

# Queer Choreography

## Tags

**#queerness**

**#choreography**

**#movement ontology**

**#modernism**

**#disorientation**

**#sexuality**

Shame is an innate auxiliary affect and a specific inhibitor of continuing interest and enjoyment... The innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest and joy. Hence, any barrier for further exploration which partially reduces interest or the smile of enjoyment will activate the lowering of the head and eyes in shame and reduce further exploration or self-exposure powered by excitement or joy. Such a barrier might be because (...) one wishes to look at or commune with another person but suddenly cannot because he is strange, or one expected him to be familiar but he suddenly appears unfamiliar (...) Once shame has been activated, the original excitement or joy may be increased once again and inhibit the shame or the shame may further inhibit and reduce excitement and joy. Thus a child may suddenly break into an unashamed stare, or he may turn away completely from the stranger who evokes shyness.  
(Tomkins 1995:135)

The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining... Moreover, this embodying is a repeated process. And one might construe repetition as precisely that which undermines the conceit of voluntarist mastery designated by the subject of language.  
(Butler 1993:176)

“Queer dance, after the live act, does not just expire. The ephemeral does not equal unmateriality. It is more nearly about another understanding of what matters. It matters to get lost in dance or to use dance to get lost: lost from the evidentiary logic of heterosexuality.”  
(Muñoz 2019: 81)

The entanglements between dance, choreography and queerness have received insufficient attention in, both, queer theory and sexuality studies, and (critical) dance studies (Desmond 2001). If dance is approached as “embodied social practice” (Bollen 2001) that sets kinesthetic, moving and affective corporeality at the center of its interest, being the subject, the medium, and object of dance’s practice, and as such is always embedded in specific spatio-temporal conjunctions and social contexts, within which its performative force enacts, materializes and articulates meanings, relationships and worlds, as being

always in process and relational, then, we can say that dance and choreography can even represent a privileged arena for interrogating, problematizing, rearticulating and experimenting with the coercive, repetitive and normative, yet undecidable and open materializations of bodily boundaries and surfaces (Butler 1991, 1993), identity, gender and sexuality which are the major interest of queer theory and politics: "Dance provides a dense and fecund field for investigating how sexualities are inscribed, learned, rendered, and continually resignified through bodily actions. Analyzing dance can help us understand how sexuality is literally inhabited, embodied, and experienced." (Desmond 2001: 4)

The necessity of bringing dance, choreography and queerness into joint research and experimental projects is further made more urgent if we take into consideration Randy Martins's argument that dance is a "reflexive mobilization of the body [...] a social process that foregrounds the very means through which bodies gather" (Martin 1998:7) and are being mobilised; hence a corporeal practice that by its own reflexivity either reproduces or ruptures the habituated bodily forms of being and understanding the world, and opens lines of flight for different becomings and transformations of movement, gesture, affect, perception, sensation, awareness and embodied knowledge. One cannot fail to recognize some of the major imperatives of and historical heritage left by queer embodied practices and theory and politics, that have established a critical relation with the gendered and sexual embodiment of subjectivity whereby normative embodiment has been subjected to restless deconstruction and subversion, demystified as regulatory norm and disciplinary apparatus of normalisation, ironised as a contingent and socially constructed fiction of the heteronormative choreography of society, and mobilized towards never fully anticipated horizons of proliferation of multiple and unstable gender and sexual positioning, which is to say bodily morphologies and materializations, beyond the exclusionary binary system and its underlying heterosexist assumptions. Queer gestures, movements, readings, everyday social performatives, choreographies and dances are precisely *counterfetishes* "elucidating the real condition of possibility of our desires and gender," (Muñoz 2019: 79). Such reflexively mobilizes the body and its histories, of how our body surfaces have been impressed, the histories of those impressions of how those bodies come to matter and continue to matter with twists, turns, foldings, and rearticulations, instead of being commodified fetishes of displacement, concealment, abstraction and illusion as the magic qualities of self-sustained dancing objects in Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism. While at the same time disclosing "a future being within the present that is both a utopian kernel and an anticipatory illumination. It is a being in, toward, and for futurity." (ibid: 91)

This position would also take into consideration Lepecki's critique of the dance's and Modernity's ontology of movement and motility. As Lepecki argues:

"choreography comes into being as a technology particularly able to answer and foster modernity's melancholic project (...) This perception suggests for critical dance studies that Western theatrical dance (...) must be theoretically approached not just as a kinetic project but as an affective one. An affective project profoundly marked by the infusion of the kinetic at the core of subjectivity generating continuous complaints of dance always going away, irremediably bound to its own loss, of never quite being there at the fleeting moment when it visibly moves." (Lepecki 2006 :124)

Although rather oblique at first sight, the question of queerness necessarily is brought into view in relation to Modernity's and hence dance's privilege of movement, mobility and forwardness, especially if one takes into consideration the exclusion of queers from the margins of Modern Western's history of so-called progress, its backward looking turn, and the accompanying affects that can be marked as queer affects of stuckness, infantilism, and backwardness, as argued by Heather Love (2007). The idea of modernity – with its suggestions of progress, rationality, and technological advance – is intimately bound up with backwardness. The association of progress with regress is a function not only of the failure of so many of modernity's key projects but also of the reliance of the concept of modernity on excluded, denigrated, or superseded others (...). Whether considered as throwbacks to an earlier stage of human development or as children who refuse to grow up, queers have been seen across the twentieth century as a backward race. Perverse, immature, sterile, and melancholic: even when they provoke fears about the future they somehow recall the past." (Love 2007: 6) In this context, one should further take into account queerness's dismantling of reproductive futurism (Edelman, 2004) of heteronormativity and its mobilization of the abjected status of queer sex in order to shatter the identity imaginaries and the phallographic subject, whose metaphysics of presence is threatened to be lost and object of melancholic investment in Modernity.

To this aesthetic ideology of dance's relation to modernity one should inevitably add the deeply ingrained heteronormative and masculinist focal point and morphologies (hasn't modernity been always constitutively intertwined with a certain historical vision and aspirations of white capitalist masculinity?) that have structured the major traditions of dance-theatre, while eschewing alternative and marginalized sexualities (Burt 1995, 2001). Veiled as alleged universality and pure interest of human movement, emotions and sensuality, the practice of modern dance as Foster (2001) has argued, has its own closet, which, on one hand, has protected dancers and choreographers from the projected sexual fantasies onto dancers' bodies, and purged the historically imaginary of the degraded, devalued and stigmatized effeminacy embodied in theatricality, performance and staged appearances (Jones 2020, Halperin 2010). "In order to justify their art, they effectively tapped the same racist and colonialist impulses that motivated the descriptions of dance-as-sex that Ellis relied on for his research. Unlike African dances(...) Duncan's dances embodied civilization -noble, refined, classical. Unlike the actual dances of Asia and the Pacific, whose ritual frenzy belied their sexual investment, St. Denis's dances gestured toward a higher spiritual quest." (Foster 2001: 159)

The intertwining of choreography, dance and queerness comes further into view if one considers sexuality not only in terms of object choice and intimate sexual practices, but rather in terms of affects/emotions, hence movement, orientation, direction, exploration, spatiality, embodied behavior, relationality, and exposure towards other bodies and the world. The quote at the beginning of this essay by Silvan Tomkins on the affect of shame is crowded with indexes of obstructed, interrupted, broken, halted, and withdrawn movements and orientation towards the world, towards others, and of the bodily practices of engagement and exploration of different bodily projects, all of which necessarily issue from the affective orientations and towardness of interest and joy. Movement-towards, whereby a body is pushed forward into the horizon of others and the risky terrain of the in-common and relationality, is turned backward, folded inwards, enclosed into the confines of the self, as the prison house of identity and the self-reflection, self-introspection occasioned by the blush of shame. Recent debates in queer theory and queer

activism (Halperin and Traub 2009) stage queerness as socially tied to those whose identity sense-making has been centred and tuned around the experience of shame and, consequently, to the practices of performativity as strategies “for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related fact of stigma” (Sedgwick 2003: 61). Sedgwick further emphasizes that this self-positioning in relation to shame is not to be conceived as an attachment to securely provided essences, but rather as “the place where the question of identity arises most originally and most relationally,” and further on emphasizes the transformational capacities that can be derived from the double structure of performativity – self-absorption and theatricality- and consequently made available for the “work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, transformation, affective and symbolic loading and deformation(...) all too potent for the work of purgation and deontological closure” (ibid: 63). Sedgwick marks these potentials for identity-play generated by the double movement of absorption and identity, and enclosure and theatricality as the opening towards the outside, the audience, which introduces a gap in the felicity of the performative act and produces possibilities for disidentification and transfiguration.

The childhood, and the lives in general, of many queer people is marked by the shaming heil and interpellation occasioned by one’s queer kinaesthesia and embodied behaviour, and the failure by queer effeminate boys to fully embody masculine bodily codes. These kinaesthetic codes represent the masculine bodily hexis (Bourdieu 1977) that could provisionally include rapid travel across the space, stiff torso, arms held rigidly, clenched fists, images of brute strength, musculature, limbs arresting abruptly yet swelled with tension, uprightness and clarity of purpose, erect, phallic and nonorganic movement style, as well as the abjection of excessiveness of gesture and mannerism, “elbows akimbo, fingers flaring, shoulders hunched forward” (Gere 2001), angled arm and broken wrists, swish flow of the hips or the soft, fluid torso, flexible, curved, undulated, touched bodily movements as choreographed behaviours enacting notions associated with the “poofter”, the “sissy”, or the degraded femininity. This inconclusive list of rules governing the gendered and sexualized language and grammar of the body could be extended on and on, and as the source of queer shame they testify to the “dynamic embodiment of gender, the set of physicalizations we perform every day of our lives, as a constant ongoing choreography: the dance through which we define ourselves and society defines us.” (ibid.:360)

But these failures in the stylized bodily citational practices that the normative gender performative is, these stumbling in performing the language of bodily gestures, while being simultaneously the source of queer shame and interiorized identity absorption, as Sedgwick has thought us, can also become the material for defiant and recalcitrant rearticulation, for turning inside-out the folded - in shaming look coming from the policing other, through the open futurity of the performative itself, through the instability of the citational and iterative practice of embodied performance (Butler 1993). These failures can be transformed into a defiant, dramatized extroversion enacted into a performance/event, a dance that removes “the blush from its terminal place as the betraying blazon of a ruptured narcissistic circuit, and instead put it into circulation” (Sedgwick 2003:41), establishing a cathected, even eroticised relation with the form of life deemed as immoral, alien, monstrous and shaming. These kinaesthetic failures can become the source of queer art of failure (Halberstam 2011, Dimitrov 2014), transfigured into a dance as a display of one’s body and mobilizer of pleasure in looking at queer bodies; thus while publicly staging and enacting queer desires and identifications on the dance floor or the theatre stage, they can also

become elicitation of desire, the desirability of queer bodies, pleasures, sensuality, affects, movements and worlds. The swish of the hips, the free fluttering of fingers can thus become a FUCK YOU, without the penetrating stiff middle finger, a new queer movement style, queer spatial negotiation, with queer relational positioning, twisted and resistant kinesthetic renderings, kinesthetic speech acts, that open different possibilities, beyond the grids of intelligibility, of what a body can do and what one does with one's body. As Bollen puts it beautifully, the queer art of failure we talk about can bring to light a queer kinesthesia as the "disruption of naturalized, gender-appropriate action...the performance of queer kinesthesia would open a rift-the rift that the naturalizing forces of heteronormative subject formation attempt to foreclose-between bodily matter and bodily action, between morphology and kinesthesia, between what a body is and what a body does. (Bollen 2001: 304)

If as we've said before, sexuality and gendered embodiment involve more than sexual object choice and exchange of pleasure and sensuality in the private sphere of the bedroom, we should approach queerness and queer choreographies as a world building project of spatial shape shifting. Being sexually orientated and inhabiting a body involves orientation towards certain pathways and moving in certain directions, touching, manipulating, and being affected in specific ways by available objects in the surround, approaching some others, at the expense of other others, foreclosed and excluded. The directions taken, shape the space we inhabit, the space itself becoming contoured and formed as an accumulation of histories of the actions taken, while simultaneously, shaping the social space, the actions and directions impress on, surface and shape the bodies we inhabit. Thus, what is normatively organized space, and the objects it makes available, in reach, and those out of reach, conceal, mystify and take out of site the histories of bodily actions, reiterated over time, which produce the kinesthetic sphere and reach, which is to say the bodily horizons and socially choreographed space of action. To be in line, to (re)orient and hold straight one's body involves aligning one's body with the spatial lines which are formed and drawn as a result of a normatively regulated history of movements and bodily actions. To sink in space, to walk firmly, and feel the comfort of being cushioned by the ground implies adjusting one's body, one's movements and orientations to the pathways already paved by others' bodies. To smile, to laugh, to enjoy, to find comfort, to feel safe in the presence and gathering of objects, to turn towards, to notice, have in reach, and reach with attention towards certain objects implies having your body and affective dispositions aligned, have them lined up, with the edges already formed by histories of handling, manipulation and touch of those certain objects, and to have a body whose surface, morphology and affectability is already choreographed in accordance to the normative and majoritarian notations. To have a normatively orientated body, a straight body, is to shape the space as a field of possible actions in accordance to the actions already made possible, to follow and inhabit the horizon of bodies and bodies-in-relation deemed as normal, as right bodies and relations, and through these very performative tendencies to effect, to bring into existence, to materialize as what comes to matter the very body your tending with. Hence, instead of being the origin, the source, the agent and substance from which those tendencies spring forth, your body and your tendencies become the effect of that very same "'tending toward.' Sexual orientations are also performative: in directing one's desire toward certain others and not other others, bodies in turn acquire their shape." (Ahmed 2006: 86)

As Sara Ahmed rightly points out, Queer, etymologically is a spatial term, signifying a twist, therefore a twisted sexuality that doesn't follow a straight line, a sexuality that is bent and crooked. And very often, queer bodies have the experience of disorientation in the world, while simultaneously bringing disorientation by their very presence amongst other bodies. This disorientation involves the "becoming oblique of the world, a becoming that is at once interior and exterior." (ibid: 162) With their twisted, bent and oblique relation with the world, their wayward desires and being out of line in relation to the normative spaces they inhabit and with their normative bodies inhabited by those very social spaces, their odd facing the world and directing toward it, their discomfort in the presence of the gathered objects that gather normative histories, and failure to laugh at jokes one is expected to laugh, shaped by the contingency of coming into contact with bodies and objects that have extended and ecologically formed their bodies as disoriented bodies, Ahmed argues that "the queer sexual disorientation slides quickly into social disorientation, as a disorientation in how things are arranged. The effects are indeed uncanny: what is familiar, what is passed over in the veil of its familiarity, becomes rather strange." (ibid: 162)

The queer disorientation can thus become a sign of and a source for collectively sustaining and inventing queer choreographies that could make possible alternative projects of freedom. It can offer a choreographed manner of being-in-the-world and being-with-other-bodies that refuse to straighten up, to line up, to habituate and reproduce. and fulfil our desires for new bodily projects with others, as a utopian longing for the then and there, for the potential ingrained in performativity, for an alternative future of becoming with others. Queer disorientation involves not the individual experience of single bodies, but incorporates a whole complex of relations, institutions, images, words, technologies, biocodes, pharmaceutical chemicals, animals, spaces, histories, kinship structures, orientations and approaches to the world, all of which a body inhabits and is inhabited and impressed by, even genetically modified by. Given this, queer choreography would set and compose bodies as thresholds of intersections, points of contacts and stations of crossing vectors of relationality, reverberations of multiple temporalities, matters of plasticity and mutability, and further pursue the rearrangement of multiple spatio-temporal coordinates, redefining the directions of actions while twisting movement and towardness.

The queer choreography I am talking about can be found and composed both on the stage and in the street, in the quotidian, the everyday and the theatre, in the high art dance world and the clubbing scene and disco podiums, in galleries and cabarets, the dark atmosphere of the proscenium and the dark rooms in gay bars, the independent cultural spaces and the trashiest drag bars, "from simple walking to 'taking a stroll,' to the most highly conventionalized balletic" and dance forms. "In other words, if the body I dance with and the body I work and walk with are one and the same, I must, when dancing, necessarily entertain the suspicion that all of the body's movements are, to a greater or lesser degree, choreographed." (Hewitt 2005:17)

Studying and doing queer choreographies can thus take a turn towards dance histories, in order to critically read phallic hypermasculinity, homophobia and heteronormativity as the "dark background" that define dance histories and the canon of dance (Desmond 2001, Burt 1995), and to disclose the gay closet of modern dance (Foster 2001) as the constitutive outside of our inherited dance vocabularies and

aesthetic ideologies. This historic turn also offers reparative reading (Sedgwick 2003) of dance histories and practices by revealing the symptoms and possibilities lurking beneath the cracks of normative bodies, as queer possibilities. In these terms we can maybe dare to hear anew Trisha Brown's claim that: "the body doesn't move with the clarity of line or mechanics... It's the human failure factor in the exposition of form that makes for this marvellous thing called dance, which is highly imperfect from the beginning (Brown, quoted in Burt 2006:141)," and reinterpret the equality of all bodies, movements, forms, gestures, phrases etc. as a queer and radical democratic proposal of contemporary dance (Banes 1980).

From a different angle, we can rewrite dance history by paying due attention to the works by dancers and choreographers such as: Nijinsky, Ted Shawn, Merce Cunningham, Loie Fuller, Douglas Fairbanks, Bill T. Jones, the butoh artist Kazuo Ohno, Mark Morris, Michael Clark, Lloyd Newson and DV8, Les ballets trocadero, Javier de Frutos, Joe Goode, Rachael Young, Helen Barbier, boychild, Wu Tsang, Matthew Bourne, Kate Lawrence, Yael Flexer, Sarah Spanton – and investigate how their works stage/d sexuality and gender in relation to dominant discourse of their times, and of ours.

We can further set our focus on dance spectatorship, and queer spectatorship and reception in particular. One starting point can be Richard Dyer's analysis that "gay men have been balletomanes for everything from the fact of ballet's extreme escapism from an uncongenial world to its display of male physique, and to its reputation as an area of employment in which gay men could be open and safe" (Dyer 1992:43). Hence, we make efforts to decode the double coded interpretative possibilities even in the phallic body of the ballerina (Foster 1996). From this vantage point, we can bring to light, the neglected and carefully held at bay from the academic critic, the "spectator's pleasure as a reading of surface inscriptions on the body rather than perception of depth" (Burt 2001: 217), especially when watching queer choreographies and bodies on stage, and hold onto the possibilities for the disintegration of the disinterested subject position (as the rational unitary masculine subject). This interest opens, future imaginings and possibilities reverberating in the spectators body after the vanishing and dematerialization of the dance act: what transformations and body projects might it foster in the aftermath of the performance? The transfer of movements and gestures, I would even dare to say at a metakinetic level, makes possible new forms of being and becoming, of knowing the body, of choreographing alternative kinesthetic capacities, precisely through this bodying-with-others, being-with and dwelling – with – others.

Getting down from the theater's stage and out of the university archives, we can move our interests towards multiple forms of folk or social dance and decode or interpretatively queer their movement repertoires and vocabularies, displacing temporalities, and shifting codes. Or we can pay due attention and respect, by doing justice to the enormity and extravagance of movement innovation and creative bodily recycling found in disco culture or the Harlem drag balls, and the nowadays already widely spread voguing scenes and practices among racial and ethnic minorities in the metropolitan centers in US and Europe; those reservoirs of cultural politics of movement. Why not pay, enter, enjoy and expose ourselves, thus learn and transform, from the glittering, subversive and ecstatic drag shows, of both drag queens and kings, spread on the outskirts and city centers throughout Europe, all those as unreliable proofs of history, and history in the making, and engage ourselves in hermeneutics of residue and utopian potential (Muñoz 2019). Oh, dare I say, take an ecstasy, and lose yourself on the dancefloor as a space of shared

kinesthesia, while being touched by unknown queer bodies and mastered by the beat of the music in techno clubs! In the end, we can take an enjoyable look of wonder and pleasure by looking at, transferring, incorporating and swishing our bodies in the rhythms and contours of queer bodies walking the street. All those ephemera that “are the remains that are often embedded in queer acts, in both the stories we tell one another and communicative physical gestures such as the cool look of a street cruise, a lingering handshake between recent acquaintances, or the mannish strut of a particularly confident woman.” (Muñoz 2019:65) Embrace that swish on the public street, greet the queer bodies and their magnificent queer choreographies!

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Examples:

<https://www.michaelclarkcompany.com/current.php>

<https://www.facebook.com/prideweekend/>

[https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7562112/?ref=mv\\_sr\\_srsrg\\_0](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7562112/?ref=mv_sr_srsrg_0)

[https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11048090/?ref=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11048090/?ref=fn_al_tt_1)

<https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/truth-in-gender-wu-tsang-and-boychild-on-the-question-of-queerness/>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vCYph\\_BniU&list=PLB6OWG6JoZzVayroQu\\_v3apmmHdhA9iAV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vCYph_BniU&list=PLB6OWG6JoZzVayroQu_v3apmmHdhA9iAV)

<https://bscottwhited.wordpress.com/2014/04/25/joe-goodes-29-effeminate-gestures-intersections-between-body-self-and-society/>

<https://billmoyers.com/content/bill-t-jones-still-here-with-bill-moyers/>

<https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/11086/croatia-serbia-drag-queens-house-of-flamingo-efermerne-konfesije>

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