

Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Education and Psychology
Doctoral School of Education
Theoretical and Historical Pedagogy

Life Reform – Art of Movement – Empathy

Theses of the Doctoral (PhD) dissertation

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2021

Budapest

1. Rationale

The inspiration for the research was my „Dancing Nature” multi-art project (2014, CEU) and my previous experience of teaching dance in nature. Originally my aim was only to experience closeness to nature in the process of dance, but this experience proved so revealing that it sparked my interest in the historical and theoretical background of this activity. The dissertation was completed within the Theoretical and Historical Pedagogy Program of the Doctoral School of Education at Eötvös Loránd University, the Faculty of Education and Psychology, and the Historical, Theoretical and Comparative Research Group’s OTKA research project aimed at investigating the connection between reform pedagogy and life reform movements.

The experience of dancing in nature also unveiled that when relocated into the natural environment from the conventional, box-like and predictable medium of the theatre and the rehearsal room, the nature of dance changes and so does the dancer’s empathic experience in contact with the landscape. This change accounts for a complex aesthetic and mental experience: on the one hand the dancer directs and senses his or her movement, on the other hand, he or she gains strength and inspiration from nature, and at the same time physically experiences being an integral part of the natural environment. This dance is inspired by the surrounding natural elements, but the aim is not to recreate them visually or create likeness through simple imitation but to reach a level of affective, cognitive and kinaesthetic identification and a kind of internal communication with the natural environment. This happens with intensive empathy and a so called liminal border crossing when after leaving the everyday self behind, the dancer makes space in his or her soul for the experience of identification, and then, when returning to everyday life, the dancer can process and incorporate the new experience into his or her personality. During the sameness experience, visual and formal similarities can be formed, and movements which resemble elements of the natural environment, but these are to a certain extent unconscious and improvisative as the similarities are not deliberate or planned beforehand.

The research is aimed at investigating the connection between Life Reform, the Art of Movement and Empathy. Therefore, after the Introduction (Chapter 1) the dissertation focuses on the theoretical and historical background of dancing in nature (Chapters 2-5), as well as on its practice and on the potentials of experiencing empathy in the natural environment in dance art education (Chapter 6). This last chapter discusses the findings of an empirical investigation which was aimed at revealing the peculiarities of the experience in dancing in nature: the dancer’s bodily experiences in relations of body, space and time.

2. The relevance of the research and its pedagogical implications

Today dancing in nature is used in Hungary mainly as a tool in therapy (*Márta Merényi*), and it also appears as performing art sporadically (*Rita Bata: Flow, Mediawave Festival, 2015*). However, it is not included in the curriculum of training professional dancers in secondary and tertiary education. Dancing in nature could have a place in out-of-school programmes and workshops, but the popularity of such practices cannot be seen in a wide circle and with a regular occurrence, although it would contribute significantly to developing the dancer's intense sense of presence and character. Worldwide, however, there are endeavours in this direction, especially in the Japanese Butoh movement (*Atsushi Takenouchi, Anita Saij, SU-EN*).

In dance art education the social sites of developing artistic expressiveness and related to this, empathic skills are the curricular Drama Pedagogy and the Acting classes. In contrast to these, dance relocated into nature allows to experience the joy of dance at a level where, moving in harmony with nature and communicating with the uncommon patterns of the environment, the individual is forced not only to experience perspective shifts, but also continuous self-reflection and an empathic relationship with the surrounding landscape. Self-reflection continues after the dance and affects indirectly the map of the dancer's identity, body consciousness and self-awareness, and it may also boost the ability of indirect learning. As is the case with skill acquisition in other fields, here the stages of individual learning are built on one another, while the new and the old skills consolidate each other. Thus development can be gradual, adjusted to how much the individual can comprehend and incorporate at a time, like in the case of mapping body consciousness, and this provides more emotional security. In such a way, the natural environment acts as an empathic mirror inducing new recognitions in the dancer but without affecting his or her emotional vulnerability, which is a constant hazard in the medium of social contacts. For a human being alienated from nature, other human beings and from his or her own self, returning to nature and reconnecting with it can evoke a spiritual sensation which increases artistic inspiration, creativity and also contributes, through a positive physiological effect to the improvement of his or her quality of life. Besides developing the personality, dancing in nature facilitates the improvement of a wide array of professional competencies.

Today's contemporary dance requires the dancer's high-level bodily, intellectual and professional consciousness, in which besides reflective thinking, empathy has a considerable role. Reflective thinking helps the dancer to develop self-awareness and a feeling of identity, and also to realize his or her creative individuality. Empathic skills contribute to increasing artistic expressiveness in the dancer's character and also contribute to the synergy effect of expression by paying attention to each other in a multiperson choreography. The process of building authentic

characters in stage roles requires the skills of analytic and empathic concentration, reflective thinking and activating the imagination and emotional memory.

3. Questions, methods and sources

The central purpose of the research, both in the theoretical and in the empirical part of the dissertation, aims at describing the the features of empathic dance in nature (EDN). In order to identify the attitude of modern dancers to the natural environment and their ideal of naturalness, the dissertation examines early 20th century and postmodern European and the North American dancers' relationship to nature. The assumption is that it is possible to rely on these modern dancers' experiences in nature when planning and interpreting an empirical investigation in our age. The initial questions of the research were the following: A) How do the examined dance historical traditions as antecedents contribute to understanding the special experience of EDN? B) What accounts for the dancer's empathic experience in terms of its philosophical implications, physiology and empathy theory? The additional research questions are the following:

- a. What body theories are relevant in connection with the attempt at freeing the body in the culture of life reform movements and also in connection with dancing in the nature?
- b. What theoretical statements of kinesthesia and empathy apply to dancing in nature?
- c. Who are the major representatives of dance in nature in the history of modern dance in the first two decades of the 20th century, and in the postmodern age?
- d. What are the characteristics of their view of naturalness in dance, and what are their resulting dance pedagogies?
- e. What common features can be discovered between the early 20th century life reform movement, and the beat and hippie movements?
- f. How did relying on kinesthesia, and aiming at naturalness and empathy form modern dance with its representatives in the art of stage dance in the period from late 1920s to 1970s?
- g. What are the anthropological, physiological, kinaesthetical and psychological features of the experience of dance in nature, with regard to empathic relationship with nature?

The study follows a qualitative approach both in the theoretical-historical and the empirical part. The discussion of the theoretical framework provides deductive, descriptive and comparative content analyses with a dominant hermeneutical approach. Through an inductive content data analysis, the empirical investigation aimed at revealing the characteristics of dance relocated into

nature, with special interest in empathic relationship to nature. The investigation was dominated by a participative approach, where EDN as the central theme of the dissertation was explored supported by the teacher-researcher's free journal as well as the half-structured journals and the focus group interview reporting the experiences during the three-day dance workshop. Data from the participant's journals and the focus group interview were processed relying on the methodology of grounded theory. Structurally, the investigation resembles an action research, with the difference that its aim is not to determine ways to improve learning and teaching.

The dissertation relies on secondary sources in the theoretical-historical framework of the research, while the empirical part draws on primary resources: the teacher researcher's reflective experience related to dance in nature, the focus group interview and the participants' half-structured journals.

4. Aims

In order to understand the specific features of EDN experience through empirical investigation, the research attempts first to uncover how modern dancers related to naturalness and to nature. With this aim, the major body theories are examined, followed by discussing the physiology of kinaesthetic experience and the theoretical background of empathy. Also, a chapter is dedicated to the history of dancing in nature in early 20th century European and the North American modern dance and in the postmodern age. The wider aim of the empirical investigation was establishing a mutual teaching and learning process within the frame of an artistic project which focused on two objectives. The objectives were (1) exploration of the peculiarities of learning to dance in natural environment through a workshop, (2) acquisition of new knowledge and skills by students which would help improve their professional dance competencies with a special view of empathic dancing, such as the skills of dancer's presence and performing roles. The narrower aims of the investigation were (3) to reveal contents in the reflections following the dance which are closely related to the experience of dance and teaching it in nature, to reveal (4) how the dancer-participants reflect on dancing in nature, (5) what affective and cognitive experience they develop when mapping their own body and (6) what sources of joyful inspiration unveil themselves for the participants while dancing in nature.

The questions addressed with the focus group interview and the half-structured journal were as follows: What are the anthropological, physiological, kinaesthetical and psychological features of the experience of dancing in nature, with emphasis on developing empathic connection with nature?

What are some specific components of this experience and how do these features help to understand nature and movement experience.

5. Theoretical background

The experience of EDN comprises such components as freedom of the body, sensual perception of the environment and kinaesthetic perception of body movements, and additionally, an empathic experience of being in nature, and this experience has its antecedent in the history of modern dance. Modern dance was created within the frame of 20th century life reform movements, which propagated the liberation of the body, and gave rise also to the tradition of dancing in nature. EDN as an academic research topic requires an interdisciplinary approach, covering theories of the body, kinaesthesia and empathy as well as the tradition of dancing in nature in the history of modern dance. The next chapters of the dissertation discuss the characteristics of modern body theories, the major elements of kinaesthetic sensation, interpretations of empathy and those dance experiments of historical and contemporary relevance that relocate dance in nature as a way of liberating the body. According to modern body theories, the body is a socially determined construct, and the study of kinaesthesia and empathy reveals the paths offered in EDN to freedom from this determined state. Analyses of certain endeavours in the history of modern dance seek to identify how such paths have been explored by the dancers.

The conceptualization of the body allows various philosophical approaches depending on the perspective of interpretation, namely, the monist or the pluralist perspective. The foundation of the dualist approach to the body was laid down in the theories of *Plato*, *Aristotle* and *Descartes*, who distinguished the mind from the body and regarded them as two separate entities. The monist view emphasizes man's basic unity, regarding either the mental or the physical as the dominant factor. Besides being part of nature, however, the body is also socially constructed. The concepts of body techniques and the body as revealing civilising trends are treated in the works of socio-cultural researchers such as *Mauss*, 1936 and *Elias*, 1987 respectively; *Douglas*, 1995 argues for the body to be the site of symbolic representation. With his concept of the performative body, *Goffman* (1959) proposes a dramaturgical perspective of the body, whereas *Foucault* introduces the concept of the docile body. A phenomenological perspective of the body is represented in the works of *Husserl*, *Edith Stein* and *Merleau-Ponty*, who based their analyses on the dual aspect of the body, the relative distinction of the physical (*Körper*) and the lived body (*Leib*), and asserted the notion of kinaesthetic consciousness.

Besides visual perception, EDN is accompanied by intense kinaesthetic sensation, a fact justified by the empirical investigation of the dissertation. The concept of kinaesthesia, which as a word comes from Modern Latin, allows more than one definition and is used interchangeably with other terms (*Lephart 1997; Barnes and Behnke, 1999; Ergen and Ulkar, 2008; Pennartz, 2015; Wilk and Hooks, 2017; Proske and Gandevia 2018*). Therefore, an accurate analysis of the empirical investigation of the research required studying the physiology of kinaesthesia, following the conceptualizations of the term by *Schmidt, 1996; Foster, 2011*; as well as *Sekuler and Blake, 2000*.

The empirical investigation also required to study the term of *Einfühlung* in German philosophy and psychology (*Vischer, 1873; Lipps, 1897, 1903*) as antecedent of the more recent term of empathy and to study also the concepts of empathy in phenomenology (*Husserl, Edith Stein*), in contemporary philosophy of mind (*Crick, 1995; Goller, 1999; Nagel, 1974/2004; Fuchs, 2019*), and in environmental psychology (*Schwartz, 1977; Sobel, 1996; Guergachi et al., 2010; Tam King-Pong, 2013*). Regarding the cognitive aspect of empathy in the philosophy of mind, *Stotland, 1969; Davis 1983, 1994; Batson et al., 1997* are referred to, and regarding the affective aspect, the research draws on *Fuchs and Koch, 2014*.

Social changes at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries prompted life reform movements (*Németh, 2002, Németh, 2013a, Németh, 2013b*), which were counter-movements directed at the disciplined body of modern man (*Lafferton, 1997; Németh, 2014; Wulf, 2007*). In revolt against the system of closed societies, a new interpretation of the body emerged, which encouraged body culture movements within the life reform, and these propagated the ideal of the healthy, well-built and free body. In discussing the connection between life reform movements and dance, the dissertation draws on *Németh 2002; Németh 2013b, Beke, Németh, Vincze, 2013*. The modern tradition of dancing in nature has two prominent periods: the first two decades of the 20th century and the postmodern age. Its preeminent representatives in the early 20th century were *Gusto Gräser, Isadora Duncan, Laban Rudolf, Mary Wigman and Margaret Morris*, whereas *Anna Halprin, Margie Gillis and Celeste Snowber* represent EDN in the postmodern age. The historical and theoretical discussion of dancing in nature relies on *Maletic, 1987; Partsch-Bergsohn, 1994; McCaw, 2012 Halprin and Kaplan, 1995; Hermann, 1998; Lever, 2003; Poynor, 2009; Carter and Fensham, 2011; Tusa, 2012; Weber, 2014; Dickinson, 2018*.

Around the middle of the 20th century new counter-movements evolved, the beat and hippie movements (*Konok, 2008; Sükösd, 1985; Illés and Farkas, 1975*), and the rebellious spirit of the age can be traced also in the postmodern dance of *Anna Halprin*. Almost contemporaneously, the mid 20th century witnessed an upsurge in modern stage dance, where as a novelty, the theory and practice of dance and dance pedagogy started to rely heavily on kinaesthesia in the works of *Doris*

Humphrey, Martha Graham, Steve Paxton, Irgmard Bartenieff, H'Doubler and Moshe Feldenkrais (H'Doubler, 1925; Hagood and Brennan, 2010; Foster, 2011). Kinaesthetic empathy was present in the choreographies of Judson Dance Theatre, and gained central significance in the dance therapy of Marian Chace as well as in the guided tours of art historian Leo Steinberg (Houston, 2017, Hagood and Brennan, 2010). The ecological crisis in our postmodern age (Lányi and Jávör, 2015; Jávör, 2000; Balog, 2005; Kohak, 1988) lends dance a new potential. Besides being the source of aesthetic pleasure it carries a moral function, the result being the genre of environmental dance (Stewart, 2010; Handschuh, 2013; Stone, 2015; Eno, 2018).

6. Major results of the empirical investigation

The objectives of the investigation were to study the experience of dancing in nature based on the teacher researcher's own practice and drawing on the findings of a three-day workshop with six participants, as well as a focus group interview and the participants' half-structured journals. Dancing in nature implies that nature as an empathic mirror reflects the dancer's body consciousness and personality, and moving in contact with nature inspires special mental experiences. Space in the natural environment poses a challenge to planning movement: the uneven surface of the ground, the temperature of the air and the sounds of nature. Added to these, nature as a stage comprises diverse patterns and diverse substances of its elements. Compared with the medium of the rehearsal room, EDN requires and inspires more intense involvement of sense organs, and related to this, a more intense perception of the surrounding environment allows more space to attention accompanied by intuition. The dancer obtains new information about his or her body through reciprocal connection with nature, which guides the body to perform more natural forms of movement. In this way, the landscape becomes part of the dance performed in a relationship with nature, and determines its quality and dynamics of movement. The following three types of establishing a relationship with nature are possible for the dancer: 1) "inside out", where the dancer's attitude to nature is determined by some psychic affinity; 2) "outside in", where movement is inspired by the atmosphere and characteristics of the surrounding natural environment; 3) mixed type, where the other two attitudes are interchangeable and mix freely. When moving in nature, the dancer can experience a feeling of enhanced harmony and can even have a Flow experience.

The pedagogical relevance of dance trainings in nature is that they facilitate a complex development of the dancer's personality as well as his or her professional competencies. The

professional competencies developed are refined sensation, space perception, kinaesthetic sensation and a more active use of the body centre. The most important mental competences whose development is facilitated by dancing in nature are adaptability, concentration, imagination and empathy, whereas the psychic competences include managing the experience of harmony and a free expression of passion.

The focus group interview and the half-structured journals unveiled the subjective elements of EDN, which included analytical observation of the natural elements with intense involvement of the senses, especially the kinaesthetic senses. As opposed to improvisation in the rehearsal room or on the stage where the dancer activates primarily his or her imagination, in EDN improvisation the sense organs have primacy, especially direct bodily experiences related to the sense of touch. What accounts for this primacy is the fact that touching activates the orbitofrontal cortex of the brain, which is also the area of cognitive empathy (*Keltner, 2010; Goodkind, 2010*).

Empathy with nature required perspective taking from the participants, to which imagination provided inspiration. With one participant, an altruistic attitude to the natural elements came to the surface in the empathic dance experience („the tree uses my body in a way that it cannot use its own body”). While others experienced the ability of moving in harmony with nature, had „the part of nature experience” and a kind of identification by feeling into the movement of the natural element. EDN had an effect on social relations, as the dancers experienced togetherness, courage, wholeness and unity through their movements reaching out to each other.

7. Conclusions

The reviewed body theories illuminate the principal feature of EDN: the potential of freedom of the body experienced through movement in nature. The body theories of *Mauss*, *Elias* and *Goffman* assert that the social body operates under limitations imposed on it by social conventions. Against these conventions, there is a rebellious desire for freedom in various periods of human history, which is manifest not only in several forms of social behaviour (sport, dressing, hair-do and other body habits) but also in artistic practice. The limitations on the body in the world of dance are especially predominant in ballroom dance and classical ballet. The ideal physique of a classical ballet dancer is defined with a strict set of measurements as opposed to the body required by the improvisational modern dance in the postmodern age.

EDN allows the dancer to experience almost limitless freedom through movement as he or she can act in isolation from society and attuned to the surrounding landscape, where the experience of oneness, a harmonic unity with the natural world becomes possible. The freedom of the body in

this improvisational dance means that the dancer can experience and enjoy intense kinaesthetic sensation of the position and movement of the body without any technical conventions and limitations, guided chiefly by mental states and processes. EDN is not a recognized dance technique as it is free from specific rules and protocols prescribing steps and movement combinations. The improvising dancer creates his or her movement freely, relying on different techniques, adding also individual forms of movement, according to the concept of his or her relationship to nature.

As opposed to the traditional rehearsal room, during EDN the environment is a place increasingly rich in stimuli for the perception, so both kinaesthetic sensation and the stimuli from exteroceptors increase the activity of the central nervous system, especially that of the cerebral cortex. Dance relocated into nature requires more alert movement coordination and anticipation, primarily due to the unevenness of the ground. It also necessitates new anticipations for implementing movements, because of diversity and irregularity in the arrangement of landscape elements and the consequent dividedness of intense attention to the various natural objects, to the body and to the mental images simultaneously. The uneven ground and the possible unexpected disturbing factors require more intense movement coordination and body centre work. Compared with how the body is used in the rehearsal room, increased reliance on kinaesthesia is a conspicuous characteristic feature of EDN. In his analyses of the effect of dance on the audience, dance critic *John Martin* (1893–1985) also emphasizes the role of kinaesthesia in the development of modern dance, by underlining the close connection between movement and emotion, and the fact that the emotional state of the other can be understood by activating experiences stored in one's kinaesthetic memory. Besides cognitive and affective ways of tuning in with nature, improvisation in EDN helps develop intense kinaesthetic connection with the elements of the landscape, which supports the dancer's perspective taking.

According to contemporary philosophy of mind, the quality of subjective experience is a puzzle, and imagination is restricted by experiences, so the knowability of the other's consciousness is limited. *Thomas Nagel* claims that since we do not have the same neurophysiology as the bat, we cannot understand what it is like to be a bat. In contrast to this, *David Chalmers* rejects the unknowability of the other's consciousness, stating that conscious experience is a fundamental entity which is accessible in indirect ways, through the descriptions by others of their experience and relying on one's own experience. In dance relocated into nature, the potential of empathy with the natural elements comes into the foreground. In this case, the dancer faces the same problem: the characteristics of natural elements do not correspond with those of humans (photosynthesizing, CO₂ uptake, etc.), which makes the potential of extending human experience imperfect. Do elements of nature experience any kind of consciousness in their operation at all? Against all this,

there is evidence that, besides the knowability of their objective qualities, a cognitive and affective approach to foreign entities becomes possible by employing the imagination. Often it is perspective taking embodied in dance movement supported by intense kinaesthetic sensation that triggers off the affective attitude necessary for empathy.

The natural environment as a source of inspiration gained dominance in the dance art of the first decades of the 20th century and in the postmodern age. In early 20th century culture, the cult of experiencing the body in its connection with nature, a characteristic feature of body culture in the life reform movements, had social, dance philosophical and aesthetic significance. In her dance, *Isadora Duncan* imitated the movements of natural elements, and by idealizing nudity, she propagated the freedom of the female body. *Gusto Gräser's* free form style and ecstatic nudist dance in nature at *Monte Verità* influenced the dance concepts of *Laban Rudolf* and *Mary Wigman*. *Laban* investigated the consciousness of body and space in dance, which he regarded as a metaphor for cosmic order.

In the dance of the hippie movement and in our contemporary postmodern dance, turning to nature is a conscious reflective experience, and with the global ecological crisis, establishing an authentic connection with nature became a moral issue in the development of environmental dance. The experience of EDN, which is the theme of primary investigation discussed in the dissertation, presents similarities to *Anna Halprin's* environmental dance. According to *Halprin* nature acts as an aesthetic guide for the movements, and she also believes that the dancing body is a microcosm of nature. Within this interconnectedness, dance communication with nature is grounded in continuous reflection.

Considering its pedagogical implications in Hungary today, dancing in nature is mostly used only for therapeutic purposes and is not an integral part of the national curriculum in professional dance education, although it could contribute both to personal development and to developing the dancer's skill of artistic presence. Personal characteristics developed through EDN affect social connections, and EDN can be a solution for identity problems, for learning about others and one's own self with acceptance. Due to its experiential benefits, EDN could be used in professional dance education as a tool for a therapeutic purpose (as treatment for the syndrome called burn-out). Relocating dance in nature also directs attention to the importance of activating a responsible attitude to nature, which is decisive in the interest of saving the living space of future generations. Thus EDN has intellectual and moral potentials.

As regards the reliability of interviews with participants in the primary investigation and their journals, subjective experience presented verbally does not always lend itself to classification easily. Not all experiences can be recalled after the dance for verbal expression and experiences expressed

through dance movements are not always associated with the ability of skilful verbal expression. All this needs to be considered by the researcher when summarizing the findings of the investigation, when checking whether the objectives of the investigation have been reached and deciding what further investigations are suggested by the results.

The exercises designed for the workshop served their purpose properly, as the subjective qualities of the experience of EDN were revealed, and themes for further investigation also came to the surface. Among such potential themes is investigating anticipation through improvisational exercises where participants establish contact with more than one element of the landscape by controlling some larger space.

EDN is dominated by embodiment, the dancer's kinaesthetic emplacement into the situation of the natural elements through tactile contact followed by imaginative thinking, and consequently cognitively assuming the position of the selected natural element. The reflections of the participants testify that only a few of them relied on mental images of memory when establishing connection with nature. This illuminates the potential of designing movement exercises in a future investigation aimed at stimulating mental images with the aim to facilitate an empathic relationship with nature. The focus group interview and the journals also unveiled some more features (Flow experience, harmony, and spiritual experience), the components of which could be revealed in further investigations. The kinaesthetic experiences (embodiment) of EDN dancers could also be made the object of a future investigation.

Regarding the selection of location for the exercises, it can be concluded that it was the furthest location from society that proved to be the best choice because there was no interference by pedestrians, walkers or passing vehicles. This needs to be considered when choosing a location in the future.

The research of the dissertation highlighted the importance of re-evaluating the function of dancing in nature, both in art and education. In our age, while retaining the traditional movement forms of modern dance, the artistic practice of dance in nature has gained new philosophical and moral content. It facilitated the development of new dance genres, experiential environmental dance and its stage adaptation. Today, the central idea of dancing in nature is not the freedom of the body, but human responsibility for the environment. In education, dance in nature can be used both for the traditional purpose of developing dance skills, and for the purpose of developing empathy.

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