

Gabor Csepregi
The Clever Body and Aesthetics of Movement

In our western civilization, we entertain a rather ambiguous relationship to the human body. We tend to view it as an instrument, a machine, or a distant object of possession that responds flawlessly to external challenges. Yet, some deeply fulfilling experiences yield to an awareness of its needs and possibilities; we then perceive our living body with a sense of unity and a feeling of harmony. In recent years, considerable attention has been paid to some activities that allow us to be in touch with, and develop, the creative powers of our body. I would like to add some additional observations to these contributions, focusing my attention on the aesthetic dimension of movement.

I

What gives to certain movements an aesthetic value? What are the qualities and determinants of the motor behaviour which elicits an aesthetic experience? The various authors, each being inspired by a particular philosophical, ideological, or anthropological option, advance diverse answers to these questions.

Some consider beauty as the primary characteristic of the movement endowed with an aesthetic value. A movement is beautiful when an idea, an intention, a meaning, an excellence, an inner unity and wholeness, or something »transcendent« and »inexhaustible«, becomes manifest in a sensuous and dynamic form. Our aesthetic experience consists of the perception of an irreducible excess, a superabundance, and a plenitude in a technically flawless motor performance.

Others prefer to pay attention to the formal qualities of motor behaviour. The aesthetic here is the successful realization of previously identified criteria such as order, regularity, symmetry, balance, proportion, precision, harmony, and difficulty. Although the motor form is not subordinated to external and pragmatic goals, it nevertheless remains bound to some »immanent laws« (Sobotka, 1974) and principles. Empirical observations allow us to analyze and compare these principles and to recognize their commu-

nificative significance. Our aesthetic enjoyment springs from the perception of a correspondence between subjective performance abilities and fixed, standardized movement possibilities.

The third approach considers movements from a subjective point of view. Here the aesthetic is not merely a matter of adapting movements to objective qualities but derives from the production of a dynamic form that, on the one hand, expresses ideas, conceptions, emotions, fantasies, and, on the other, elicits an awareness of total bodily involvement. To relate personal meanings to movements means to go beyond the factual, efficient, and useful, and to place the movement in a context where expression is valued over performance. The deployment of symbolic figures and illusory appearances produces an aesthetic delight and, consequently, sustains or reshapes feelings. Both the symbolic transformation and the refinement of feelings happen without adaptation to a conscious purpose; they are spontaneous processes since they spring from the primary need for the embodiment of inner life and the »symbolic envisagement of the world« (Langer, 1957).

I would like to briefly consider the characteristics of movement within the third perspective since it places great emphasis on the body's creative abilities and the affective component of the aesthetic perception. All of us have noticed that certain motor experiences induce in us an exhilarating and stimulating feeling. This is not the same state of ecstasy, euphoria, or intoxication that we might experience while dancing or taking part in certain rituals. Expressions such as enchantment, delight, rapture, captivation, excitement, and inspiration seem to be more appropriate to describe the sensations connected to the movements.

The aesthetic delight does not depend on the physiological or muscular processes alone, but rather on how we perceive ourselves in the movement and how we relate the movement to the surroundings, particularly to space. We experience a feeling of lightness and ease as we move with unusual dexterity and alertness and trust our own bodily capabilities.

The meaning of the movement is the primary source of our pleasurable feelings. To be sure, a movement must exhibit an inner order, a structure in which the different segments obtain their unity and cohesion. A fundamental prerequisite of the aesthetic satisfaction is our ability to coordinate smoothly and correctly a great number of partial movements. When an adequate mastery of certain techniques is not acquired, the various elements follow each other without accentuation, articulation, and synchronization. The movement then is devoid of internal coherence or »kinetic melody«, to use the expression of F. J. J. Buytendijk (1957) and Oliver Sacks (1995). However important it may be, the »melodic flow« alone is insuffi-

cient to produce an aesthetic value. What is needed is authenticity and expressiveness. Our aesthetic enjoyment springs from the expression of momentary feelings, insights, and desires through original and personal movement compositions. These achievements can neither be created on command nor narrowed down to stabilized and measurable movement patterns. They occur and develop, without any conscious planning and control, through the unconcerned variation of the symbolic structure, the playful improvisation of a kinetic theme, and the qualitative use of motor options.

II

I have already mentioned that some of the creative abilities of our living body uniquely contribute to an aesthetic motor experience. What are, more precisely, these abilities?

An important feature of the exploratory and symbolic formulations is the absence of interest in efficiency and technical perfection. Expressive movements are not related to specific objectives or restricted by utilitarian considerations; they lack a definite reference to a goal, a distance, or a temporal limit. They entail an unconcerned and sympathetic contact with the surroundings, a state of alert but relaxed receptiveness. Movements are initiated and carried out as responses to momentary and immediate phenomena, such as the prevailing atmosphere, the activity of other participants, the already accomplished gestures, the intensity of feelings, etc..

We have all experienced music not only suggesting movements but also compelling us to move. Our steps, jumps, turns, rotations, all the gestures, and their infinitely rich combinations, executed by the various parts of our body, are in close affinity with the specific rhythmic and melodic features of music. As Erwin Straus (1980) has noted, »the immediate experience and the (expressive) movement in which it actualizes its meaning are indivisible«.

But what makes this affinity possible? Expressive movements are dependent upon the sensibility, »pathicity«, of the body. »Pathicity« is that feature of the body by which an immediate, vivid, pre-conceptual, and affective communication with the surroundings takes place. A central element of this unmediated bond is the experience of suffering, of being affected. In the pathic sphere, something (an image, an odour, a sound) takes possession of us; we are seized by its quality and delivered to its influence. The decisive factor here is the direct, immediate intimacy of our body with the world, its ability to echo vivid and penetrating effects, to resonate to new impressions or unexpected deviations. The words »echo« and »resonance« refer to the

affective attunement to the outside world and the experience of being affected by some meaningful events.

Furthermore, we find ourselves involved in our own way in a particular situation: we are sensible to the quality of impressions according to our own point of view and interest. The pathetic relationship is a transforming experience: certain objects take hold of us, affect our innermost self, often tacitly, without our explicit awareness.

The production of various motor forms also imply an attitude that may be called renunciation: a relaxed and trustful surrender to bodily impulses and intentions. As we move easily and effortlessly, we confidently rely on the sense of rhythm and distance concealed somewhere within our body. We abandon ourselves to the »natural spontaneity« of the body that, without purposeful pre-assessment or planning, introduces new movements and responds appropriately to the unexpected demands of the situation. F.J.J. Buytendijk (1965) has pointed out that we are able to invent surprising and unusual movements because our body is invested with a subtle sense of what can and should be tried and risked, with a » *finesse d'esprit*«, with an »inexhaustible creative power«.

Such an inventiveness may embody the connection, the »bisociation« (Arthur Koestler's term), of two previously unrelated sets of movement. Such a movement combination arises suddenly, it is »an upward surge« from some fertile layer of our body. The bisociative creation may consist of the unsuspected connection of a movement to a subjective significance. When, for example, we express our joy through slow and solemn gestures, without actually knowing why, the motor figures arise spontaneously from the bisociative processes of the body. Our expressive movements entail the tendency to what Paul Ricoeur (1966) calls »involuntary release«: we are surprised by the ease and appropriateness with which our body proposes unpredictable symbolic formulations.

The mimetic element is also central to the aesthetic movement experiences. The imitation of living or lifeless realities (a bird or a train) is a natural way of investing a motor form with symbolic content and articulating a particular feeling or desire. As Walter Benjamin (1978) has brought out forcefully, the source of imitative movements is our mimetic faculty, the gift of recognising and producing similarities. Thanks to this bodily endowment, we are able to re-create and interpret aspects of our immediate surroundings and express our own feelings. We find, in the mimetic object or event, an incentive to perform certain movements and charge these movements with a personal meaning. When we imitate the peculiar motion of a

bird, our interest in flying movements is fused with our intention to give a coherent and active form to some of our fears, hopes, or ideals.

This example stresses the non-realistic character of imitation. No attempt is made to copy something faithfully. Rather, imitation requires the creative ability of selecting and reproducing the constitutive traits of the chosen object.

More important, perhaps, is that the mimetic act presupposes an empathic understanding of the meaning of the perceived reality. When we display a mimetic mode of behaviour, we come to act in harmony with our surroundings. In his analysis of Benjamin's theory of mimetic experience, Jürgen Habermas (1983) speaks of the »uninterrupted connection of the human organism with the surrounding nature«. The various aspects and qualities of the environment are no longer perceived in confrontation but accepted with a sense of involvement and participation. Thus, the mimetic capacity is not only the gift of producing similarities, but also the bodily potential on which we draw in order to act in unison with the surrounding world and to perceive it with empathy and care.

Beyond their subjective significance, movements elicit an aesthetic experience due to their temporal structure, their inner order. Rhythm is the organizing factor that coordinates the temporal segments of the movement into a coherent and melodic flow. A rhythmic motor performance is not merely a passive and mechanical adaptation to a series of uniform pulses or a sequence of economical gestures. Rhythmic patterns are actively apprehended or produced by the moving subject. Of course neither is rhythm the outcome of random personal invention. However spontaneous a »rhythmizing act« may be, each motor situation and task requires a specific and suitable temporal organization. Whether spontaneously generated or actively appropriated, a rhythmic pattern normally consists of the periodic repetition, articulation, and accentuation of movement phases.

How does the rhythmic organization of the expressive movement occur? Some believe that the primary source of rhythm is the natural and vital impulses of the body. Others, placing less emphasis on bodily states and capabilities, contend that intention and consciousness preside over rhythmic emergences. We have seen, however, that expressive movements are carried out without conscious planning; they are not tied to particular goals and directions. Their temporal unfolding depends more on the immediate experiencing of spatial and motor qualities than on set structures. Thanks to their own »Knotenpunkte« (to use Arnold Gehlen's expression), movements themselves suggest a particular temporal configuration. A slight change in the manner we employ to emphasize these »fertile« phases results in the

variation of subsequent rhythmic patterns. Consequently, the various ways of grouping and accentuating movement phases derive not so much from a conscious representation but from the »logic« of the movement itself. When, for example, children alter the tempo of their stride, or switch from walking to skipping and from skipping to hopping, they seem to obey the dictates of their own body. In the words of Ursula Fritsch (1990), they allow their body to »think by means of the movement«. Their »rhythmizing acts« are based on their bodily tendency to repeat, with more or less regularity and intensity, alternating movement components, and on their ability to remain attentive to the »eloquence« of the movements. Paul Valéry (1964), reflecting on the nature of dance, has drawn our attention to this bodily potential through which the rhythmic organization of movements occur. The body, writes Valéry, »assumes a fairly simple periodicity that seems to maintain itself automatically; it seems endowed with a superior elasticity that retrieves the impulse of every movement and at once renews it. One is reminded of a top, standing on its point and reacting so sensitively to the slightest shock.«

Finally we come to the productive power of imagination. When we endow the motor form with a symbolic content, we relate our movements to visual images. Visual images, however, are not the only ingredient of expressive movements.

Valéry's analogy reminds us that, though not tied to specific performance criteria and objectives, expressive movements are nevertheless bound to particular motor situations. We may compare the movement to an ongoing »conversation« between our body and the surrounding world.

From this follows that the execution of a movement requires tactile contacts with natural elements (water, snow, grass) and objects (ball, stick). Our gliding, jumping, running, and swimming motions originate in, and lead to, this active mode of sensory communication, touching. In touching, we both experience and anticipate a specific tactile quality (smooth, rough, hard, soft). Melchior Palagyi (1907) and Arnold Gehlen (1995) have emphasized that tactile images constitute just as important a part of our movements as do the actual tactile impressions. For example, as we jump over a broad ditch or turn while skiing at high speed, our legs, as it were, »imagine«, »project« tactile sensations that should correspond to our movements.

But the tactile image of landing on the ground is the outcome of the movement that we execute in imagination. Whenever we envisage a dive into the water, our take off involves an imagined movement followed by an imagined sensation. Our body imagines movements to the same extent as it anticipates sensations, though we are seldom aware of these projections.

The motor form, whose main characteristic is the exploratory variation and continuous introduction of novelty, arises from a successful expression of feelings and a receptive relationship to the surrounding world. This relationship acquires its importance if we recognize, on the one hand, that a great variety of imagined movements and sensations are evoked by a free and relaxed encounter with objects and, on the other hand, that anticipated qualities and forms determine, just as much, the characteristics of a movement as do actual sensory experiences. Movements, in short, are not only upshots of specific intentions, but also responses arising from the formative powers and expressive energies of the body.

III

I have tried to draw attention, though rather briefly, to some of our somatic capabilities that produce expressive and »autotelic« movement compositions. The significance of these movement experiences have already been emphasized by important studies in recent years. To these learned analyses, I would like to add here one remark.

Several contemporary thinkers forcefully argue that our relationship to the surrounding world has been radically transformed: we no longer have significant experiences and relate to concrete and tangible realities with a growing sense of alienation. Albert Borgmann (1984) has shown that the widespread tendency to specialization, and the increasing use of technological devices, has progressively eliminated the need and possibility of active and sensitive engagement with our total environment. The »extended network of hyperintelligence« and the »paradigm of technological device« has led to a degeneration of our bodily capabilities. Disembodiment, as Borgmann asserts, is the gradual atrophy of bodily powers and skills, intensified by a disconnected and disburdened sort of life.

No recovery of our fully functioning body can occur without some initiatives. Aesthetic movement experiences, as I contend, help us to achieve a more intimate contact with the surrounding world and foster some of our bodily abilities. These results cannot be produced at will. What is needed, primarily, is adequate opportunities, for both adults and youth, to experiment with movements and take initiatives freely, without fear and constraint. The creation of this free space for innovation and enjoyment is what an aesthetic education has to seek and promote.

Bibliography

- Abraham, A. »Reflexionen über eine Sologestaltung.« In *Gestaltung in Tanz und Gymnastik*, edited by H.-G. Artus, 109-123. Bremen: Studiengang Sportwissenschaft, 1987.
- Benjamin, W. »On the Mimetic Faculty.« In *Reflections*, 333-336. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.
- Borgmann, A. *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Buytendijk, F.J.J. *Attitudes et mouvements*. Translated by L. Van Haecht: Desclée de Brouwer, 1957.
- Buytendijk, F.J.J. *L'homme et l'animal*. Translated by R. Laureillard. Paris: Gallimard, 1965.
- Csepregi, G. »Le sport a-t-il un sens?« *Science et Esprit* 40 (1988): 209-225.
- Csepregi, G. »Spontaneity and Physical Education.« In *Facetten der Sportpädagogik*, edited by R. Prohl, 23-30. Schorndorf: Verlag Karl Hofmann, 1993.
- Csepregi, G. »Zur Bedeutung der Improvisation für die Leibeserziehung.« *Spectrum der Sportwissenschaften* 8 (1996): 60-71.
- Fritsch, U. »Tanz «stellt nicht dar, sondern macht wirklich«. Ästhetischer Erziehung als Ausbildung tänzerischer Sprachfähigkeit.« In *Grundlagen und Perspektiven ästhetischer und rhythmischer Bewegungserziehung*, edited by P. Röthig E. Bannmüller, 99-117. Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1990.
- Gehlen, A. *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995.
- Habermas, J. »Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique (1972).« In *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, 129-163. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1983.
- Heuser, I. »Rhythmus als Ausdruck des Lebendigen.« In *Beiträge zur Theorie und Lehre vom Rhythmus*, edited by P. Röthig, 122-136. Schorndorf: Verlag Karl Hofmann, 1966.
- Langer, S.K. *Philosophy in a New Key. A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art.*, Third Edition, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1957.
- Lübbe, H. »Erfahrung und Kompensationen. Zum philosophischen Problem der Erfahrung in der gegenwärtigen Welt.« In *Der Mensch als Orientierungsweise?*, edited by H. Lübbe, 145-168. Freiburg im Brigsau: K. Alber Verlag, 1982.
- Palagyi, M. *Naturphilosophische Vorlesungen über die Grundprobleme des Bewusstseins und Lebens*. Charlottenburg: O. Günther, 1907.

- Ricoeur, P. *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*. Translated by E.V. Kohak. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966.
- Röthig, P. »Bewegung – Rhythmus – Gestaltung: Zur Problemen gymnastischer Kategorien.« In *Gymnastik. Ein Beitrag zur Bewegungskultur unserer Gesellschaft*, edited by H.J. Medau K.-J. Gutsche, 36-51. Schorndorf: Verlag Karl Hofmann, 1989.
- Röthig, P. »Betrachtungen zur Körper- und Bewegungsästhetik.« In *Grundlagen und Perspektiven ästhetischer und rhythmischer Bewegungserziehung*, edited by P. Röthig E. Bannmüller, 85-97. Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1990.
- Röthig, P. »Zur Theorie des Rhythmus.« In *Grundlagen und Perspektiven ästhetischer und rhythmischer Bewegungserziehung*, edited by P. Röthig E. Bannmüller, 51-71. Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1990.
- Röthig, P. »Bewegungsgestaltung and ästhetische Erziehung im Sport.« In *Facetten der Sportpädagogik*, edited by R. Prohl, 13-22. Schorndorf: Verlag Karl Hofmann, 1993.
- Sacks, O. »A Surgeon's Life.« In *An Anthropologist on Mars*, 77-107. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.
- Selle, G. *Gebrauch der Sinne. Eine kunstpädagogische Praxis*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1988.
- Sobotka, R. *Formgesetze der Bewegungen im Sport*. Schorndorf: Verlag Karl Hofmann, 1974.
- Straus, E.W. »The Forms of Spatiality.« In *Phenomenological Psychology*, 3-37. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1980.
- Valéry, P. »Philosophy of the Dance.« In *Aesthetics*, 197-211. New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964.