

The Dance-Ephemeral: With Michel Serres

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Short, momentary, temporary, transient, precarious, and labile are adjectives that the current post-pandemic, ecological, climatic, war, political, economic, and social contingencies have accustomed us to employ almost compulsively and indiscriminately by now, and that, beyond everything, are synonyms inter-implicit with and in the ephemerality, which deserves reconsideration in its literalness as *ep them éra* (for a day), that can take place through a sort of its “double”, not quite mainstream but nonetheless suggestive and perhaps even effective, such as the artistic one of dance. Therefore, it is worth pausing to try and see which streaks/implications of the ephemerality itself the dance-ephemeral conveys and/or produces: the neuralgic concretions that the latter seems to me to involve and permeate, in a perspective of re-cognition/re-discovery/awareness, are time, space and the body, evidently inter-implicated.

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The Ephemerality and Its *Double*: The Dance

Short, momentary, temporary, transient, precarious, and labile are adjectives that current post-pandemic, ecological, climatic, war, political, economic, and social contingencies have accustomed us to employ now almost compulsively and indiscriminately to talk about the least as well as the greatest systems.

While establishing once and for all whether it is the function that creates the organ or whether it is the organ that creates the function remains all in all a woolly question, it is possible, however, to at least attempt to grasp and focus on the inter-implicative and, so to speak, agglutinative relational dimension of the phenomenon.

That is, to put it more explicitly: outside the minefield of etiological investigations, attention turns to the overall inter-implication and agglutination of the *short, momentary, temporary, transient, precarious, labile*, synonyms as it were in turn inter-implicated with and in the ephemerality, which, unfortunately, because of precisely this renewed popularity, ends up being *victimized* by rhetoric and distortions that are celebratory, absolutizing, or on the other hand demonizing, consoling, exorcizing, escapist; whereas, in my opinion, it deserves reconsideration in its literalness as *ep them éra* (for a day), which can take place through a kind of its *double*, suggestive, and eloquent, as is the dance.

If it is quite intuitive and therefore perhaps does not require many words that the ephemerality is a condition of possibility, the soul and other face of dance itself (it would not be such if it were fixed or perfectly reversible and repeatable) as well as of many other very ancient and also very recent artistic expressions (it is before everyone’s eyes the extraordinary proliferation, in recent decades, of ephemeral art forms) (Gallo & Simonicca, 2016), it is instead worth pausing a little longer to try to see what streaks and implications of the ephemerality

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itself the ephemerality-dance conveys and produces.

The neuralgic concretions that, in a perspective of re-recognition, re-discovery, evocation, and awareness, dance seems to me to permeate, and impact are, in close mutual inter-implication, time (Battaglia, 2019b; Napoli, 2020), space (Mazzaglia, 2012; Battaglia, 2019a), and the body (Di Bernardi, 2012; Roseau, 2013). This permeation and impact take place because of and within a process of slippage from the dimension of being to that of making-being and possibility, as well as because of and within a process of dispersion, subtraction, deprivation and negation-dis-appearance, de-specialization, in-utility (i.e., the prefixal space of *dis-*, *de-*, and *in-*), which specifically means that dance-ephemerality is evanescent, in-permanent, not useful, does not exist (neither before nor after), and happens here and now; but, precisely in the prefixal space, it evokes and invokes, in a dynamic tension between oblivion and recognition.

From Thought to Dance: Transparencies

I find effective expressions and declinations of these ideas the image of the semaphore-dancer and the statement that the more I dance, the less I am me presented by Michel Serres in *Genesis* (Serres, 1982, p. 39).

It is worth recalling the entire passage in question.

Dance is to the body proper what exercise of thought is to the subject known as I. The more I dance, the less I am me. If I dance something, I am that something or I signify it. When I dance, I am only the blank body of the sign. The sign is a transparency that tends toward its designation. The dancer, like the thinker, is an arrow pointing elsewhere. He shows something else, he makes it exist, he makes an absent world descend into presence. He must thus himself be absent. The body of the dancer is the body of the possible, blank, naked, nonexistent. This dislocation is polysemy come down into the limbs, and these far-flung limbs are an alphabet, a series of scales. The body becomes, at best, undetermined, as undifferentiated as a hand, a digit, a letter, a numeral. The dancer is a semaphore. And semaphore is nothing if it transmits no signal. Have you at times heard language beyond earshot of any specific meaning? Have you heard the noise of thinking, outside individual thoughts? Have you heard naked language, naked thoughts, as faculties?

The semaphore dancer has given himself a faculty-body, a pure possibility of doing. (Serres, 1982, pp. 39-40)

In order to grasp the meaning of the message Serres throws out here, it is necessary to keep in mind that inter-implicit with the “the more I dance the less I am me” is the “the more I think the less I am me”, which is nothing more than a reformulation, with distancing intent, of the Cartesian “I think therefore I am me” which precisely becomes “the more I think the less I am me” and slips into the “the more I dance the less I am me”. The underlying idea is that, precisely anti-Cartesian, of thinking as an intentional exit from the subject-*ego* in order to blend bodily with the world, follow its intrinsic bifurcations and inventive turns, gather its creative gestures and potentialities, and ultimately become what one thinks (Serres, 2015, p. 21).

Substantialist, fixist, exceptionalist, exclusive, exclusivist, and dualist rational subjectivity and the so-called autarkic identity are thus fluidized in intentional tension, possibility, processualism, exuberance, relationality, encounter, and metamorphosis. The subject of thought recovers the literal meaning of *sub-jectum*, i.e., that which is *thrown under* everything, so much so that “to think, it is enough for me, subject, to throw myself under”¹, as Serres asserts in *Le Gaucher boiteux* (Serres, 2015, p. 20), in which, effectively availing himself of autobiographical reference, he vividly sketches the *ego* of this anti-Cartesian *cogito*.

No one taught me to swim, but as a child I lived by the river and in the river, in its currents, its floods and its weirs; heavy, turned to stone, my body knew how gravels were born; turbulent, how whirlwinds are formed; light, alive and

¹ Translation is mine.

quivering, how carp and gobies are born and move [...]. The Garonne was not a river for me, but a person, fearsome woman, adored teacher, irreplaceable companion, mother, daughter, sister, friend. (Serres, 2015, pp. 20-21)².

To then arrive at the statement that the construction of identity proceeds not only from the human environment but also, perhaps above all, from rocks, waters, and even plants and animals. (Serres, 2015, p. 21).

Thus, there is a thinking that is to immerse oneself in the cosmic and vital dynamism of the world, to go through the metamorphosis of its forms, to adhere to its temporal duration, to dwell in it and act with it, to adopt its gesture of creation (Serres, 2015, p. 20) and to enter into its Great Story, the “common trunk” of universal and human history, made, as such, of contingent bifurcations, circumstances, and unpredictable turns, one of which is the human (Serres, 2017). And there is a subject of thought that is that which is thrown under and which, in order to think, has precisely to do nothing more than throwing itself under everything.

What emerges, then, is an *ego cogito* in which the *ego*, at the moment it immerses itself in the world and its Great Story, that is, thinks, metamorphoses into that which it thinks (Serres, 2015, p. 21), in which identity is not the identical (Serres, 2001; 2003; 2021) but the accumulation of otherness and the hybrid fruit of human (parental relations etc.) and non-human factors (plants, animals, waters, rocks etc.); and in which the *cogito* is originally *co-acting*. A verb which, as Serres notes, designates the shepherd’s action of pushing a herd of rams, which go everywhere and become agitated, with the difficulty of keeping them at bay, especially if another herd is added. Co-acting is thus precisely the strenuous dealing with multiplicity (Serres, 2014, p. 366); but, by extension and in a general sense, it is also, in my view, the adherence to, immersion in, and collaboration with the metamorphic dynamics and teeming creative potential of the universe.

The more I think the less I am me thus consists in a remembering of what the *cogito ergo sum* has forgotten, that is, the worldly and vital, religious (*reli è*) process—in the literal sense of connected, from the Latin *religare* from which precisely *religio* (Serres, 2019; Rignani, 2022)—of metamorphosis, the universe, life, the body.

In other words, it consists in remembering the powerful and inventive metamorphic link and flow that runs and bifurcates from the inert to the living and from the living to images, ideas, and signs. The *ego cogito*, which, forgetting the world, poses itself as exceptional, unique, and exclusive, comes to be disavowed and exauthorized by the remembrance of the expanding universe with its inventiveness (Serres, 2015, p. 24, pp. 9-10), that is, precisely by thought as immersion in its Great Story, whose powerful dynamism shows us how to invent (p. 10). Thinking, then, is thinking the world (and) like the world (p. 10), becoming toti-potent and incandescent of thought (p. 25) since precisely thought itself vanishes in its determinations (Serres, 1982, p. 40).

Taking this reasoning to its extreme consequences, Serres goes so far as to say that I think therefore I am no matter who or what (tree, river, fire, etc.), that is, I am *Nobody*, the homologue of the Homeric Nobody, the white as the sum of all colors, the incandescent, the possible, a wild card, a pure capacity (Serres, 1982).

It is also true for dance: “the more I dance, the more I am naked, absent” (Serres, 1982, p. 39); the dancer is an arrow, he makes see without making himself see, he makes exist; his body is white, possible, de-differentiated, signifies, evokes, is disjointed in the sense that each member is able to move in all directions, and therefore is capable of all senses, all signs, and all designations.

Just as the thinking subject does not call attention to itself, so the dancing body does not draw gazes to itself, since the purpose of both is to point to a “center” eccentric to itself. The dancer, in fact, is nothing in order to make one see everything possible; the possible temporal through rhythm and the possible present and absent in

² Translation is mine.

space, just like the thinker, who is nobody to be nothing more than attention to novelty and expectation of happenings and occurrences.

Chrono-/Choro-/Somato-Phany

Similarly to thought, dance, then, as Serres (1982, p. 47) says, leaves space and gives way; as ephemerality, it opens to the totality of possibilities; it conveys the “signs” of the world by pointing to the human’s continuity with it; and, at the same time, it makes possible the recognition of the body’s potentialities.

If, in the Serresian vision, *zero* is a neutral element, an almost null factor that nevertheless makes possible the smooth operation of an operation, a white *x* that removes fixity in one position and opens toti-potentially to all (Serres, 1987, pp. 89-90), the dance, with its transparency that fluidizes definitions, elides specializations, opens up the temporal and spatial possible, and thus deactivates, as mentioned, the ontology of being by (re)activating that of the possible, of capacity, and of relation, appears, as it were, as the stand-in for *zero/x* itself.

And, as such, what it intrinsically involves and permeates are precisely, in their mutual inter-implication, time, space, and body.

Its relation to and impact with and on time is of an elasticity bordering on the oxymoronic: as a transparent ephemeral, it contextually presupposes it (there is no ephemerality if there is no time), brackets it (it makes as if there is no before and after), and shows it through rhythm, which is almost inherent in it.

It can be said, on the whole, then, that dance is a kind of *chrono-phany*, in that it gives way and makes one discover time in its multidimensional polymorphism: the instant, absolute, but also transient and all in all unrepeatable (ephemeral) (it is almost impossible, in fact, for the same dance step to be reproduced identically each time), within the irreversible temporal flow, as well as the ordered and repeatable succession (rhythm).

And it can also be said to be a *choro-phany*, that is, a manifestation and indication of space, in that, analogous and related to its relation to time, dance entertains a permeating and impactful relation to space itself, evoking in the latter, as Serres asserts, all possible present and absent. If, in fact, it necessarily reckons with the metric Euclidean space in which the dancer is placed, nevertheless it does not run through it, but rather interrupts it, shatters it, recreates it, evokes, and topologically invokes a surrounding, relations of proximity and continuity; as Serres says, it makes one see all the possible present and absent in space.

Chrono-phany and *choro-phany* then, dance is also, above all and altogether *somato-phany*. The Serresian image of the semaphore-dancer suggests this: if the dancer is an arrow toward something, a bearer of signs that is, of transparencies that go toward a designation, he himself must be transparent and absent, and therefore his body is perforce white, *tabula rasa*, devoid of qualities, body of the possible, pure possibility of doing (Serres, 1982, p. 40), and support of all possible senses.

It is therefore precisely in and for dance that the body emerges in this toti-potentiality, transparency, and incandescence (Rignani, 2018): it unveils it and, as it were, invents it by launching it toward improbable, unexpected, and new positions, movements, twists, tensions, jumps, and gestures, that is, toward a repertoire of conducts mostly useless to the usual performances (walking, running, etc.) and vital functions, but likely useful in case of extraordinary or dangerous events (Serres, 2003).

In other words, dance points to and catalyzes the capacity of the body, to be understood in the terms of de-specialization, in-definition, adaptability, metamorphosis, surplus, extendibility, displaceability, and multi-directionality. And in so doing, it fosters the recognition of the body itself in the constellation of dynamism,

virtuality, possibility, and power the world by inserting itself into the dance of its *m danges* and continuing it inventively (Rignani, 2016).

But this, together with all that has been said so far, induces a series of (conclusive) observations and reflections. In dance, bearing in mind also and notably Serresian theoretical inputs, one grasps an extreme tension between what I have called the prefixed space, designated, and drawn by the *dis-*, the *de-* and the *in-*, and the *-phany* in its mutually inter-implicated dimensions (the temporal, the spatial, and the bodily). And contextually, it is noted that this same tension constitutes a virtuous dynamism between absence and presence, between oblivion and recognition, and, ultimately, between death and life. If dancing (and thinking), as Serres (1982) says, is nothing but surrendering place and step, “virtue” lies precisely in the *is nothing but*, in *place* and *step*.

The *nothing but* expresses the prefixed space, the incandescence, and transparency, and with that the openness to the totality of possibilities, which is precisely constituted by *place* and *step*. Hence absence (dance is only arrow, it is not), oblivion (dance has no memory and leaves no trace according to Serres), and ephemerality (dance has no before or after) ultimately emerge as the conditions of possibility of presence, recognition and, at the limit, life.

As presence, recognition, life (whose subjective genitives are precisely time, space, and the body), absence, oblivion, and ephemerality, dance makes one discover time in its multidimensionality; it points to the qualities of space; it makes one recognize the body in its toti-potentiality and in its continuity, inventive relationality, co-belonging with the world (being a body, the anthropopoietic value of the body grounded in relationship); it evokes, in its ephemerality and disappearance, life, in the sense that it makes one be, but also that it expresses, as it were, existential becoming as mortal vitality and vital mortality.

But then, if the virtuous dynamism between prefixed space and *-phany* conveyed by dance makes one precisely see and recognize the relational toti-potentiality of the body and thus of the human in co-partnership with the world in a possible and multidimensional time-spatiality, it is almost inevitable to ask what is left of dance (and of course also of thought).

It seems to me that one answer lies in the identification of the consistence of ephemeral dance itself (with its constellation of the brief, momentary, transient, precarious, labile), of ephemeral art in general and of thought (understood in the sense mentioned above) in transparency and potential relational intentionality as, so to speak, alternative ontological, existential, and ethical models for the human and/with/in the world, for one should not forget Serres’ warning that we do not understand unless we enter the dance of the *m danges* of the world precisely (Serres, 1999).

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