



## Rhizomatic America and Arborescent Culture: Towards a new philosophy of dance

Michael A. Peters

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## EDITORIAL

### **Rhizomatic America and Arborescent Culture: Towards a new philosophy of dance**

In botany a rhizome is an underground stem by means of which certain plants propagate themselves. Buds that form at the joints produce new shoots. Thus if a rhizome is cut by a cultivating tool it does not die, as would a root, but becomes several plants instead of one.

We're tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They've made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. Nothing is beautiful or loving or political aside from underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 15)

#### **Introduction to Rhizomes**

In the Introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) write about the concept of the book—an *anti-book*, for it is really an *assemblage*, a multiplicity that is unattributable, a *body without organs*. It is not a 'root-book' based on binary logic or linear unity that constitutes a radicle-fascicular. By reference to William Burroughs, James Joyce and Friedrich Nietzsche, they edge towards the concept of the rhizome in which, unlike tree or root, any point can be connected to any other and establishes a semiotic chain and collective assemblages of enunciation, connecting it to a whole micropolitics of the social field. There is no Chomskyan model of linguistics that specifies universals or an ideal speaker. There are no unities, only multiplicities which are rhizomatic. As the authors write: 'There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines.' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 8)

As against the classical or romantic book, there is no interiority of a subject. In this sense, citing Kleist, they suggest: 'The ideal for a book would be to lay everything out on a plane of exteriority of this kind, on a single page, the same sheet: lived events, historical determinations, concepts, individuals, groups, social formations' (p. 9). As Deleuze and Guattari write, 'the book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an aparallel evolution of the book and the world' (p. 11). They want to banish every trace of Hegel in the object of the book:

There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author).

Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel nor the world as its object nor one or several authors as its subject.

Formalizing the principles of the rhizome, they state:

1 and 2. Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be (p. 7).

3. Principle of multiplicity: it is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive, 'multiplicity', that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world (p. 8).

4. Principle of asignifying rupture: against the oversignifying breaks separating structures or cutting across a single structure (p. 9).

5 and 6: Principle of cartography and decalcomania: a rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model; it is a 'map and not a tracing' (p. 12)

Against the *arborescent* conception of knowledge based on totalizing, binary and dualistic principles, Deleuze and Guattari opposed the rhizome, which works with horizontal, non-hierarchical and trans-species connections and resists the organizational structure of the root-tree system that mistakenly charts a chronological causality and looks for value in the origin of things. In asserting this mobile organic structure they make use of biological mutualism and horizontal gene transfer as opposed to evolutionary theory, suggesting that 'Evolutionary schemas would no longer follow models of arborescent descent going from the least to the most differentiated, but instead a rhizome operating immediately in the heterogeneous and jumping from one already differentiated line to another' (p. 10).

A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines. You can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed. Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees (p. 9).

In botany the rhizome is a horizontal, underground plant stem capable of producing the shoot-and-root system of a new plant, allowing the parent plant to propagate asexually and to perennate (i.e. survive an annual unfavourable season) underground. The rhizomic approach to culture and history is to resist its narrativizing tendencies and to present them as a map, assemblages with no specific origin or genesis: a 'rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo' (p. 12). Deleuze and Guattari call the rhizome 'an image of thought' which can be used as a mode of knowledge and a model for society that does not rely on any structural or generative model of linguistics or psychoanalysis.

The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious. It fosters connections between fields, the removal of blockages on bodies without organs, the maximum opening of bodies without organs onto a plane of consistency ...

In linguistics as in psychoanalysis, its object is an unconscious that is itself representative, crystallized into codified complexes, laid out along a genetic axis and distributed within a syntagmatic structure (p. 12).

Arborescent thought and culture, while ancient and dominant, does not provide an accurate map of the brain, and neither the brain nor the memory is tree-like or root-based: as the authors argue, 'the tree has dominated Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy, but also gnosiology, theology, ontology, all of philosophy ... : the rootfoundation, *Grund, racine, fondement*' (p. 18). Deleuze and Guattari contrast the West, with its fields and forests, to the East, which entertains a special relation to the steppes and gardens: rhizomic tuber agriculture versus that dominated by trees; China versus the West.

Deleuze and Guattari maintain that 'America is a special case' (p. 19). While not immune to tree domination (and the search for genealogy), 'everything important that has happened or is happening takes the route of the American rhizome: the beatniks, the underground, bands and gangs, successive lateral offshoots in immediate connection with an outside' (p. 19). They continue: 'in America everything comes together, tree and channel, root and rhizome. There is no universal capitalism, there is no capitalism in itself, capitalism is at the crossroads of all kinds of formations, it is neocapitalism by nature.'

It is against this background of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic theory that I want to offer a few thoughts about dance and the new philosophy of dance in rhizomatic America, where the intersections of politics, dance, and pedagogy become evident. When I first conceived of this project I was working at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign), where there is a strong postmodern dance movement.<sup>1</sup> Knowledge, politics, learning need not grow in a tree structure from previously accepted ideas or follow established patterns. See the editorial and dialogue by Ellen E. Berry and Carol Siegel (2000) called 'Rhizomes, Newness and the Condition of Our Postmodernity' in the inaugural issue of the cultural studies journal *Rhizomes*, where they call for:

- creative and critical practices that generate alternative thinking by deliberately pursuing those alternatives embedded in any idea or system, particularly what a system omits or deems unworthy of serious scrutiny. Such thinking prevents any system from promoting itself as definitive and leaves it open to other ways of knowing and being.
- creative and critical practices that encourage us to unite ideas that seem most disparate or incompatible, thereby deliberately dislocating us from the known.
- creative and critical practices that train us actively to desire multiple differences rather than simply tolerating them or projecting them as objects of analysis. Such practices would be unpredictable, performative, and incomplete. By 'hailing' us in ways that permit entry into relation with the other even as we forego

full comprehension of him/her, they will thereby also extend our empathetic and ethical capacities.

In *The Aesthetics of Movement: Variation on Gilles Deleuze and Merce Cunningham*, Camilla Damkjaer (2005) argues that Deleuze, following in the footsteps of Nietzsche and Spinoza, attempts to put his philosophy into action, as a means of transgressing representation and in the movements of the *virtuel* and its actualization, to allow his concepts to be always in movement, never fixed but in a constant state of becoming.

### **Postmodern Dance: The History of a ‘Movement’**

Our ecstasy in dance comes from the possible gift of freedom, the exhilarating moment that this exposing of the bare energy can give us.

(Merce Cunningham, 1952)

Merce Cunningham (16 April 1919–26 July 2009) died at the age of 90 on 26 July 2009, with which ended a career of more than 60 years of engagement with avant-garde modernist themes. He started his career as a member of Martha Graham’s company in 1939, leaving after six years to form his own company<sup>2</sup> in collaboration with his partner, the avant-garde composer John Cage. Together they proposed that while music and dance may occur in the same time and space, they should be treated as separate to one another, with an emphasis on pure movement or ‘nonrepresentative dance’ which simply emphasizes movement—a philosophy that rejected the temporality of musical forms and narrative as conventional elements of dance composition to embrace chance and randomness (after the *I Ching*) in the composition of dance forms. In Cunningham’s choreography, dancers do not necessarily represent any historical figure, emotional situation or idea. In *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham*, Carolyn Brown (2007) tells the story of Cunningham’s experimental aesthetic, exemplified in 2003 in the conclusion to the company’s 50th anniversary season when, onstage, he rolled dice to determine the order of music, décor, costumes and lighting for the premiere of ‘Split Sides’. Brown, a founding member of Merce Cunningham’s dance company, explores in this dance memoir Cunningham’s technique, choreography and experimentation with compositional procedures influenced by Cage, and documents the early days of the company, which involved luminaries such as Robert Rauschenberg – who designed lighting, sets and costumes – Willem de Kooning and Rudolf Nureyev. In the literature there are many articles that emphasize the relationship with Cage, Rauschenberg, Duchamp, Kandinsky, and Jasper Johns under the description of ‘the aesthetic of indifference’. John Rockwell, in conversation with Merce Cunningham, introduced him as someone who created a whole new language of movement:

Abandoning the established idioms of modern dance and ballet, he invents a lexicon of gestures that range from the most routine of urban-inspired activities to startlingly original, virtuosic sequences. He has introduced chance operations and made indeterminacy an important compositional device. He has crafted a dialogic relationship between dance, music, and

visual decor where each is arrived at independently but performed simultaneously. He has ‘decentralized’ performance space, dismantling the notion (derived from Renaissance perspective and the proscenium stage) that the actions of dancers radiate from a central point. In a Merce Cunningham work, the position of one dancer on the stage is no more important than that of another. Moreover, he has displaced the linear, plot-driven narrative of traditional dance with a dynamic, non-hierarchical field in which cause and effect no longer govern the performers’ movements. (<http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/cunningham/index.html>)

Cunningham, influenced by Cage, was perhaps the first in modern dance to experiment with chance techniques and to make indeterminacy central in sequencing choreographic phrases. Cage, as one of the leading figures of the American post-avant-garde, used the *I Ching* as a tool of composition that freed sound from composer intention. Many of his works were experimental ‘happenings’; later, his work also began to engage themes about the power of technology to effect social change. Cage saw a link between *I Ching* divination and improvisation. He believed that any sound can be considered music, a philosophy tested through his 4’33” (‘four minutes, thirty-three seconds’), which presents music as an open process—an invitation to listen—rather than an attempt to realize a composer’s intentions, and ‘raises the question of whether organized sound is even a necessary condition on something’s being music (any more)’ (Kania, 2007). Many scholars see Cage’s (and Cunningham’s) work as the source of a postmodern aesthetics emphasizing decentered, collaborative, ‘environmental’, experimental performances based on contingency and fragmentation (Perloff, 2002).

From these beginnings one can imagine an emphasis on random, chance and nonlinear choreographies, a rejection of traditional narrative forms with a displacement of plot structure, an experimental mix of different genres including multimedia and image-based dance, spontaneous and improvisational movement and ironic self-referencing and theatricality. Postmodern dance, like many kindred movements, began as an attempt to move beyond traditional genres, often focusing on the vernacular and the body’s movement contextualized as dance or performance. In the early 1960s the Judson Dance Theatre became a centre of innovation, influenced by the dance compositions of Robert Dunn, who had studied with Cage and who had initiated the view that dance can be anything—a philosophy that drew attention to everyday movement and favoured alternative spaces for performance. The first group including Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Fred Herko, Alex and Deborah Hay, Yvonne Rainer, Elaine Summers, William Davis, and Ruth Emerson disbanded in 1964. Twyla Tharp, Rudy Perez and Meredith Monk reestablished the theatre in the 1970s (Banes, 1993, 2003). As Banes (1993, p. xv) comments, there was a certain serendipity in play with regard to dance events in Greenwich Village:

In many ways the blossoming of the Judson Dance Theater as a center for avant-garde activity in dance was a fortuitous occurrence. Robert Dunn offered his class; a number of young dancers who were ready and willing to experiment at a professional level came to the class, where they formed a rich medium for some of Dunn’s ideas, as well as their own. There were

models among older choreographers in two senses: the older avant-garde of the 1950s, like Merce Cunningham, James Waring, Paul Taylor, Aileen Passloff, Beverly Schmidt, and Merle Marsicano, provided a precedent for breaking with the modern dance “academy,” and the academy itself provided the methods, techniques, and definitions that were once avant-garde but now served as the givens of the art—there to be sampled, borrowed, criticized, subverted. Finally, the church was there for the asking: a large space to dance in, with performance and rehearsal facilities free of charge.

Banes argues that experiment in dance not only was confluent with avant-garde developments in art and music, but also reflected the fascination at the time with philosophies of Zen Buddhism, existentialism and phenomenology that focused on the everyday, on questions of identity and on the new desiderata concerning the body.

In this context we might entertain Brian Massumi’s (2000) statement:

Once again it’s all about the openness of situations and how we can live that openness. And you have to remember that the way we live it is always entirely embodied, and that is never entirely personal — it’s never all contained in our emotions and conscious thoughts. That’s a way of saying it’s not just about us, in isolation. In affect, we are never alone. That’s because affects in Spinoza’s definition are basically ways of connecting, to others and to other situations. They are our angle of participation in processes larger than ourselves. With intensified affect comes a stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life—a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places.

## Notes

1. See <http://www.dance.uiuc.edu/about-us/welcome>. See also Gilway (2014), Bussey (2011) and Robinson (2013) on the political philosophy of Deleuze.
2. See <http://www.merce.org/> and see the complete chronology at <http://www.merce.org/about/chronology.php>

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Michael A. Peters