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Corporal Transcodification(s): Mark Morris' Dance Adaption of Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*

Abstract: My goal in this essay is to look at the Mark Morris Dance Group' adaptation of Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas.* Mark Morris' ballet creates an alternative grammar, acting out a series of trans-codifications on various levels, through a heroine, Dido, who already embodies strong resistance to the normative construction of reality. All of these aspects will demonstrate how this multilayered adaptation is able to rebuild *Dido and Aeneas* through extensive trans-codification(s), resulting in the production of a corporal language that defies normative categories and rewrites both the opera and Dido's story. In order to explain this, I have divided this essay into three parts: a conceptual clarification on the transcoding of corporalities, contextualized in relation to Dance Studies and contemporary philosophical currents with respect to Morris' production; a brief introduction on Purcell-Tate's work and on the Mark Morris Dance Group, followed by an examination of the trans-codification(s) implemented in the ballet of the American choreographer; and finally, a problematization of the figure of Dido in relation to her cultural history and to Morris' representation.

Keywords: Mark Morris Dance Group, Dido and Aeneas, Henry Purcell, dance adaptation, bodies' transcodification(s)

The aim of this essay is to look at the Mark Morris Dance Group's (MMDG) adaptation of Henry Purcell's three-act opera *Dido and Aeneas.* On the one hand, by adapting Purcell's music and text of seventeenth century Irish poet and lyricist, Nahum Tate, Morris goes beyond a simple staging and instead performs a radical adaptation[1] and resemantization of the opera; on the other hand, he develops an alternative grammar with his body that allows for a widely disseminated disruption of the dancers' and his own identities, unhinging the traditional connotations associated with this opera. This latter operation is also a result of the historical,

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1 I am referring to the concept of adaptation proposed by Hutcheon 2006.

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intellectual, and political events that occurred in Europe and America in the 1980s (both of which have been crucial to Morris's life and work).

Morris' various semiotic procedures resemantize and recode his own body and those of his *corps de ballet*, in addition to the performativity inherent in ballet staging as an ever-changing performance. The choreographer succeeds in writing a queer ballet (and a camp one too)[2] that brings out the force of generally regarded dangerous heroines, such as Dido, when it has the power to express itself, thanks to an innovative and fully personal adaptation.

Transcoding corporalities

Speaking of French contemporary dance, Sophie Walon writes that some choreographers stage heteroclite and non-standard bodies for "une *incorporation* à travers leurs pratiques chorégraphiques d'une volonté de résistance, de réaction face aux forces normatives, aux contrôles insidieux qui pèsent sur les corps."[3] This resulted in *nouvelles corporeités*[4] which, both in France and, above all, in America, were gradually spreading from the 1980s onwards. It may be bumptious to point out that the distinctions between modern and contemporary dance are not only to be distinguished in terms of the specific episteme that had developed over time in America and Europe, but can also be analyzed as aesthetic-philosophical differences between the first and second halves of the twentieth century. Modern (American) dance, which arose as a reaction to classical ballet's rigidities, had as its primary goal the dogmatic isomorphism of dance and movement, as well as the expression of the dancer's emotional subjectivity.[5] Conversely, contemporary dance opposes the naturalization and consequent ontologization of the body and the subject with the idea that these are instead constructs, that is, always the products of a constructive process – additional, historical, relational, gradual – in short, never given *a priori.*[6]

The postmodern body becomes a social construct, with a more radical meaning insofar as it is subjected to the pressure of cultural, political, and social forces that "shape its appearance through multiple symbolic representations that act

2 Schwartz 2012, 82.

3 Walon 2011.

4 This is how Michel Bernard indicated, inspired by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, the product of the work of certain choreographers who, through their practices, have produced an aesthetic subversion of the traditional category of the body see Bernard/Nioche/Perrin 2005: 46.

5 See Pontremoli 2018, 23.

6 See Rossetti 2021, 290.

forcefully from the outside on an identity that has become more malleable"[7] (transl. mine). In this manner, the supposed *a priori* and universal categories are revealed as ideological constructs and deconstructed through dance itself. As Rossetti points out, this is the same foundation on which philosophy's epistemological constructivism begins: with the de-objectification and de-substantialization of reality.[8] Contemporary dance permeates forms, integrates styles and rejects all essentialist elements.

Mark Morris, despite being canonically targeted as a modern dancer, as he names his Dance Group as well, performs a series of aesthetic operations that apply extreme novelty and distinctiveness in comparison to his contemporaries. In particular, his style seems to be influenced by the queer theorizations that would only go on to be formalized in the 1990s, but followed years of struggles and gender claims – including the theories of Judith Butler – that boosted:

> a macro-category of dance, in short, that has put into play the natural and biological presuppositions of a body morphology given *a priori*, proposing a plurality of "other" corporeities that have given *performative* substance to new organic materialities through innovative choreographic *statements*.[9] (transl. mine)

The Mark Morris Dance Group is extremely peculiar both for the physical appearances of its dancers and their background. Let us remember that ballet in America had been greatly influenced by a construction of male gender that was centered on white, Christian, and Darwinian heroic masculinity, developed mainly by Ted Shawn as a response to the gender ideologies that were spreading in the 1940s and 1950s in the USA. In fact, American modern dance was born in strong opposition to Russian ballet (one can mention here, Nijinsky, who Morris himself decided to cite repeatedly for the purpose of his ballet), and it proposed a theatrical performance of masculinity summed up to describe Shawn's dance troupe in what Kimmel (1987) would term as "Muscular Christianity."[10] It was Martha Graham who gave the first impetus to a general reconsideration of gender norms. Graham's choice of heroines, conceived for a female audience, allowed a reappropriation of the representation of eroticized male bodies, albeit in a context in which masculinity was that proposed by Shawn (in which the eroticization of the male body is present but never explicit), i. e., heroic, white, muscular etc.[11] "Like Shawn's

7 Rossetti 2021, 290.
8 See Rossetti 2021, 290.
9 Rossetti 2021, 301.
10 Kimmel 1987, 143.
11 See Burt 2003, 112.

male dancers, Graham's Greek men's movement range is limited to represent only the more macho side of male behaviour."[12]

Morris started from there, but between Morris and Graham, there had been Merce Cunningham, Steve Paxton and his contact improvisation, Trisha Brown, and Yvonne Rainer, who had greatly revolutionized the conception and connection between music and dance, as well as between stereotyped gestures, by providing an alternative way of staging. The movements staged by Graham – and expanded by Cunningham – who was certainly already moving towards a form of androgynization of the female body (less so of the male one), is reused by Morris in a totally new form. One can cite here, for example, the reprise of *Lamentation,* (figs. 1–2) or again the citation of Nijinsky's scandalous, at the time, masturbation, which Morris applies to Dido but with a changing of sign. The choreographer, however, resemantizes the movements of his predecessors, giving completely different meanings to his body and that of his dancers and destabilizing the boundaries of identity in an increasingly scattered direction. This is thanks to the ways in which Morris succeeds in making his own identity disappear and in allowing a very wide spectrum of possibilities, both in the performance and in the interpretation by the spectators, to blossom. In this way the adaptation of Purcell-Tate through the recoding of Morris's body in a "vortex of corporal trans-codifications", denounce, but above all contest, the ideological construct at the basis of binary concepts, such as those of masculine and feminine, chaos and order, evil and good.

Dido and Aeneas: Purcell-Tate vs MMDG

Dido and Aeneas (1689?) is an opera in three acts, probably written for young female students at the Josias Priest boarding school in London by Henry Purcell (1659–1695), on a libretto by Nahum Tate (1652–1715). It takes its cue from the 4th book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, blended with Ovid's Dido from *Heroides,*[13] combined with suggestions from other compositions, including John Blow's masque *Venus and Adonis*, from which it takes its structure.

It tells the story of the love of Dido, Queen of Carthage, for Aeneas, the Trojan hero, and her despair when he abandons her. In Virgil, Aeneas has already been told that he should seek the site of a new Trojan Empire (which will be Rome), and Juno sends Mercury to remind him of his destiny when he appears ready to stay in Carthage with Dido. She urges him to stay but, when unsuccessful, she

12 Burt 2003, 114.

13 See *Aen.* 4 and *Ov. Her.* 7.

builds a funeral pyre, upon which she stabs herself to death. Tate and Purcell make a significant alteration by focusing the attention even more on Dido and her inner struggle rather than Aeneas, who is the sole soloist without an aria. Rome and the imperial project are not but mentioned. However, there are some other distinctions. Dido dies of a broken heart, with no desire for vengeance or the need for a pyre. A Sorceress and a coven of witches, rather than divine providence, are to blame for persuading Aeneas to flee Carthage (the Sorceress enacts the spirit of Mercury).[14] This priestess, according to Dido, has advised her on how to deal with Aeneas' impending departure, but she could well be a fiction of Dido's self-destructive mind – a ruse to hide the fact that she plans to murder herself.

Morris's *Dido* was created in Brussels for the Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris (during his three-year contract at the Theatre de la Monnaie) in 1989 and restaged several times with major differences until 2016. This analysis takes advantage of Barbara Willis Sweete's 1995 filming of the performance.

As stated in Morris' recent memoir (2019), he had the idea to stage Dido all by himself, interpreting all the characters in order to, "fuck myself to death,"[15] since he was afraid this would have been his very last performance and that he would have gone on to die of AIDS.

Compared to other performances of the opera, Morris shows us a scanty scene: on the stage, a map etching the floor (a stylization of the Mediterranean), in the center a bench with Pompeian columns. Men and women of different physicalities walk in, all wearing black clothes, a Phoenician color but at the same time a lugubrious announcement of the opera's finale. It almost seems as if the entire ballet is a requiem for Dido's death ("Death is now a welcome guest" sings the heroine in the last act, III.3). The chorus and the soloists are voices-over from below the stage, while the scene is only for the dancers. The lights that we see are white, sometimes ghostly, and the only act that gives us a distinctly contrasting color is the second, in which a green light frames the scene of the witches while Morris goes from being Dido to the Sorceress: from a composed queen, he turns into a mad maenad with his curls blowing in the wind. In the very end, Dido in a sad dance with Belinda, both dignified and regal, dies surrounded by a blue light with the dancers framing her in a sculpture-like scene. In a final brushstroke, the destiny of a timeless heroine ends in the silence of a painting with ancient reminiscences (see fig. 4) but profoundly up to date (turning to Berlinda she says, "no trouble in thy breast/Remember me/but ah! Forget my fate" III.3). Aeneas (Guiller-

14 Alastair Macaulay (2000, 816, quoted in Jordan 2015, 221) noted that a Sorceress lurks within Virigil's story, though is not explicitly mentioned.

15 Morris 2019.

mo Resto), the only one with a bare chest, always follows Dido in her dance; when he can no longer do so, he leaves the scene in silence, without ceremony.

Morris' version is most notable for his choice to dance in both Dido and the Sorceress parts, as well as the strong sensualization, at times parodic feel, of the entire score.

The ballet has been analyzed in depth from a great number of points of view.[16] In particular, Gay Morris pointed out that the choreographer:

> As Dido, he creates a sense of the feminine through the kind of movements he selects, which, in his second dance, are soft, rounded "feminine" shapes, as well as steps that in western theater dance fall within the domain of women, such as shoulder ripples. These are the "incessant and repeated actions" Butler contends create the illusion of gender stability. But at the same time, we see Morris as a "man." Not only does he dance in a "masculine" way during his first solo, with its many flat, angular movements, but we see and read his body as masculine – large, hairy, muscular. His body, one might argue, is not an activity; it is stubbornly material.[17]

However, in light of a broader theory of gender, body and performance that takes into account the modes of representation Morris chose to assume and blend with the languages he uses in his dancing, as well as the operations he performs to incorporate that in his body, it makes a new interpretation compelling. A synopsis of the dance styles used by Morris can be useful here (see figs. 2–3):

- Greek –'antiquey'– two-dimensional with torqued bodies and angular movement, in the manner of friezes and vase patterning.
- Ballet mime
- American Sign Language (ASL)
- Baroque rhetorical gesture
- Indian (Morris' refers to the style of 'mudras' – mime gestures with the hands)
- Indonesian, in the annual hip action in walking, an occasional tilt of the heads and the sarongs
- Irish step dance for the sailors
- A grotesque vocabulary particular to the Sorceress and witches, as they squat, upturn themselves or shudder in spasm, with gnarled arms and sickled feet[18]

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16 By Stephanie Jordan in a recent contribution (2015), from a gender perspective by Gay Morris (1991, 141–58), Ramsay Burt (2007), Selby Wynn Schwartz (2012, 71–94), but specifically from a male-dancer point of view, and from its postmodern, multi-layered meanings by Sophia Preston (1998, 241–52), Carol Martin (1999) and Duerden/Rowell (2013, 143–71). See also the MMDG webpage for a collection of reviews on the opera: https://markmorrisdancegroup.org/work/dido-and-aeneas/ (last accessed 07/12/2024).

17 Morris 2005, 145.

18 See Jordan 2015, 226–7.

Morris's adaptation of the Purcell/Tate opera, for his choreomusical, choreographic and direction choices, manifests a great "postmodern impulse."[19] Purcell's music and Tate's libretto are reinterpreted in a way that no one has done before, thanks to the invention of a new dance typology that combines various genres. We might add here that both the "music visualization" and "mickey mousing" offered for Morris appear to be restricting categories to explain *Dido*'s adaptation. We can best describe it as a "corporal trans-codification", of which the preceding aspects are only a part. This variety of styles and languages overlapping with the multimedia inherent in the ballet/opera already make it an intermedial and intertextual product. The grammar Morris *constructs* is therefore a constant dialogue with the past, which is, however, always a new construction, but above all, always a criticism and deconstruction of the *status quo* – an operation Morris carries out on various levels, especially in the choice of subject.

Dido, a queer heroine

Indeed, the choice of Purcell's work, particularly the character of Dido, is intriguing from the standpoint of cultural history. A component of the heroine's legacy has been crucial in Western culture. As shown by Maria Vittoria Tessitore and Paola Bono (1999) in a book about Dido's literary reception, she embodies on many levels a deviant femininity. Dido is characterized by both exterminating and generating and conserving power, as is typical of many mythical female figures with active willpower. At the same time, these are regarded as potentially dangerous. The representational ways of threatening femininity are divided into two in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, with Dido and the Sorceress, in both circumstances, standing for two possible destroyers. Morris flattens the dilemma that lies beneath the representation of dominant femininity by restoring Dido's agency and by not making her the victim of a male, but of her own volition.

It is no coincidence that the strong sexualization of Dido's body in the dance, which culminates in masturbation clearly not present in Purcell's score, in connection with death and love, allows a strong break with the stereotyping of Dido as an abandoned woman, also through the choreographer's choreomusical grammar and syntax. The centrality of Dido and her relationship with all the other characters in the opera (Roger Savage proposed seeing all the characters in Purcell's opera, with the exception of Aeneas, as facets of Dido's personality),[20] as well as Aeneas'

19 Duerden-Rowell 2013, 161.

20 See Savage 1976, 397.

lack of mobility, who is the true outsider of the scene, allow for a "choral," to use Kristevian terms, vision of femininity.

Morris' operation goes even beyond chorality, which would have led us back to a realm where femininity is still associated with the abject. There is no longer a conspiratorial femininity, nor is there an annihilation of one femininity against another, as in Purcell's text, but rather a very deliberate choice that brings Dido back to an anti-patriarchal and anti-normative horizon. Morris' recoding and reinterpretation of Purcell's text is part of a larger effort by the choreographer, who permits a comprehensive rethinking of both the music and the text, as well as the ways of writing and rewriting with and on the body, through his body. Ramsay Burt writes that "[t]he only political use [that] deconstructive strategies have is to create a space within which to make visible and representable what has remained invisible and unrepresentable within patriarchal culture."[21]

Transcoding, therefore, has here the sense of writing with the body. Encoding and recoding through the use of the body creates a hybrid writing that is not only not strongly gendered but is also double and accepts the double in itself. Mark Morris' corporeal writing, by combining codes from different media, creates a syntax that allows an emergence of Dido in all her possible aspects. In *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman (1988) argues that the female voice in cinema, as well as the soundtrack, contribute to the construction of gender difference, suggesting the passivity and the secondary role of women, always proposed through non-authoritative and non-narrative voices (verses, cries etc.), according to the double construct disembodied male voice vs. synchronized female voice. By eliminating the singers from the stage, and by presenting himself centrally as both the female protagonists of the ballet, Morris writes with the body what cannot be expressed within the common language, disrupting the division proposed by Silverman in a new hybrid system.

Morris's operation is even more complex: on the one hand, he succeeds in going beyond the concept of the feminine abjection, staging a figure such as Dido who already represents a strong resistance to patriarchy; on the other hand, through his body, which is male, overtly homosexual, and harassed by the fear of death linked to sex, he succeeds in constructing a grammar that overlaps the word, but through the body "rewrites" all the characters of the opera, giving them a new agency. Mark Morris' body, in other words, "corporealizes" the voices – especially Dido's – making it gesture.

Morris brings about with his body a disruption of bodies, by consciously maintaining a perpetual ambiguity. This is possible only and exclusively in the construc-

21 See Burt 1995, 162.

tion of a hybrid language that borrows from different semioses. In fact, if dance is always presented as a hybrid form between word and image starting from the ancient "Greek schemata", as Maria Luisa Catoni (2005) has well analysed in a brilliant book on the subject, Morris' type of dance combines the already hybrid syntactic construction with the body and on the body, which does not intend to replace the word, but to show an alternative way of understanding it. What is called Morris' "music visualization" or "mickey mousing" because of its excessively didactic significance – for which he was also strongly condemned by the critics – is in fact a new expressive mode, which will open the doors to a whole series of epochal changes that will lead to ballets that are probably much better known, such as Sasha Waltz's *Dido and Aeneas*,[22] but which certainly start from the reflections on the body of Martha Graham, Isadora Duncan, Vaslav Nijinsky, but which Morris does not analyze through the lens of an androgynization of the female body, but of an expression that manifests performativity and the construction of movements and binarism in a continuous destructive and constructive dialectic, in short, in corporal transcodifications. And he does so by staging a heroine like Dido who presents in the history of her tradition a very strong form of female resistance to patriarchy.

22 See Alonso 2012 for a comparison of the two stagings.

Fig. 1: H. Moselsio, *Martha Graham in Lamentation, No. 3.* Photograph. © Library of Congress, Music Division. Source: www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200154214/ (last accessed 10/02/2025).

Fig. 2: Still frame from Barbara Willis Sweete (dir.), *Dido and Aeneas*, Mark Morris Dance Group, DVD, 19'18''. © Mark Morris Dance Group 1995.

Fig. 3: Still frame from Barbara Willis Sweete (dir.), *Dido and Aeneas,* Mark Morris Dance Group, DVD, 4'23''. © Mark Morris Dance Group 1995.

Fig. 4: Still frame from Barbara Willis Sweete (dir.), *Dido and Aeneas*, Mark Morris Dance Group, DVD, 50'16''. © Mark Morris Dance Group 1995.

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