's *Room Service* (1963) and Trisha Brown's *Rulegame 5* (1965) demonstrate how working bodies must adjust muscles, angles, and the distribution of weight in order to move, navigate around, and assemble cumbersome objects, such as bed

mattresses, wood planks, ropes, gears, and pieces of steel. Carroll and Banes suggested that, if such dances are performed correctly, "there can be no question of superfluity of expression over the requirements of practical purposes, because the *raison d'etre* of the pieces is to display the practical intelligence of the body in pursuit of a mundane, goal-oriented type of action."[25] The subject of such dances, they continued, is "the functional economy of movement."[26]

Task dances present the economy of movement that characterizes everyday actions in a way that opens them to aesthetic appreciation of fitness for function. They draw attention to the movement vocabulary that is most often unreflectively utilized as individuals walk to work, assemble furniture, shop for groceries, and so on. The movements that characterize task dances are fit for the function of manifesting a pedestrian choreographic approach in the same way as the professional dancer's movements are fit for expressing the choreographic approach that characterizes a particular style of dance. The features of movement that are cultivated with dance training are not necessary since the economy of movement that characterizes everyday activities generally does not require specialized movement skills. For this reason, some post-modern choreographers have gone to the extent of incorporating individuals who have little or no dance training into their task dances. In a self-reflective fashion, choreographers such as Rainer and Brown encourage audiences to consider how their everyday actions can be aesthetically appreciated as fit for function.[27]

Contemporary dance theorists have stressed that the roles and thematic content that characterize dances in many styles of dance are explicitly normative in that they cast the dancer in a particular framework of cultural values.[28] With regard to gender, we find that classical ballet and many works in the canon of modern dance are hetero-normative in that they portray a particular stance on gender identity and gender relations. Other theorists have noted that race can also be a factor, as non-Caucasian roles are often portrayed as alien others who act as a foil for Caucasian heroes and heroines.[29] In general, many works that fill the canon of ballet and modern dance, as well as Bharata Natyam, express the values of the culture from which they came, values that many contemporary dancers, choreographers, theorists, and audiences find problematic.

The post-modern choreographers take this a step further as they argue that normativity can also be problematic in a non-thematic way since appreciating the relationship between particular movements and a general choreographic approach can be a normative affair. That is, even if the cultural values that inform ballet and Bharata Natyam could somehow be avoided, the styles require bodies capable of producing the specialized movements that are necessary for the instantiation of their respective choreographic systems. Dance styles carry normative weight because they are contingent upon a normalization of movement that encourages the classification of dancers in terms of their ability to perform movements that fit within the choreographic system and, more generally, ignores any of the dancer's kinetic uniqueness that does not.

Task dances and other post-modern dances[30] avoid gender roles, problematic thematic content, and codified choreographic systems by presenting the body simply as a source of movement. As Banes noted, the early post-moderns can be seen as striving to create a democratic approach to dance that avoids cultural values and the normalization of dance movement, and that is accessible and practicable by anyone who is willing to invest time and energy in dance:

> In the sixties, the impulse of the post-modern choreographers was to deny virtuosity and to relinquish technical polish, literally to let go of bodily constraints and inhibitions, to act freely, and also, in a spirit of democracy, to refuse to differentiate the dancer's body from an ordinary body.[31]

One may argue that such an approach is extreme, and quite possibly aesthetically limited, since the normalization of movement that is essential for the development of dance styles has produced a vast array of artistically significant dances. To put this point another way, normalization through the cultivation of dance technique is necessary as it allows for the clarification and refinement of creative energies. Spontaneous actions are converted into artistic expressions when they are channeled through a medium that has been tempered by technique.[32] With regard to dance, the human body is converted into a medium of expression when it is disposed to succinctly manifest qualities of movement so that they may be appreciated by an audience. If this is the case, then it is difficult to see why capitalizing on the body's natural capacity to express various qualities of movement is an inherently problematic affair.

One may agree that the questionable cultural values that arise in many dances are problematic but one can go on to argue that the normativity that characterizes the cultivation of dance technique is a different affair. It is one thing for a dance to manifest questionable cultural values, and it is another for choreographers to seek out dancers who can perform the movement qualities that they value so that the appreciation of fitness for function and other artistic ends can be achieved. This is because there appears to be no logical connection between cultural values and qualities of movement. For example, a low center of gravity and powerful muscular movements may be used to express particular cultural values, but one can imagine dances that would utilize such features for different ends. Habit and culture lead to the association of particular qualities of movement with specific cultural values, but a survey of the world's dance traditions produces many variations on this theme. For example, one can contrast the variable qualities of traditional ballet that grew out of the French royal court with those of the Kathak tradition that was prized by the Mughal courts of ancient India. We generally find a high center of gravity in the former and a low center of gravity, articulated by *grand* or *demi-plié* stances that are held for substantial periods of time, in the latter.[33] That these royal courts emphasized different dance values indicates that the dancer's relation to gravity is largely a matter of cultural convention.

The advocate of post-modern dance may reply by arguing that since axiological and functional normativity have been associated for so long, the best strategy is to create dances that avoid or explicitly draw attention to both forms of normativity. But, again, this is troubling since it rules out the appreciation of fitness for function that is generally necessary for appreciation of other important aspects of dance performance, including the advancing of thematic or narrative content.

Banes noted that the post-modern choreographers of the 1970s and 1980s became aware of these limitations and consequently shifted away from the minimalist program of the 1960s as they began experimenting with social dance, multi-media technologies, choreographic pastiche, improvisation techniques, and by parodying virtuosic performance.[34] Such strategies allowed them to avoid issues of functional normativity yet allowed them to explore artistic options that went beyond the restrictions of task dances that present pedestrian movements that can be appreciated as fit for function. More recently, one can point to the work of contemporary choreographers who have intentionally drawn on an array of dance traditions to create their own unique choreographic approaches. As discussed at the end of Section One, the polemics that were used to strongly differentiate modern dance from ballet, post-modern dance from modern dance, and Western from non-Western dance are largely relics of the past; the lines between dance styles are no longer so starkly drawn.[35] Consequently, dance artists now have the opportunity to study a wide range of dance traditions; such training allows for a pluralism in dance values and a pluralism towards the normalization of movement. In turn, this allows for an appreciation of fitness for function that does not implicitly sanction questionable social values or rely solely on traditional choreographic approaches.

Such work raises an important question concerning novelty and the appreciation of fitness for function.[36] One can readily appreciate how dance movement appears fit for choreographic function if it is contextualized by a well-defined choreographic system. However, such appreciation is not as readily available when one views dance from an unfamiliar tradition or if it is produced by a contemporary choreographer who intentionally veers away from established dance traditions. I would like to conclude this essay by discussing a dance that illustrates how contemporary work can avoid the de-personalized normalization of movement that characterizes established dance traditions and demonstrates how fitness for function can be appreciated when one encounters a novel choreographic approach to movement.

5. *Babel (Words)* (2010)

Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui is a Belgian-Moroccan dancer and choreographer who began dancing at the age of fifteen, inspired by music videos and popular music. He entered a national dance competition at the age of nineteen and won with a solo that mixed vogueing, hip-hop, and African dance. Soon after, he enrolled in Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker's dance school in Brussels, and in 1997 joined the prestigious Belgian-based dance company *Les Ballets C de la B*. He

began presenting his own choreography in 2000 and his work has won critical acclaim around the globe.[37]

I believe that Cherkaoui's work charts an intriguing middle-ground between minimalist task dances and contemporary post-modern dances that make no attempt to develop a unified movement vocabulary. With regard to the latter, some contemporary choreographers present work that juxtaposes movement sequences drawn from various dance styles in order to explicitly draw attention to stylistic conventions. This is aesthetically significant since the observer is continually surprised as the dancers shift from one dance style to the next. Since the dancers in such pieces must be able to execute a wide range of movements, one can appreciate their virtuosity. However, the qualities of movement that they present do not coalesce into a distinct choreographic approach, and the appreciation of fitness for function is hindered.

Cherkaoui's work avoids the limitations of minimalism and pastiche since it presents an array of dance styles and approaches to dance but incorporates them into a coherent movement vocabulary. This seems to be because Cherkaoui's work often centers on the theme of cross-cultural dialogue, and because he often draws on the experience of dancers who present a range of dance styles, physiques, ages, and nationalities. This is explicit in *Sutra* (2008), which features Buddhist monks from the Shaolin temple in China and, more recently, in *Babel (Words)* (2010), which features an international cast.[38]

As the name implies, *Babel (Words)* draws on the myth of the tower of Babel that is presented in the *Bible*.[39] Briefly, the myth holds that human-kind built a massive tower in an effort to reach the heavens and, in response, God created many languages so that divisions and conflict would arise between the constituents of the newly formed language-groups.[40] Cherkaoui considers the idea of a universal human language and how language informs cultural diversity and perceptions of cultural difference. In *Babel (Words)*, the audience observes individuals from a range of cultures encountering otherness as they cooperatively execute complex dance sequences and create towering structures out of Antony Gormley's set pieces. They divide into factions, strive to exert power and control over one another, and search for reconciliation and common ground.

Cherkaoui creates a wide-ranging movement vocabulary that draws on his dancer's experience. The observer catches glimpses of modern dance movement, hip-hop, break-dancing, and kung-fu movement, along with aspects of flamenco and Orissi dance. The piece's movement vocabulary includes intricate hand-gesture phrases that are executed in unison by the entire cast; acrobatic sequences that are used to present human conflict; complex pedestrian movement sequences where the entire cast manipulates large set pieces; and fluid duets where partners deftly combine energies in order to draw attention to how cooperation and personal intimacy can be achieved.

The viewer begins to realize that the piece's general choreographic approach is grounded in the notions of gestural communication, physical cooperation, and aggression, which

are expressed in a wide array of movement sequences. The fitness of a particular movement sequence can be appreciated as one gains a sense of how it presents a general choreographic approach to the subject of the piece. For example, the complex hand-gesture phrases that are performed in unison by the entire cast are part and parcel of a movement vocabulary that repeatedly explores how the body can be used to communicate without the use of spoken language. Chekaoui consistently explores how the body can be used to express meaning without the assistance of spoken language as his choreography explores hand gestures and cooperative duets that utilize the entire body. For this reason, the viewer can appreciate how such movement sequences contribute to a general choreographic approach to the subject matter.

Cherkaoui's choreographic approach avoids the normativity entailed by an established dance style since it is a pluralist approach drawing on a wide range of dance traditions to create a unique choreographic approach. Cherkauoi takes hand *mudras* and kung-fu movements out of their traditional context and reconfigures them to help develop the piece's thematic content. For this reason, it is not appropriate for the viewer to view hip-hop movement sequences in *Babel (Words)* as fit for expressing the economy of movement that characterizes hip-hop as a style. Those sequences are used to create percussively rhythmic and sculptural tableaus that facilitate the ideas of cooperation and aggression that are often revisited in the piece. In this way, Cherkaoui draws on the aesthetic quality of hip-hop movement but re-contextualizes it so that it can contribute to the piece's overall choreographic approach.

I believe that this explains, in part, the fascination of Cherkaoui's choreography. The observer cannot rely on familiarity with a particular style of dance in order to contextualize the movement qualities presented by the dancers but must actively figure out how Cherkaoui re-contextualizes them in a way that allows for a novel appreciation of fitness for function. The dancer's hip-hop movement is not viewed as being fit for hip-hop as a style but as being fit for a pluralistic choreographic approach. The viewer gains a sense of the work's choreographic approach as movements and movement sequences are performed, repeated, and varied as the piece unfolds.

6. Conclusion

This essay demonstrates that appreciation of fitness is an important component of dance aesthetics. One can view dance movement as being fit for choreographic function as one appreciates how movement manifests a particular choreographic approach. The problems of translation and determinacy were addressed as well as the issue of choreographic dysfunctionality. A discussion of these issues demonstrated a key difference between appreciating the fitness of artifacts and the fitness of dance movement. The problem of normativity that is addressed by post-modern task dances was then discussed and this set up a consideration of a more refined account of appreciation of fitness for function that focuses on dances, such as *Babel* (*Words*), that draw on a

plurality of dance styles in order to advance a novel choreographic approach.[41]

Eric C. Mullis
mullise@queens.edu

Eric Mullis is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Queens University of Charlotte. He specializes in philosophy of the body, performance theory, and Confucian Ethics. He has recently published essays in *Dance Research Journal*, *Teaching Philosophy*, and *Journal of Aesthetic Education*.

Published January 17, 2014.

Endnotes

---

[1] Glen Parsons and Allen Carlson, *Functional Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[2] As will become clear, I view fitness for function as only one component of dance appreciation. Further, this essay does not attempt to define dance in terms of fitness for function for, as I will explain, appreciating fitness for function can arise when observing a wide range of somatic practices, including sports, gymnastics, martial arts, yoga, Tai Chi, and so on. For Carroll and Banes' article, see "Working and Dancing: A Response to Monroe Beardsley's 'What is Going on in a Dance?'" *Dance Research Journal* 15,1, (1982), 37-41.

[3] Nature aesthetics presents the possibility of appreciating fitness for function that does not rely on objects since one can appreciate how a particular organism's existence and behavior contribute to the overall balance of an ecosystem. When this occurs, the action is appreciated as fit for contributing to a dynamic and holistic environmental system. For more on this, see Allen Carlson, "On Aesthetically Appreciating Human Environments," *Philosophy and Geography* 4, 1, (2001), 9-24. Also see Glenn Parsons, "Natural Functions and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Inorganic Nature," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 44,1, (2004), 44-56.

[4] Parsons and Carlson (2008), pp. 90-100.

[5] Movement performed by disabled dancers hinders the general appreciation of fitness for dance movement since the disability limits the appreciation of the general kinetic potential of the human body. However, as I will explain, the movements of a disabled dancer may be incorporated into a work such that their movement helps contribute to a graceful economy of movement. For more on dance and disability, see A.C. Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), pp. 50-66.

[6] For more on the similarities between athletes and dancers, see David Best, "The Aesthetic in Sport," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 14:3 (1974), 202-203.

[7] *Ibid.*, 205-207. Also see David Carr, "Thought and Action in the Art of Dance," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 27, 4,

(1987), 351-352, and Parsons and Carlson (2008), pp. 62-89.

[8] For more on Bharata Natyam's history and approach to dance values, see Janet O'Shea, *At Home in the World: Bharat Natyam on the Global Stage* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007).

[9] For more on the balletic approach to dance values, see Susan Leigh Foster, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 76-88.

[10] It has been pointed out to me that one can ask whether the body or the movement that it performs is what one appreciates as fit for choreographic function. The question is based on a conceptual distinction that can readily be applied to art forms that rely on inert media for their creation but is difficult to apply to dance. One can conceptually distinguish the body of the dancer from the actions that it performs in the way that one can distinguish between paint and the act of painting, but this does not accord with the phenomenological experience of dance appreciation. Since the body is the medium of dance, the "the body executing movement" is the subject of one's appreciation. A follow-up question asks whether this lack of conceptual clarity undermines the appreciation of fitness in any way. That is, if we can't conceptually distinguish the body from the movement that it performs, then is our appreciation of fitness necessarily a muddled affair? I don't see why, since "the body executing movement" is a perceptual *gestalt* that is the foundation of dance creation and performance. I will continue to refer to "movement" as being fit for choreographic function but acknowledge that dance movement cannot be conceptually separated from the body that brings it forth.

[11] Parsons and Carlson (2008), p. 46.

[12] Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (London: Methuen and Company, 1979), pp. 40-41. Also see Parsons and Carlson (2008), pp. 45-49. Also see Gordon Graham, "Art and Architecture," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 29, 1, (1989), 248-257.

[13] Scruton (1979), p. 41.

[14] See Parsons and Carlson (2008), pp. 49-57.

[15] See Parsons and Carlson (2008), pp. 69-89 for their cognitivist "selected-effects" reply to the problem of indeterminacy.

[16] One can continue this line of thought by noting that the observer of dance movement can directly appreciate its aesthetic quality since she is an embodied being who has intimate experiential knowledge of the body. For more on this subject see G. Rizzolatti and L. Craighero, "The Mirror Neuron System," *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 27, (2004), 169-192 and V. Gallese et al., "Action Recognition in the Premotor Cortex," *Brain* 119, 2, (1996), 593-609. For applications of this topic to aesthetics, see Barbara Montero, "Proprioception as an Aesthetic Sense," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, 2, (2006), 299-317.

[17] Parsons and Carlson (2008), pp. 196-227.

[18] To frame this point differently, appreciating fitness for function is a cognitive affair since one must have a basic knowledge of the function that the object or action is intended to perform. Knowledge of a broader choreographic framework allows one to appreciate how individual movements are fit for realizing it. But we must note that appreciating dance also has non-cognitive components, such as the expression of emotion, that are valued by dance audiences.

[19] My position is consistent with the pluralist spirit of Parsons and Carlson's selected-effects approach to the function of art. For their account, see Parsons and Carlson (2008), pp. 216-222.

[20] See Parsons and Carlson (2008), pp. 107-110.

[21] For commentary on and video clips of *Loopdiver*, see http://www.troikaranch.org/vid-loopDiver.html# [accessed: 6/14/2013].

[22] Quoted in *What is Dance? Readings in Theory and Criticism*, eds., Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 333-334.

[23] A dance can draw attention to disability and audience expectations concerning able-bodied dancers in the manner of *Running out of Breath* by intentionally presenting dancers with disabilities. The contemporary choreographer Raimund Hoghe achieves this by choreographing movements on his body, which is characterized by a severely crooked spine and a large hump, and by contrasting it with movements executed by ballet dancers. A disabled dancer may not present the standard features of the human body but he or she may dance in a piece that presents movement qualities that are produced through the kinetic fusion of the human body with prosthetics and wheelchairs. AXIS dance company performs a wide range of work that presents movement articulated by dancers in wheelchairs. These pieces do not call attention to the lack of standard features, in the manner of Raimund Hoghe's work, since they present a unique movement economy that encourages audiences to consider how a novel context can render movement performed by disabled dancers as fit for function. For more on this approach, see Adam Benjamin, "Cabbages and Kings: Disability, Dance, and Some Timely Considerations" in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, eds., Carter and O'Shea (2010), pp. 111-121. For pictures and video of Hoghe's work, see http://www.raimundhoghe.com/ [accessed: 6/14/2013]. For more on AXIS, see http://axisdance.org/ [accessed 6/14/2013].

[24] See Carroll and Banes (1982). For an excellent interview-presentation by Yvonne Rainer and Sally Banes on the development of post-modern dance, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cn6HtsbThKc [accessed: 6/14/2013].

[25] Carroll and Banes (1982), p. 37.

[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

[27] Ballet movement and pedestrian movement can both be

viewed as fit for choreographic function but can it be argued that one is better as dance than the other? Strictly speaking, one cannot answer this by solely appealing to fitness for function since both kinds of dance allow for the appreciation of the global aesthetic property that is the subject of this essay. One has to consider the broader ends that such movements and choreographic approaches are intended to realize and then assess which ends one believes are more valuable. Hence, if one believes that dance should be a democratic art form that should avoid the elitism that characterizes much of the history of Western dance, then one will agree with the post-modern approach and conclude that task dances are better dances than, say, romantic ballets. To do so would be to go beyond fitness for choreographic function by accepting an essentialism in dance that holds that dance has a clear proper function. As discussed above, I am not prepared to argue for such an essentialism. I am grateful for the anonymous referee of this journal who pointed this issue out to me.

[28] See Bruce Nauman, Juan Dominguez, Xavier Le Roy, "Masculinity, Solipsism, Choreography," in Andre Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 19-44. Also see Sally Banes, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies Onstage* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

[29] For example, see Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

[30] Yvonne Ranier's *Trio A* (1966) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aggv4jybdaY [accessed 6/14/2013], and Trisha Brown's *Accumulation* (1971) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86I6icDKH3M [accessed 6/14/2013] are cases in point.

[31] Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), p. xxvii. Also see Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theatre 1962-1964* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

[32] For more on this process, see John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigree, 1934), pp. 63-65.

[33] Sunil Kothari, *Kathak: Indian Classical Dance Art* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1989) and Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (New York: Random House, 2010), pp. 3-50.

[34] Banes (1987), pp. xxix-xxxiii.

[35] See Copeland and Cohen (1983), pp. 225-306.

[36] For Parsons and Carlson's discussion of the appreciation of novel functional objects, see (2008), pp. 80-84.

[37] For more on Cherkaoui's work, see http://www.east-man.be/en/people/161/ [accessed 6/14/2013].

[38] For information and video on *Sutra*, see http://www.east-man.be/en/14/18/Sutra [accessed 6/14/2013]. For information and video on *Babel (Words)*, see

http://www.eastman.be/en/14/20/Babelwords [accessed 6/14/2013].

[39] For a review, see Judith Mackrell, "Babel," *The Guardian* (May 19, 2010), http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2010/may/19/babel-review [accessed: 6/14/2013].

[40] *Genesis* 11:1-9.

[41] I would like to thank Sybil Huskey, Caitlyn Swett, and the anonymous referee of this journal for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.