



Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance

by Susan Leigh Foster. 2011. London: Routledge. 286 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$125 cloth, 59.95 paper, e-book available.

Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices

edited by Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason. 2012. Bristol, UK: Intellect. 224 pp., illustrations, index. \$43 paper, e-book available.

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On the cover of both of these two books are photographs of women in loose white pants—arms extended, wrists twisted, each wearing concentrated facial expressions; both seen from front and back as if doubling in a mirror. Perhaps suggested by the reaching gesture, the bodies seem to implore the viewer. It is as if movement is held out and yet in abeyance, incomplete within the image, thus awaiting further fulfillment and explanation. As with the images, both books grapple with the conundrum of how movement communicates to a viewer, and how feelings might be evoked, whether kinesthetically or choreographically. Similar but different—one more historical, the other more fragmented—they also address the timely question of empathy in creative practice.

Susan Leigh Foster's monograph is organized into four large chapters: the first three are essays on the key terms of choreography, kinesthesia, and empathy, followed by a final culminating reflection on "choreographing empathy." This latter has its own argument and offers readings of contemporary choreographies by artists from Thailand, Japan, native America, France, Britain, Germany. The edited collection by Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason, on the other hand, arises from an interdisciplinary research project called "Watching Dance," and is organized into six sections each with an introduction, and includes case studies about kinesthetic empathy from fields as diverse as sports science, film, therapy, theater, dance, and photography. One might argue that these two books therefore represent some of the differences circulating in the field of dance studies, particularly as it is constituted in North America and Britain. Britain's well-developed conception of "practice as research" gives precedence to the phenomenological and interdisciplinary terrain of ideas about performance, whereas the prevalence of the concert dance tradition in the United States is aligned with the artistic and technical virtuosity of a choreographic canon elaborated within national and conceptual borders.

Via the concept of empathy, both books address the burgeoning interest in embodiment and the phenomenology of experience, which is active in scholarly discourse across a range of diverse disciplines. In order to consider how empathy plays such an important role within contemporary cultural theory and creative practice, my discussion will be in three parts, provoked as much by the complementarity of these books as their differences in and through the use of key terms, images, and references. First, I will discuss their methodological contribution to choreography, and an expanded terrain of artistic research, from the perspectives of the U.S. and the UK academy. From there, I will consider the value of these books to interdisciplinary research in relation to "kinesthesia." I will conclude with discussion of the common term "empathy" as a means of addressing the place of the "affective turn" in performance and creative practice, with brief reference to wider debates in cultural studies.

Part One: Contemporary Choreography and Performance

In 2011 at the SpringDance Festival in Utrecht, Holland, Foster suggested, as she does in her preface, that her new book, *Choreographing Empathy*, might have had different structures. She teasingly, and persuasively, exposed the audience to an alternative argument—one that investigates the dancing body as an ideological artifact in the genealogy of historical knowledge, showing “how the body could be cultivated so as to assume a relationship of power over another body” (175–9). In the fine writing of her final chapter, the essay of the same name as the book, she extends a careful reading of the cultivated body and power to the values attributed to empathy in contemporary choreographic projects. Her examples range from the cross-cultural choreographies of the Thai dance artist, Pichet Klunchun, and his attempts to establish an “egalitarian exchange” with the French choreographer, Jérôme Bel, to the place-making of the indigenous dancer Tanya Lukin Linklater. Foster also attends to remote perversions of affect in the media-inspired works of Lea Anderson and the Japanese performance collective KATHY, who reproduce the dispassionate physicality of commodified female bodies. Insofar as the audience is expected to be active within networks of affect, Foster participates in the ambulatory performances of Rimini Protokoll and Headlong Dance Theatre who direct movement scores for the active spectator by mobile phone. In each of these diverse choreographies, empathy has been recoded and re-charged, using strategies designed to activate kinesthetic response and locate an affective experience for the immersed spectator or critically observant commentator.

Foster’s analysis of these new artistic practices is vivid in its watching of the bodies, as well as wary of her emplacement within the event. She subtly unpicks the gender, race, and ideological content, noting that a special dedication on behalf of an artist or witness is often required to make “fellow-feeling” happen (187). What is difficult to grasp, however, is whether empathy can be translated into the semiotic analysis of a piece, and if so, what values do the complex subjective and intersubjective qualities of an empathetic exchange contribute to the materializing of dance discourses? How does an affective response exceed interpretation or precondition understanding? Such questions of sensory experience, or embodied cognition, in relation to a range of interdisciplinary creative practices are central to Reynolds and Reason’s *Kinesthetic Empathy*. For many practitioners, an engagement with kinesthetic and choreographic empathy represents an important creative methodology, and the editors, in their own chapters, introduce, respectively, sound and photography as ways to simulate the meanings of an affective response to movement. For Reynolds and Reason, empathy is an ambiguous concept, although it usefully aligns the phenomenological aspects of aesthetic experience with contemporary understandings of intersubjectivity defined as processual and negotiated.

In this respect, Reason’s collaboration with the experienced dance photographer, Chris Nash, is an exemplary contribution (Chapter 12). Nash asks the dancers to work with their peripheral vision to “mirror” each other while photographed from different angles using varied exposures and filters. The photographs, two of which grace the cover discussed earlier, relay as much about the micro-performances of the individual body as they do about the sensory experience of locating a perception of movement within the space between them. Reason considers this appreciation of “only almost mirroring,” a subtle relationship between two bodies, as a metaphor for the perceptions active in kinesthetic empathy (248). His own unfolding surprise in studying the images, their mobile punctum as it were, conveys ambiguity, intimacy, attention, and a flux of feelings toward that which is knowable, and thus objectified in an image, and that which is less certain, and perhaps not translatable into words. It is “the strongly communicated engagement between two figures” that interests Reason and that constitutes his understanding of kinesthetic empathy (248).

Discussion of improvisation in music by Tai-Chen Rabinowitch, Ian Cross, and Pamela Burnard further includes the ways in which co-creation might be considered a complex entanglement of sonority, rhythm, and technical knowledge, made possible through the intersubjectivity of group interaction (Chapter 5). What distinguishes performance genres however, as Reason suggests, is

the character of “explicit performances” whose intention is to be watched, thus evoking and requiring a kinesthetic empathy that includes “to-be-looked-at-ness” (139). It is these “crafted, constructed and artificial elements” of communication and embodied engagement within particular contexts of spectatorship that generate an interest in kinesthetic effects, and “it is this kinesthetically driven implication that provides the enduring impact of witnessing the explicit performances of film and theatre” (141). One of the more critical contributions of the Reynolds and Reason volume is its discussion of the conjunction between difference and empathy, or between displacement and proximity, that arises when watching performance.

Several case studies highlight that empathy may not always be a condition of “fellow-feeling” but can include negative affects, and chapters by Adriano Aloia, Lucy Fife Donaldson (Chapter 8), and Guillemete Bolens discuss the uneasiness of selected film sequences. Writing on Charlie Chaplin, Bolens examines how an audience’s “kinesic sensitivity” can “induce precise, if vicarious, embodied sensorial perceptions” (140), while Aloia returns to the precarious balance of the acrobat theorized in early twentieth-century aesthetic theory, by incorporating the feminist film scholar, Vivian Sobchack’s commentary on the “lived-body” into the phenomenology of the moving image (102). He argues that the pact of the film with the spectator depends upon a “proximity generated at a distance” that simulates the tense anxiety associated with falling (94). Whether these bodily dimensions of viewing are real or fictional, what matters to the critical apparatus is that they are designed “as if” to generate a “circuit of empathies” (103). Much of this affective knowledge is, in my view, dependent upon the multiple corporealities transacted with an audience, in conditions that include watching besides others (Fensham 2009).

Reynolds and Reason, and their contributing authors, also acknowledge that responses to a dance performance involve contextual factors, which may produce either positive or negative affects. As Foster’s frame analysis in *Reading Dancing* (1986) suggests, an audience brings expectations about what they will experience, their knowledge of the dance form, and their levels of experience to any understanding of observed movement. The concept of affect extends that consideration to how kinesthetic involvement with actions on the part of performers, and spectators, varies the self-perceptions evoked by an explicit performance. Perhaps what remains at stake is less the aesthetics of affect per se, whether inner or outer, private or social, but rather its nuancing as a Brechtian form of critical distance.

Rather than reduce distance, Rose Parek-Gaihade argues that the attunement of empathy opens up recognition of another as “an other” (Chapter 9). Thus, watching a performance might lead to an ethical relationship such as the one that evolves between Klunchun and Bel in Foster’s example. Rather than overstate the importance of empathy, which might be quite limited on occasion, or be the cause for dissonance in our sympathies, Parek-Gaihade makes a more modest claim: “In certain empathic moments, performance can provoke a reflexivity that is tied to an immediate embodied experience” (179). It is the momentary connection with a choreography of bodies, belonging to neither one nor the other, that causes the subtle dynamic felt to be a state of empathy. Such a nuanced understanding of the affectiveness of performance acknowledges the power of this concept for enhancing meaning as well as identifying its potential for specificity in research relating to choreography. Other aspects of these two books, however, extend the discussion of kinesthetic empathy more widely.

Part Two: (Inter)discourses: Choreography and Kinesthesia

Arguably contemporary dance studies is contingent upon kinesthetic knowledges, and concepts that accrue from heightened or sophisticated analysis of embodied movement. While Reynolds and Reason’s book spreads laterally, both speculative and exploratory, the greater part of Foster’s book exposes the roots of key ideas in choreographic history. Indeed, Foster’s historical sweep is

brehtaking: unpicking Obama's speeches about a Supreme Court judge appointment, rewiring the obsessive details encoded in nineteenth-century physical education teaching manuals, or enjoying obscure seventeenth-century writings on the contagious and curative properties attributed to the "Powder of Sympathy" (134). Following a Foucauldian methodology, she insists upon the contingency of durable historical developments, whose relations of power inform moments of emergence in dance knowledge.

Her examination of choreography likewise explicates the link between the *choros* of dancing and the *graphos* of writing that has dogged Western views of dance since the Renaissance (18–26). Foster here undertakes an important translation of the ways in which cartography evolved in parallel with new ideas about the dancing body: we became choreographic the more we could abstract the movement of bodies into symbolic representations of place. These framing orientations of the body represent conditions of power that required possession of land, as well as increasing control of the arrangements and hierarchies of the body. Coordinates that become coordination and maps that become notations together produce a cartographic imagination that becomes a means to manage embodied knowledge. I recall a presentation by Foster at the 2006 SDHS conference in Banff holding the Feuillet drawing out in front of her, rotating it along with her body in order to follow its scrawlings along the "white page," while simultaneously reading from a colonial manuscript describing a place of "discovery." It provoked some laughter, but the corporealizing of the relationship between emplacement in maps and choreography as components of an imperial project were vividly exposed.

Moreover, Foster deconstructs the concept of kinesthesia, explaining it as a perceptual apparatus of increasing value to the mobilization of movement repertoires from the eighteenth-century court ballets to the gymnasiums of the late nineteenth century. By way of contrast, the *Kinesthetic Empathy* collection acknowledges a co-extensive and interdisciplinary present interest in the phenomenological aspects of kinesthesia for research and philosophical enquiry. It favors practitioners who explore the sensory and multidimensional aspects of choreography or dance methods, and thus is receptive to the intercorporeal and intersubjective approaches that inform contemporary dance, whether somatic practices, media technologies, soundscapes, or other visualization techniques. In this contemporary context, Reynolds and Reason regard kinesthesia as both inner "proprioception" and an outer awareness of action and its inter-relationships (18). Kinesthesia thus functions as a key interdisciplinary concept—one that enriches research into the ethical and political dimensions of embodied knowledge.

Although differing in relation to the historical or political purpose, these writers agree that kinesthesia and the sensory capacities of the body involve learned movement and an autonomic set of responses, and that over time, we become expert observers of subtle corporeal differences within our body and those around us—Foster has elsewhere called this the "perceived body" (1997, 238–9). It is only more recently that watching, observing, and attending to another's body has become of interest to cognitive scientists who ascribe positive or negative intensification of a sensation or feeling to a learned response in the brain. Reynolds and Reason cautiously argue that the "discovery" of mirror neurons and the plasticity of the brain when applied to the human capacity to feel for others, or respond to their movements, could be regarded as reductive (12). They aim to draw attention to the increasing acknowledgment that personal histories, and indeed learning and cultural context, change and modify our receptivity to kinesthetic empathy. The visual art critic, Amelia Jones, who provides an introduction to *Kinesthetic Empathy*, also recalls that kinesthesia relates to Henri Bergson's notion of the durational dimensions of human experience—the embodied mind's capacity to give meaning to each present instant. If, according to Bergson, "art impresses rather than expresses feelings," then she suggest that the kinesthetic dimension has a vitality that can generate purposeful action. An empathic response that conveys emotions, without pre-determining its future effects, may still have political or ethical consequences through subsequent action (13).

Given the prevalence of kinesthetic research in the academy, several chapters in the Reynolds and Reason collection expand upon this phenomenological schema in the training capacity of sports science equipment (Maiken Hillerup Fogtman, Chapter 15) or the “object” relations of theater scenography (Joslin McKinney, Chapter 11), through the use of puppets to engage touch and sensitivity in autistic children (Nicola Shaughnessy, Chapter 1), and in the investigation of “stillness” and its capacity to move us within a performance (Gray, Chapter 10). Others, such as Sarah Whatley and Brian Knoth (Chapters 13 and 14, respectively), are more interested in how the somatics of a multisensory performance “can enhance their (the audience) experience of affect” and be linked with simulation (Knoth, 286–7). A range of mirroring responses including the formats of call and response, a Greek chorus, and an echo effect impact upon other concepts such as the structures of rhythm or the therapeutic model of dyad witnessing. For instance, Bonnie Meekums regards kinesthetic empathy as a critical aspect of a person’s capacity for “mutual incorporation” in dance therapy, not unlike contact improvisation where a “leaderless duet . . . can be experienced as transcending the boundaries of the self and invoking feelings of oneness” (Chapter 2, 63). This desire for empathy as unison movement or incorporation of self with other varies significantly across these diverse investigations of kinesthetic empathy, and reveals its seductive use as a metaphor for explaining movement.

By way of contrast with humanist models of scholarship that stress dialogue between researchers and participants, the example of cognitive psychologists Amy E. Hayes and Steven P. Tipper offers a dispassionate observation of the evolutionary or physiological reasons for affective responses to qualities such as flow or non-flow in motor events (Chapter 3, 30–1). In their study of the manipulation of everyday objects, affect, feeling, and emotion perform as interchangeable terms across a scale of appraisal between good and bad. Concerned with identifying the implications of fluency affects, whether acquired or not, the scientists assess the possible implications of affective skills for consumer preference. Such a positivist account of kinesthetic empathy, as an adaptive and learnable attribute, may be relevant to those working in therapy, training, and educational settings, or as Reynolds and Reason suggest, in other sectors such as gaming or cross-cultural interactions. This section challenges therefore any assumed values we may wish to attribute to the role of kinesthesia for enhancing social relations.

Part Three: Empathy and Affect

At the outset, I proposed to return to the concept of empathy, and its significance in contemporary dance studies in relation to other scholarly discourses on embodiment and affect. Empathy, as both Foster, and Reynolds and Reason acknowledge, was given specific meanings by the dance critic John Martin when he suggested that the “metakinesis” of modern dance could evoke a parallel, or sympathetic, emotional engagement within the viewer (Foster, 155–7; Reynolds and Reason, 19, 123). This idea that watching movement might enable a spectator to “mimic” the emotional attributes of another person in turn derives from the notion of “fellow feeling” developed in late nineteenth-century German and British aesthetic theory, and then extended in the mid-twentieth century by the affect theory of psychologists such as Silvan Tomkins (Sedgwick 2003, 93–122). More recently, the dance ethnologist Deidre Sklar constructed the notion of “kinesthetic empathy,” which she defined as “the capacity to participate within another’s movement or another’s sensory experience of movement” (cited by Fogtman in Reynolds and Reason, 305). The notion that there can be a transmissible cognition of bodies watching other bodies was also a key concept in my own book on “embodied spectatorship” (Fensham 2009, 177). And the neuropsychologists, such as Antonio Damasio, have lent support to this thesis by suggesting that the human capacity to empathize might be hardwired into our brains through mechanisms that trigger autonomic responses as a result of the perception of movement; with their powerful MRI technologies, they have observed mirror neurons that respond at different levels of firing to the movements of another. It is this pre-patterning, they hypothesize, that makes it possible for a child to learn from its mother, or indeed

for a dancer to learn intricate movements by watching the demonstration of a teacher. In this highly condensed version of what constitutes empathy, we can trace shifts from sympathy to emotional engagement, from cognition to mirroring, that have become known as “the affective turn” in literary and cultural studies (Callard and Papoulias, 2010).

Reynolds takes up this association between empathy and affect (neither feeling nor emotion) directly in her own chapter, acknowledging that both ideas are notoriously ambiguous. She usefully cites a range of theorists working within film and cultural studies who deploy empathy in the interpretation of affect, in order to engage with contemporary dance practices. The sensory responsiveness of spectators to movement, she asserts, is not merely dependent upon the narrative, spectacle, or identity of the dancer. The “dance’s body” makes movement visible within a choreographic work, and, according to Reynolds, this experience of a unique content might arise from the interactions of a dancer with some piece of technology, an object, or between dancers in a group formation. Neither subjective nor objective, its material effects are virtual—kinesthetic and affective—causing the spectator to respond with an intensification of feeling that is not yet differentiated. Reynolds’s conception of the dance’s body builds upon Brian Massumi’s (2002) definition of affect as a “becoming active, in parallel, of mind and body” (cited in Reynolds and Reason, 128). For her, this poststructural notion of “an embodied intensity that impacts the spectator kinesthetically” (Reynolds and Reason, 132) is most productive for dance studies, since it is neither psychologically prescriptive (Tomkins) nor merely neurological (Damasio).

By way of contrast, as I’ve suggested, Foster historicizes; it is religious, political, educational, and social systems that determine the operational systems of corporeal organization and value. Kinesthesia and affect thus arise historically as disciplines of the body, or as modes of address to the spectator shaped by moral and social structures, including gender, race, and other identity epistemes. From this perspective, we need to consider the contexts in which claims for empathy are choreographed, not only in the historical variability of the connections between physical sensation, emotional content, and cultural practices, but also in the artistic enactments of codes, beliefs, and attributes of power. For Foster, if empathy is imbricated with action, then “each action is simultaneously an act of perception and an act of knowledge production” (173).

In the global politics of a network society, what disturbs many cultural theorists is the increasing detachment and lack of corporeal intimacy that undermines the necessity and scope of empathy, they seek answers to how embodied recognition might render us attentive to another’s situation. There are also dissenting voices who question the value of equivalences proposed between the materiality of signs, whether corporeal or otherwise, in artistic production and empathy. The British art critic, Briony Fer, for instance, has asserted that “one of my aims is to counter a so-called empathic model of aesthetic experience and consider instead the cuts and dislocations that are a condition of viewing” (2004, 1). A trenchant critic of the affective turn has been the cultural historian, Ruth Leys, who argues that neuroscientists and poststructural scholars alike have blurred their accounting for “the affective system” by linking two systems of consciousness, one concerned with affect (and sensation) and the other with cognition (and interpretation) (2011, 443). Leys argues for methods of appraisal that facilitate interpretation as an act of socially constructed meaning-making, rather than deferring to the subjectivity of affective response. This scholarly debate on affect is a live one, and in dance studies, it soon will be added to in an edited collection by the German dance scholar, Gabriele Brandstetter, entitled *Touching and Being Touched: Kinesthesia and Empathy in Dance and Movement*.

These books by Foster, and Reynolds and Reason, however, make a powerful intervention and provide complementary and important reading for a comparative understanding of empathy. Perhaps their greater contribution is to stimulate a renewed capacity to interpret dance, to understand kinesthesia and patterned motion as a practice of empathy, and thus to recognize that a sensuous responding to the actions of others also requires critical and reflective distance. Together they

demonstrate that the discourse of dance studies, and its finest scholars, can contribute to debates about the value of affect, its historiography, and the effects of communication in and through bodies within contemporary performance. These are persuasive writers, and their argument for ambiguity in relation to empathy, whether kinesthetic or choreographic, is innovative and stimulating. Indeed, this pair of books suggests that dance studies has a sophisticated capacity to explain both to students, researchers, and audiences what it means to “feel” something when sharing the dance.

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