

CORPO VIRTUALE O PRESENZA CORPOREA?

VIRTUAL BODY OR BODILY PRESENCE?

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Abstract

Starting from a careful pedagogical analysis of the central role of the body and the languages connected to it, this essay aims to reflect on and compare two realities (corporeity and digitality), in the perspective of recognizing and connecting, in the digital interface and presence, the possibility of continuing to know and recognize each other.

Because of the encroachments imposed by the Pandemic period, which questioned roles, functions, times and spaces, this work also invites reflection on the contexts that propose and develop formation on the practices of expressive languages and dance, in presence and at a distance.

A partire da un'attenta analisi pedagogica sul ruolo centrale del corpo e dei linguaggi ad esso connessi, questo contributo si pone come obiettivo quello di far riflettere e di confrontare due realtà (corporeità e digitalità), nell'ottica delle possibilità di riconoscere e collegare, nell'interfaccia digitale e nella presenza, la possibilità di continuare a conoscere e riconoscersi.

Alla luce degli sconfinamenti imposti dal periodo Pandemico, che hanno messo in discussione ruoli, funzioni, tempi e spazi, questo lavoro invita, altresì, ad una riflessione sui contesti che propongono e sviluppano formazione sulle pratiche dei linguaggi espressivi e della danza, in presenza e a distanza.

Keywords

Dance; inclusion; corporeity; developmental age.

Danza; inclusione; corporeità; età evolutiva.

¹ This essay is the result of a shared work, but Lucia Pallonetto Ph.D. Student in Didactic Corporealities, technology and Inclusion is the author of the paragraphs "Introduction" and "The role of the body between real and virtual" Carmen Palumbo Associate Professor of Motor Activities Methods and Didactic (sector M-EDE/01) is the scientific coordinator of the work and edited the paragraph "Conclusions".

Introduction

According to Merleau-Ponty, there is no consideration on the world that can be approached without starting from corporeal reality. The body is at the same time both “lived body” and openness of being in the world, so a “living body”. Therefore, the body as “flesh” is the ontological means of relating to the world, insofar as it is part of it, but it also constitutes the consciousness of this union, which can take on a number of meanings.

However, the world cannot be said to be reachable through reflection, because, for us, it comes before any thematisation. Thus, «my body has its own world or understands its world without having to go through “representations”, without subordinating itself to a “symbolic” or “objectifying function” » (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 195).

Although the phenomenological view of the body is not analysed, it is necessary consider the indissoluble knot that unites sense and the body: the living body inhabits the world and thus knows it independently of any reflection. Thanks to the body, when a human being perceives an impression, it is nothing more than a sense that emerges and makes itself manifest: «on the other hand, feeling invests the quality of a vital value, grasps it first of all in its meaning for us, for that heavy mass which is our body, and for this reason it always involves a reference to the body».

Merleau-Ponty focuses on the concept of intentionality in his book, *Phenomenology of Perception*, and defines it as an intrinsic characteristic of the living body. The spatiality of one's own body is a spatiality not of position, like other things in the world, but a spatiality of circumstance that is founded in modes of action and motor planning ability. The philosopher speaks of embodied intentionality that almost coincides with the subject's motor intentionality. According to this view, if consciousness is intended as embodied corporeity, the ability of the living body to place itself in situation determines the immediate relationship of consciousness itself with the world.

According to this logic, motility is the original intentionality, that is: «under intelligence, as under perception, we discover a more fundamental function, a vector that, like a reflector, moves in all directions and by means of which we can orient ourselves towards anything, inside of us or outside of us, and have a behaviour towards this object [...], the central function we speak of, before we see or know objects, makes them exist more secretly for us» (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 191).

The world is made up by an “intentional arc” and not by a set of mere nervous stimuli. Consciousness projects around us «our past, our future, our human environment, our physical situation, our ideological situation, our moral situation, or rather, it ensures that we are situated under all these relations».

Instead, if we consider sensation only from a physiological point of view, as a mere reception of data transmitted to the brain, the subject is no longer a living body, but ontologically decays to an object. As we can learn from phenomenology, we must always consider the body as a living body, as the place of experiences concerning sense.

Gallese, in his article *Living Body, Embodied Simulation and Intersubjectivity*, he introduces, following a more modern view, a study on the relationship between the motor system, movement and action. He claims that the particularity of action, intended as a motor act aimed at a goal, is that it is under the control of the motor system, which had always been considered as assigned to the simple control of movements.

Then, in the 1980s, Giacomo Rizzolatti and his research team came to identify that some neurons are activated during the execution of actions, according to a purpose, and not during the execution of movements.

Gallese explained in this regard that «in this specific case, these were neurons that discharged each time the monkey grasped an object, whether it did with its right hand, its left hand, or its mouth. The movement of each of these different body parts is controlled by very different muscle groups. Neither muscles nor movements can therefore constitute the common denominator that is at the base of the activation of this neuronal population. The common denominator is the purpose of those actions» (Gallese, 2006: 300).

Furthermore, Gallese (2006:301) notes that the activation of such neurons has also been recorded following complex, non-motor visual stimuli: «a class of these neurons (canonical neurons) responds to the observation of objects whose intrinsic physical characteristics (shape, size) are intimately related to the type of action “encoded” by those same neurons».

This means that when an object is seen, the activation of the motor programme to interact with that particular object begins. In other words, “the object in that context constitutes the potential action”.

This scientific discovery, from a phenomenological point of view, means that there is a world continuously related to a subject, which, being a living body, intentionally interacts with the world itself, immediately and in a pre-reflective form.

This discovery influences the conception of Gallese, according to which the relationship of being with the world is of a motor nature, precisely because of the presence of neurons that are activated prior to cognitive processing.

This implies that the unitary sense of things in the world is understood through the dynamic relationship between the acting subject and the world itself. The perspective we have just examined, that is Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory and its development within Gallese's neurophenomenology, served us to understand and fix CORPOREITY AS A STARTING POINT.

This confirms that the learner is not a pure container in which to pour notions, but a living subject and body that interacts with the world through movement, even before any reflection.

In this light, the importance of dance, in its function as an experience that simultaneously enhances personal identity and awareness of one's body, intellectual knowledge and free expression of the self, becomes clear.

It is also confirmed that dance “is not only a type of physical activity that offers pleasure, but also contributes to the improvement of the quality of life in many fields” (Lykesas et al., 2018, p. 101) by providing a language that allows for expression in adaptable ways and contributes to harmonious and complete growth.

The role of the body between virtual and real

The health emergency caused a sudden and unexpected rethinking of our habits, behaviours, relationships. It forced us to rethink our lives and the spaces we occupy, giving us a sense of reflective. The need to rethink spaces, times, distance, movement and contact, communicative relationships and the voices of others in a new dimension of distance has been and still is an ongoing experimentation.

We were suddenly and with very little preparation forced to experience communication at a distance, and today that we can finally ask ourselves some tests and questions, we ask ourselves how effective communication is, even though we are two or more persons, two or more bodies actually far apart or really close.

This is why in the first analysis it was appropriate to carry out a review of the scientific literature, comparing how the relationship and growth of a moving body in presence or at a distance changes.

Regarding the possible and potential functions on the central role of the body both in virtual reality and in presence and especially through dance, as we experienced how much it enhances and expands all the characteristic abilities of the person-student, because it is effective in the global and integrated formation in the personality of the student.

Many studies examined the effectiveness and the influence of intervention programmes focused on creative dance, on the development and improvement of motor skills of Primary School children (Lykesas G., Tsapakidou A., Tsompanaki E., 2014). In these programmes, the activities and games had as their primary objective the knowledge of the body in relation to space (Tsompanaki E, 2019).

Because of the closing period of the schools, the “Anghiari Dance Hub” (2021) and the “Aterballetto Foundation” (2020) proposed alternating paths and reshaped the meaning of the work, elaborating practices of “remote exploration” that allowed for the exploration of movement assisted by technological tools, such as Virtual Reality, in order to give back to the public an overview, closeness and overcoming of the isolation condition. Therefore, as also identified by Lancia and Rubinacci (2007), a link is born between the digital and the pedagogical world, also identified by Bolter (2000), a technological remediation of the body, placed in digital environments.

Therefore, thinking about a reorganisation of space and time led us to realise that dance education experiences aim to create pathways that, starting from the proposal of creation and experience of movement, lead the subject to a mind-body, organism-environment circularity which expands the boundaries of educational action, since it involves, in the best of cases, the subject in the

affective and relational complexity that arises from the phenomenal experience of the body and shows us the way to a broader conception, which not only allows us to overcome physical boundaries, but also to include virtual ones.

Our research hypotheses were:

- Can we find a three-dimensionality in contact with the other, closeness and presence, even throughout a two-dimensional medium such as a computer video?
- Does the space we occupy influence our experiences, cognitive structuring, aesthetic education and relationships?

In order to answer the formulated questions, it is possible to distinguish the objectives in relation to the body in digital reality and in relation to a body that we will define as being in 'presence':

VIRTUAL BODY is the one that has to train to inhabit and act in the classroom as a virtual place of relationships and while still remaining a subject of communication, connection, bonding.

BODY PRESENCE gives the children an awareness of a greater intentionality of action and of the relationship that is established between the bodies, allowing them to orient themselves towards the discovery of the unexpected and the possibilities of unveiling their own sense of uniqueness.

Regarding the activity of danced movement, the methodological framework focused on the founding principles of the art of dance highlighted by the studies of Rudolf Laban with those in psychokinetics on the psychomotor development of the developmental age person conducted by the Prof. Jean Le Boulch.

The structuring of the treatment activity, which shared the competency objectives of Body, Space, Dynamics, Social Relations, included 5 phases such as:

- Mind-body warm-up;
- Space awareness and conditional factors;
- New skills/techniques;
- Composition - Performance
- Recovery.

In the distance activity, the work's aim was to become more aware of one's own perception, playing creatively between real space and virtual space, thus creating reference coordinates to orient oneself in the virtual space and create a relationship dance and be able to use video as a form of connection and communication.

In presence, on the other hand, the pathway on danced movement, aimed at the development of an attention to the body and its significant role in the creation of knowledge was realised through the proposal of pathways in which the awareness and intentionality of action was combined with creative thinking, that is an active reworking of the proposals given. The aim was precisely to involve the child in freeweight activities moving in space and time.

Conclusions

Dance therefore demonstrates to be particularly applicable to the school context, as it is placed in an experiential perspective and not a rigidly executive one, making children more aware of their movements, combining the ability to control and free expression, motor creativity and communication through forms of movement that translate into the art of moving (Palumbo, 2014).

Thanks to studies on bodily expressivity, dance has been recognised as a tool capable of broadening horizons and connecting several research territories, constituting a space in which several research methods and approaches, whether traditional or more advanced, can be integrated and compared. Only in this way, in fact, is it possible to study a multidimensional phenomenon characterised precisely by its peculiar pluralistic nature.

In dance there are executive, technical and expressive aspects, but also the declination of human abilities and the creation of personal identities, the result of a continuous motor process made up of actions that would otherwise appear to be in conflict with one another.

Educational research received from dance studies an amount of input and information, useful for analysing the resources that the body activates through movement and that constitute its didactic potential. Interpretations, gestures, transformations constitute as a whole a “visible expression of simplistic properties” (Palumbo, 2013) that include specialisation, modularity and rapidity. “Because of complexity, living organisms have chosen specialisation, modularity, separation of functions, division of labour, categorisation, distinction” (Berthoz, 2011, p. 67).

Dance is a complex, yet natural space, made up of gestures and movements that are individually unique and specific, but acquire their meaning through the fluidity and continuity of the movement considered as a whole. Part of this complexity, which can be immediately identified, is the artistic sense expressed in the interpretation, yet the continuous coordination of the flow of movements performs a proactive process, in relation to the perfection to be achieved in the gesture.

In short, the transformation into dance of the individual actions, when performed in functional sequence, corresponds to the realisation of the “complexity of the dynamic dimension of the person” (Berthoz, 2011, p. 71).

Furthermore, the dance space includes different visuals such as enactive, constructivist, cognitivist and behaviourist, which compete and together act, in complementarity, within the teaching-learning process, thus making it capable of providing diversified tools, suitable for dealing with the complexity in front of which one finds oneself.

Projects such as those quickly described, which originate in the field of art and social participation, are enlightening examples of project reconversion, taking care to keep alive the pedagogical tension and the socialisation purpose, the spirit of education and inclusion. And it is from here that we must start again in order to make sense of the teaching relationship as a space for social participation in learning. At the end of a journey as forced as that of the pandemic, which led us to reflect on the possibility of a communication of bodies at a distance, we can say that we can make a comparison on the two possibilities of communication.

Our conclusions convinced us that the discomfort in learning of distance teaching became evident because the visual, physical, social contact and intentionality that only with the proximity of bodies can be enacted, is lacking. However, it is also true that in the light of experience, didactic projects and traditional practices did not always activate the emotional and cognitive motivational dimensions involved in learning.

Therefore, we believe that distance does not always and in any case harm, if teaching is aware that the experiences conveyed must be of a co-constructive nature, soliciting the pupil's interest in more modern methods and tools and reconsidering educational environments.

In other words, is it necessary insist on distance learning without taking care to make presence learning more interesting and modern?

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