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A Postcolonial Cybersemiotics. Tradition and Modernity in Shobana Jeyasingh's Chaosmopolitan Choreographies

Abstract: This article discusses the articulation of postcolonial thought through the expressive form of choreography, and its relation with a variegated geographic and cultural dimension. It analyses the works of Anglo-Indian choreographer and performer Shobana Jeyasingh, particularly focusing on her use of the Bharata Natyam Indian dance, a technique consisting of detailed hands and feet gestures performed while standing on a bent-knees position. By drawing on Charles S. Peirce's semiotics, on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's philosophy, and on the cybernetic theories of Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, the article investigates how dance can be considered as a technique rather than a language: a movement technology producing sensations and meanings at the same time. By combining the classicity of Indian tradition with that of Western contemporary dance, Ruma Devi with Merce Cunningham, the purity of the dancing body with its mathematical patterns, and by incorporating video technology to the live performances, Jeyasingh's choreographies are able to suggest a cybernetic sense of sacredness, intended as a material connection between the dancing body and its (past and future) spatiotemporal enviroment(s).

Keywords: *postcolonial, choreography, Shobana Jeyasingh, semiotics, cybernetics, sacredness*

"Two dancers move across the stage in classical style, while another pair slide and push themselves over the floor as if physically gauging the lie of the land. Immediately a tension is set up ...".[1] The tension appears between two different ways of moving: a codified way and an exploratory way, the precisely defined little jumps of Bharata Natyam (a sacred classical dance of Indian origin) and the soft improvised slides of contemporary dance. In the first movement, the body covers a spatial distance through prescribed and finite displacements; in the other, it continuously occupies space by distributing itself contingently across all its points.

Tradition and modernity are the two main cultural and political senses interwoven by the discordant gestures of Shobana Jeyasingh's dances. Born in Chennai (India), Jeyasingh is a woman choreographer now living and working in London. If creativity (and specifically choreographic creativity) is usually defined as the capacity of attuning oneself to a sort of inborn kinaesthetic wisdom, Jeyasingh's rejection of this unilateral concept is in line with the postcolonial migrant's rejection of any nostalgia for her homeland. This article will try to decipher Jeyasingh's choreographic postcolonialism, and particularly its controversial representational relation to India, through the theoretical lens of Charles S. Peirce's semiotics. This peculiar methodological choice was determined by an important aspect mostly unnoticed in Peirce's theory: that is, its capacity to feel the sense of a sign as a 'sensation', before interpreting it as a

[1] Sanjoy Roy, "Multiple Choice: Profile of Shobana Jeyasingh", http://sanjoyroy.net/1997/09/multiple-choice-shobana-jeyasingh/, accessed 1 August 2015.

'meaning'. This *sensational* semiotic approach will be followed by a cybernetic vision of dance as a technical system, a set of movement techniques showing strong reciprocal relations with their (past and future, close and distant) environment(s).

The following reflections will therefore develop from the encounter of three main points of view: the postcolonial view, which could be defined as her preference for cultural 'adaptations' over 'purity'; Peircean semiotics where, in line with the postcolonial vision, the sign-meaning binary relation presupposed by structuralism is complexified by sensation as a further element of semiotic analysis; and the cybernetic perspective, a scientific framework which studies the adaptative and connective capacities of communication systems. In this 'postcolonial cyber-semiotics', it makes sense to consider dance as a movement technique that is able to make sensations emerge alongside meanings. Under this light, the two techniques coexisting in all Jeyasingh's choreographies seem to finally suggest two differing senses of 'sacredness': jumping as a way to fill the distance which separates the dancer from the infinity of God, sliding as a way to establish a continuous cybernetic connection between the body and its environment. In this ambiguity, the very notion of 'sacredness' loses its meaning of classical purity, to become a semiotic keyword that can make us *sense* the postcolonial character of Jeyasingh's dances.

The Premiss: Staging the Encounter

Three sharply dressed young men, hips jutting, fingers snapping and bodies twisted in freeze-frames, stand in a confrontational, defensive attitude.[2]

Echoing the words of Christian Metz, we can say that choreography, like cinema, can be considered as a language on two parallel levels: 1) by becoming narrative and presenting a story; 2) as a consequence, by conceiving gestures and steps as its propositions or utterances.[3] If we consider the first hypothesis, all Jeyasingh's choreographies can clearly be read as representations of contemporary Indianness, as they tell us the story of postcolonial India: choreography as another language for the Indian diaspora. The choreography of *Faultline*, for example, from which the above three young men scene was extrapolated, is inspired by the anxiety and violence proliferating in and around Asian youth gangs in London after the 2005 bombings, a thematic trigger extremely unusual for Indian classical dance but extremely common in postcolonial representations; while her latest choreography *La Bayadère. The Ninth Life* narrates the persisting fascination of the West with the myth of the Orient.[4] Racism and orientalism are in fact the two linguistic acts delimiting the figure of the 'stranger', two forms of epistemological capture extensively discussed (and undermined) by the critiques of postcolonial authors dear to Jeyasingh, such as Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha. And yet, it is important to remember that, as argued by Julia Kristeva, that of 'the stranger' is first of all the point of view of those who, even in their own land, in their own place, feel 'exiled'.[5] It is in this sense that Jeyasingh admits, "The country I represent, ... is

[2] S. Roy, "Shobana Jeyasingh: *Faultline*, *Bruise Blood*" http://sanjoyroy.net/2010/12/shobana-jeyasingh-faultline-bruise-blood/, accessed 1 August 2015.

[3] See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: Continuum, 2005) 24-25.

[4] In particular, the choreography of *Bruise Blood* directly draws on Steve Reich's sonic work *Come Out*, which uses the actual words spoken by a young black Harlem man in the Sixties who was wrongly arrested during the riots and had to let his bruise blood come out to show that he had been assaulted by the police. In its turn, *Faultline* depicts the public anxiety around young Asians – particularly men – because of fears about terrorism (some of the dances had been stopped and questioned by police). Drawing on Marius Petipa's original 19th century ballet choreography, *La Bayadère* recounts the story of the first 'real temple dancers' to visit Europe.

[5] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia U. P.), 1991.

difficult to chart. It is definitely not India...".[6] The choreographer's reluctance to represent the exact coordinates of her identity and her home (constantly dislocated between India and the UK) makes of her a stranger first of all to herself, and to her own native culture. With their characters, their settings and their plots, her choreographies kinaesthetically represent this postcolonial estrangement. Nevertheless, Roy argues, "Even when the dance is 'about' something [India, racism, diaspora, the classical past], its form still remains the strongest focus: Jeyasingh seems more interested in showing how it's made than what it means".[7]

We thus get to the second way of conceiving choreography linguistically: as a linguistic technology, or a technical composition of gestural propositions. As a classical technique, Bharata Natyam presupposes a perfect positioning of the human body as the central axis of a circle in which all subsequent movements are drawn.[8] From here, turning out and bending her knees and arms, the dancer forms three perfect triangles. This geometric arrangement in the 'natya aramba' constitutes the precondition of all successive phrases. Starting from the basic position, a combination of dance units called 'adavus' (given by variations in stance, foot position, arm lines and hand patterns) forms the alphabet of the dance. Telling the story of Indian migrants in the UK through the juxtaposition of Bharata Natyam adavus and contemporary dance steps or street dance gestures, Jeyasingh's choreography legitimizes its status as a language, simultaneously configuring the position of the choreographer as that of a polyglot.

And yet, by simply defining choreography as a language (or a combination of languages), the main risk is to immediately jump, from the sensorial perception of movement to the attribution of a meaning to its constitutive elements. The danger is to limit the point of view to a semiology of what is already language, of what inevitably tells us something. In fact, if we proceeded by slow rewind, we would note that this sudden jump, the perception-meaning leap, imperceptibly happens as a passage of techniques through signs, or a 'technical sensation of signs': each gesture or step, according to its technical properties, gradually moves from the status of a perceived object to that of a linguistic signifier. In the passage, the gesture becomes a sign, it is felt as a sign before saying anything, the trace of an encounter between perception and intellect, between what excites the senses and what makes sense. In this article, the point of view of Peirce's semiotics will be adopted to follow Jeyasingh's gestural techniques as they go through this process of becoming signs. Going beyond questions of representation, historical placement and authorial voice, Peirce's semiotics will therefore constitute a potentially rich new vision more useful than the limited binarisms of structuralist semiotics and its focus on already accomplished sign-content, self-other relations. This vision will delineate a different postcolonial reading based on the openness and multiplicity of sens/ation rather than on the closed circuits of meaning (or its poststructuralist disruptions).

[6] Shobana Jeyasingh, "Imaginary Homelands. Creating a New Dance Language", in A. Carter, ed., *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 47.

[7] Roy, "Multiple Choice".

[8] "To create this image the dancer has to centre the body by pulling in the stomach and pulling up the upper torso. There is a feeling of growing taller and expanding; this forms the base line of a triangle. To create a second triangle, turn out from the hips is essential (which forms triangle 3) since without this the base line of the second triangle will not be legible. The depth of the plié is crucial if there is to be harmony between triangles 2 and 3. These three triangles form the Bharata Natyam body picture and are the ideal that the dancing body aims for and which the classical sculptures show us". S. Jeyasingh, "Getting Off the Orient Express", in A. Carter and J. O'Shea, *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2010) 184.

But before starting with the actual analysis of the dances, we need two initial clarifications. First, it is important not to conceive signs in a static manner, which means not to think as if behind a sign-thing there were an object-thing. According to Deleuze, by simply attributing to an object the sign which it brings forth, both perception and intelligence induce us to think that objects contain in themselves the secret of the signs they emit, so that we always return to the object in order to decipher the sign (objectivism).[9] Intelligence thinks objective contents, explicit objective meanings, while perception has the task of grasping the sensible objects behind them. Beyond this perceptual and intellectual objectivism, a sign, in Peirce's definition, is "Something which stands *to somebody* for something in some respect or capacity" (emphasis added).[10] Differently from other semiotic theories, the peculiarity of this definition is suggested by the appearing of 'somebody' that is addressed by the sign, an 'interpretant', in Peirce's words, or a 'mind' in which "an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign," is created. To think the emerging of signs, or rather the passage from a sign to an object, from a sign to a meaning, or even better from one sign to another, in other words to conceive experience as an unfolding of signs, we therefore start from the middle position of the 'interpretant'. A second important clarification is at this point required: finding a subjective compensation to the limited view of objectivism, and conceiving the interpretant as a conscious human subject, or even as a whole culture, a race or a gender, cannot be a solution: subjective interpretations and associations based on the presence of a human consciousness are no less limited than objective explanations and recognitions.[11] Rather, *every* act through which a sign mutates into another sign (either in the human, animal, or biological sphere) should be considered as a mental operation and an interpretant: for example, a dog's interpretation of the perceived image of a chair as a 'sittable' object. Furthermore, this process of becoming sign cannot but be thought as a pragmatic event: passing through the act of semiotic deciphering, every seeing becomes a doing, a mental operation that is always simultaneously and immediately transduced into an attitude or a behaviour. It is on this pragmatic basis that, for Peirce, the semiotic encounter is founded.

It has been said that, as an Indian choreographer of the diaspora, Jeyasingh shares with all her exile companions a bond with her past, her dances writing on the stage the mnemonic trace of the distant lost time of classical Indian dance. In the same way in which her gestural signs are still connected to an object (classical India), their sense is still connected to a subject (the postcolonial Indian migrant woman), as we jump from one to the other. But as Deleuze has taught us, the interpretation of signs must go beyond the objects they remind us of and beyond the personal associations they elicit in us, in order to find the ideal essence that the sign incarnates. We can define this essence (or ec-sense) of signs as the way in which they attach their materiality to a pragmatic dimension, acting as topological figures of continuous active connection, rather than as linguistic containers of an isolated and isolating meaning. As the active connector between the appearing of a chair and the act of sitting, the sign is, in

[9] See G. Deleuze, *Marcel Proust e i segni* (Torino: Einaudi, 2001) 26-37.

[10] Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. by Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss and Arthur W. Burks (Cambridge: Belknap, 1931-1966, vol.2), 228.

[11] See Deleuze, *Marcel Proust*.

this sense, definable as a facilitator of material encounters. Being a pragmatic semiotics, Peirce's way to think signs will make us see Jeyasingh's choreography technique as capable of producing not only meanings, but also encounters. It is exactly by virtue of their respective encountering capacities, that the artistic work of a woman choreographer of Indian origin who has been studying and working in the UK for more than 30 years, can happily encounter the words and concepts of an American philosopher of the 19th century. The outcome will be the delineation of a different semiotics of the Indian diaspora, and a way to connect the markers of gender and race to a different sense of sacredness, in what will be defined as a 'cyber semiotics of the sacred'. At the same time, Peirce's semiotic definitions will get even more pragmatic value from the encounter, by literally becoming the movements of a dance. A philosophical interest for a possible evolution of Peirce's ideas will therefore also be key in the reading of this essay.

Peirce's dance

Considering Peirce's theory as a dance, rather than a science, apparently betrays its scientific, logical and rational presuppositions, threatening them with the danger of an improper metaphorical aestheticization or, even worse, with an unorthodox philosophical adaptation. But Peirce's conception of science (and therefore of logic and semiotics, the sciences of relations and signs) in fact already shows a peculiar tone which takes it rather far away from the rigour of positivism. This conception discards the traditional scientific dualism of a material nature confronted and intellectually captured by a human subject (a dualism which underlies a Western epistemology complicit with colonialism), in favour of a vision of the world as a system of signs continuously provoking sensibility and thought, literally luring them into interpretation.[12] It is a feeling that drives experience from perception to meaning, a lure to sense which, according to Peirce, appears in the hiatus of an inexplicable shock, acting on the nerves as an inescapable 'compulsion', an 'absolute constraint to think'.[13]

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that the definition of Peirce's schema as a dance, or a choreography, is being introduced here in a non-metaphorical sense: in order to ask them what they can do, we will take these notions "where their own author could not", beyond the field of semiotics, following their encounter with the gestures and steps of dancers.[14] Only at that point, they will start to form a generative text that "does not just transmit significations" but "produces inflections".[15] In this way, we will be able to observe what happens when Peirce's theory is taken not as transcendentally classificatory but as immmanently formative of embodied action: 'as if' Jeyasingh's dancers were literally embodying semiotics as a choreographic instruction.

Jeyasingh's semiotics

[12] See Carlo Sini, *Distanza un segno. Filosofia e semiotica,* Milano, CUEM, 2006.

[13] C.S. Peirce, "What is a Sign?", https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/peirce1.htm, accessed 1 August 2015.

[14] This non-orthodox approach is a tentative application of the radically pedagogical practice of textual reading proposed by Brian Massumi and Erin Manning in the SenseLab. See B. Massumi, "Collective Expression. A Radical Pragmatics", in *Inflexions: A Journal of Research-Creation*, Issue n.8, http://www.inflexions.org/radicalpedagogy/main.html#Massumi, accessed 1 August 2015.

[15] C.S. Peirce, "What is a Sign?".

Peirce's schema composes a grammar and a syntaxis of three main kinds of sign (or three semiotic relations): signs whose nature corresponds to a logical possibility (qualisigns), signs whose nature corresponds to an actual fact (sinsigns), and signs whose nature corresponds to a law (legisigns).[16] This grammar can be used as a choreographic technology, an algorithm of motions that can make us understand the different ways in which Jeyasingh's work is able to produce particular sensations of classical India.

[16] C. Sini, "Le relazioni triadiche dei segni e le categorie faneroscopiche di Peirce", http://www.archiviocarlosini.it/materiale/Articoli/AR029.pdf, accessed 1 August 2015.

1) The Origin Freezes

Peirce writes: "A qualisign is a quality which is a sign. It cannot actually act as a sign until it is embodied; but the embodiment has nothing to do with its character as a sign".[17] The qualisign, in other words, is not an actual empirical quality yet (such as an actual shade of colour) but what Alfred N. Whitehead would call an 'eternal object', a potential to become a particular quality, and therefore to acquire a particular meaning for someone or something (the idea of 'red', as it also appears in the proposition 'this is not red').[18] These potential qualities can be considered as the origins of all actual events, provided we conceive the origin not in the historical sense which is so much criticised by postcolonial theory, an origin which can always be remembered and known and from which an identity derives (like a particular dance form to be constantly repeated and preserved in its purity). Rather, the origin should be conceived more like an immanent field of emergence (for example a quality of movement). This is also the sense of Gilbert Simondon's notion of an 'absolute origin', an origin which persists as the intact centre of various successive phenomena.[19] For example, precision of movement is a potential quality that can actualize itself as the origin of different performative events, both classical and contemporary. Such as when, in Jeyasingh's choreography *La Bayadere*, classical Indian splayed fingers and precise feet placements remain at the centre of a frame of various contemporary steps, suggesting Bharata Natyam as the immanent origin of the dance. In fact, the word 'bayadere', Jeysingh finds out after seeing Petipa's ballet for the first time, comes from the Portuguese 'bailadeira', a term used in 19th century Europe to refer to the female 'devadasis', the temple dancers of South India who danced Bharata Natyam. This is a 2,000 years old dance practice abolished during British colonization for its marked erotic tonality, and rediscovered in the 20th century as a stage art of strong precision. Choreographing a new *Bayadère* and tracking the old Bharata Natyam steps is thus for Jeyasingh a possibility to return to her cultural origins, through a sort of abstract technicality which becomes basic to all her movements, and which remains stable throughout the course of their different evolutions. At the same time, her filial and techno-genealogical feeling is connoted by a certain detachment discernible in Jeyasingh's own description of Bharata Natyam as an almost involuntarily learnt language:

[17] C.S.Peirce, "Three Trichotomies of Signs", https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/peirce2.htm, accessed 1 August 2015.

[18] See A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press) 1985.

[19] G. Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, (Paris: Aubier-Montagne, 1969). See also Massumi. "Collective Expression".

> The reason I learned Bharata Natyam was a direct result of the British presence in India. … I suppose when the psyche of a country has been bashed

> around for over a hundred years, one of the things that actually happens when you want to break free is that you begin to re-evaluate and refind your own culture. Therefore, for my parents, who were typical of their generation, it was important that their daughter learned Bharata Natyam, the classical dance of India.[20]

[20] Jeyasingh,"Imaginary Homelands", 49. This citation was taken from Annalisa Piccirillo, "La *De-sacralizzazione*, in Shobana Jeyasingh", a Ph.D. dissertation chapter.

Across this distance, the origin of a very precise initial gesture ceases to be a past to be exactly re-traced, and remains as a vague potential that will give to all Jeyasingh's future choreographies a pretext, a "jumping off point".[21] Therefore, on one hand, Peirce's notion of qualisign allows us to define the way in which Bharata Natyam only appears as an 'immanent origin' or a potential in Jeyasingh's choreographies. On the other hand, the immobility we have initially noticed in Peirce's concept (the qualisign as a sign which 'cannot act until embodied') reveals itself as the static but vital nature of a virtuality, a capacity to freeze and persist (rather than disappearing) across different actualizations. Classical India, the origin of Jeyasingh's work, freezes and persists as a qualitative precision in the contemporary dance.

[21] Massumi, "Collective Expression".

2) The Body Folds

"A sinsign (…) is an actual existent thing or event which is a sign. It can only be so through its qualities; so that it involves a qualisign, or rather, several qualisigns". The sinsign is an existent, or a real fact (such as a well defined shade of red on a piece of fabric). *Dev Kahan Hai?* (Where is Dev?) is a dance choreographed by Jeyasingh in 2012. Here, the various turns and jumps performed by the dancers make their bodies deviate from the Bharata Natyam's original prescription, while other unexpected and inappropriate choreographic elements, such as group dancing, physical contact or the curving and rotation of the back, constitute the highly irreverent sinsigns through which the choreographer distances herself from the linear trajectory of classical formalism. The gesture or act through which Peirce's sinsign 'involves' its potential, an involvement which is an implication or an infolding, becomes in Jeyasingh's works a concrete physical rotation of the contemporary dancing body, which bends on and involves the potential of classical Indian precision, but with a movement that is a swirl, a clinamen, a deviation. The physical actualization of this deviating involvement reveals its cultural and political implications as a postcolonial curvature from the immutability of an originary past which can only keep intact the form of choreographic classicism.

3) The Choreographer Cuts

Finally, "A legisign is a law that is a sign. ... Every legisign signifies through an instance of its application, which may be termed a *Replica* of it". The legisign is the codification of the sign (red flag, therefore, danger). In its highly traditional code, Bharata Natyam is composed of two movement images: Nritta, the abstract movement performed following a musical rhythm, and Nritya, the narrative part of the dance, the facial expressions and intricate hand gestures

which tell stories and convey emotions. In Jeyasingh's own replica of the dance, it is only the purely formal and non-narrative aspect (Nritta) which interests her most and becomes her choreographic law, as the only 'legisign' which is able, according to her, to speak to contemporary audiences. The gesture of Peirce's legisign replicating itself, folding again and again and actualizing the code an infinite number of times, becomes transduced into the choreographer's act of splitting the original Bharata Natyam law in two parts, in order to be able to cut out replicable choreographic forms and codified steps.

While the first triad of Peirce's theory classifies the intrinsic nature of signs, the second trichotomy regards the relation between sign and object, its semantics or, in logical terms, how a 'representamen' can stand for and represent something. Or, for us, the techniques through which Jeyasingh's dance can give us sensations of contemporary India.

1) Imitation

"Firstly, there are *likenesses*, or icons; which serve to convey ideas of the things they represent simply by imitating them". Jeyasingh's dances are considered as iconic of Indian identity. But what is an identity? While Hall notoriously aknowledged the simultaneous 'necessity' and 'impossibility' of identities, and the suturing of psychic and discursive elements in their constitution,[22] Deleuze and Guattari's notion resonates with the same critique of subjective universality and unicity, while adding to it a further physical element from which cultural identification originates. The two philosophers conceived identity as a kind of territorial dance, a matter of bodily "poses, postures, silhouettes, steps, and voices". This identitarian dance generates and regulates collective movements according to a logic that is flexible and temporary, rather than static and rigid.[23] An elastic and malleable (or, in their words, "inflatable and portable") territory is therefore identified, where different elements or traits of expression can, by virtue of their smoothness and connectability, be assembled (identity as a machinic assemblage of mutiplicities into a territorial, geographical and cultural organization). We see a clear example of this identitarian topology in J.K. Galbraith's definition of India as a mosaic of identities, a smooth space or a geopolitical multiplicity where the fluidity of borders and shared beliefs intersects with a manifold local or regional traditions (the dances of Bharata Natyam, Kathak, Odissi, etc...).[24] This heterogeneity is mirrored by Jeyasingh's choreographic patchworks of Bharata Natyam, Yoga and Indian martial arts, making them into icons of India's immanent pluralism.

[22] S. Hall, "Who Needs Identity?" in P. du Gay, J. Evans and P. Redman, eds., *Identity: A Reader* (New York: Sage, 2000).

[23] G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 320.

[24] J.K Galbraith quoted by Christopher Bannerman, http://www.rescen.net/Shobana_Jeyasingh/HmH/SJ_Intro.html, accessed 01 August 2015.

2) Connection

"Secondly, there are *indications*, or indices; which show something about things, on account of their being physically connected to them". There is the immanent pluralism of Indian culture, but there also is the continuity of its ex-changes: it is important to see how this second force, together with the first, contributes to generate a smooth feeling of culture that strongly opposes itself to all identitarian anxieties. This idea of an open and mutant nature of identity

does not correspond to the transformation, and even less to the contamination, of any presumed essential property or archetype such as Indianness, but presupposes (in line with the cybernetic vision) a series of discontinuities emerging in a field of connectedness and continuity. Examples of this can be seen in the moment when the Dionysian cultic practices of Greece met the Indian Tantric rituals, after the invasion of Alexander the Great; or when Indo-Greek theatre started to show a similarity of movements and gestures indicating a mutual kinaesthetic influence much before Alexander's advent.[25] Using Deleuze and Guattari's words, we can define this kind of cultural symbiosis as a 'becoming', an affective relation or a trans-territorial exchange of expressive traits. In the same way, we can understand how the multiplicity of gestures composing Jeyasingh's choreographies (classical and contemporary and urban and martial) is physically and affectively connected, as a further becoming, to India's many cultural encounters.

[25] M.L. Vardpande, *Ancient Indian and Indo-Greek Theatre* (Abhinav Publications, 2014).

3) Capture

"Thirdly, there are *symbols*, or general signs, which have become associated with their meanings by usage". Here, it is easy to see how the traits of cultural multiplicity are restrained into the fixed characters of an identity and its symbolic representations: India as represented by the traditional music, costumes, gestures or, in general, signs that are conventionally associated to its purity, and that are still present in Jeyasingh's choreographies. The usage of symbols ensures that a culture is faithfully depicted, allowing to all the signs, objects and interpretants only as little movement or variation as possible. And it is in relation to this symbolic representational apparatus (or, as Jeyasingh defines it, this cultural 'straitjacket') that the choreographer finds herself twitching uncomfortably. The same gesture then migrates to the stage, where her dancers are often seen twitching and jerking between the steps, as if they were reacting to all those symbols that still populate the stage.[26]

[26] Http://www.rescen.net/Shobana_Jeyasingh/HmH/bangalore.html, accessed on 1 August 2015.

A last Peircean trichotomy defines the relation between sign and interpretant, or between the sign and the mental relations it incites. Or, for us, between Jeyasingh's dance and its Indian audience. Recalling her company's only Indian tour, Jeyasingh narrates: "[Some]one comes over to ask me what kind of dance they are seeing. I have to invent a category off the top of my head. 'It is contemporary' I offer 'and Indian' because I notice his recognition, however partial".[27] 'Contemporary', and 'Indian': in Peircean terms, two *rhemes*, two 'intepretant' acts that remain in the field of potential. Neither of them being really determined or defined, the two adjectives chosen by Jeyasingh mirror, with their vagueness, the ambivalent feelings of Indian audiences in relation to her staged performances. Responses to Jeyasingh's work in India were in fact not polarised by expressions of total approval or condemnation. But in the end, they all shared the idea that the work was not-Indian, and that it did not clearly show its Indianness. The *dicisign*, or the proposition, to use Peirce's words, signalling the audience's actual response to the choreographies, was in the end:

[27] Ibid.

'not-Indian'. In order to find an appropriate entry point and a logic to their judgment, people looked at costume, listened to the music, considered the main themes of the performances: all these markers, in the final *argument* and according to a precise identitarian syllogism, seemed too Western to them. In the context of the Indian interpretants of Jeyasingh's work, the last Peircean trichotomy of 'rheme', 'dicisign' and 'argument' becomes therefore particularly significant, especially for the affects it reveals: not Indian enough, too Western. As Meenakshi Mukherjee writes, contemporary Indian artworks are usually interpreted according to their cultural positioning in the 'global vs regional' alignment.[28] This phenomenon is labeled by the thinker as 'anxiety of Indianness': an attempt to go back to a simple, pre-colonial Indian identity, a desire to feel rooted and pure, as a reaction to post-colonial dislocation. As a feeling of anxiety about the rigid limits of one's own identity, this identitarian 'striation' clearly differentiates itself from the smooth cultural sensations iconically and indexically signalled by Jeyasingh's choreographies.

When intended as cultural feelings, anxiety and smoothness respectively correspond to the emotional and textual (or semiotic) practices Deleuze and Guattari define as 'roots' and 'rhizomes'.[29] What is rooted, Deleuze and Guattari say, is the mnemonic and genealogical structure of familial links, the links one has with their own land, their own origins. On the other hand, a sense of heterogeneity and becoming connotes a rhizomatic sense of culture. And whereas the root-text (or tree-text) marks borders, or identity's limits, rhizome-texts cross them. Choreography, as Jeyasingh describes it, is a rhizomatic practice that happens nowhere but in the dance studio and, simultaneously, in the abstract, elastic, 'hyper geographical' space of the imagination, where functions of cultural exclusion/inclusion can morph into a differential logic revealing a more variegated in-between interstice. This interstitial choreographic space resonates with Homi Bhabha's notion of 'third space' as a space woven between the 'I' and 'You' of every communicative act.[30] Here, the choreographer becomes a nomad of kinaesthetic thought or, to use Ronald Bogue's definition, a 'chaosmopolitan', the citizen of a chaosmos.[31] An example of a chaosmotic space is in fact the 'polis', the city, the urban ecology as it is crossed by continuous physical and cultural becomings (Jeyasingh herself insists on 'the urban', more than the 'Indian' or 'Western', as the only possible definition for her choreographies). The diversity of events populating the immanent plane of cities demands a different way of moving, a 'complex of thought and practice' in which creativity and habits, anarchy and norm, can coexist. An urban choreography where order emerges out of chaos. A chaos-mo-poli-graphy. "We can see this process ... exemplified in the scenes of rush-hour pavement walking or crowd cycling..., where kinetic habits and techniques are reanimated by the ingression of unexpected gestures and steps, and the apparent chaos of a disordered multiplicity finds its own way to autonomously and improvisationally choreograph itself. A collective movement that makes a collective body, through the co-tuning of its own relational field".[32] From this concept, a new vision of choreographic creation emerges, where the issue is not

[28] M. Mukherjee, "The Anxiety of Indianness", in *The Perishable Empire* (Delhi: OUP, 2000).

[29] See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3-25. For the definitions of smooth and striated spaces, see also 474-500.

[30] H. Bhabha, "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences", in B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths amd H. Tiffin, eds., *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[31] R. Bogue, "Nature, Law, and Chaosmopolitanism", in R. Braidotti and P. Pisters, eds., *Revisiting Normativity with Deleuze* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).

[32] Stamatia Portanova, "Wonder, Movement and Becoming: Response to Erin Manning", in *Body and Society*, Special Issue on Rhythm, Movement, Embodiment, 171.

so much that of movement's linear trajectories and rules nor of their disruption, but rather of the relation between movement's 'virtual' and 'actual' dimensions. In Peirce's words, between his firstness and its secondness, between its potentials and its steps. This relation constitutes what Peirce would define as a choreographic 'thirdness': an opening of the classical body to the discomfort of a multiplicity of mental schemes or corporeal laws. Such as when Hema, a dancer of the Jeyasingh's company who is trained in Kalarippayattu, contemporary and Bharata Natyam, is induced to repeat the same movement again and again, in order to re-experience its way of drawing on the many movement languages that already coexist in her body. Or when, in *Romance with Footnotes*, a woman dancer adopts a classical pose from Bharata Natyam, while her partner circles her and slowly takes her out of this position, until she loses balance and has to move.

Cyber-sacredness

Jeyasingh's chaosmopoligraphies are therefore more connected to urban contemporaneity than to Indian (or Western) classicism. At the same time, they are able to entertain, as shown by our Peircean semiotic analysis, a non-nostalgic relation with their past. This non-chronological but 'aionic' and 'kairotic' temporality (a temporality of strange transversal encounters and timings) marks the qualitative rather than signifying aspect of her works: it is, as we have seen, through the quality of precision, that her dances find a connective thread with Bharata Natyam. And it is through the qualitative tension of movement that they also reproduce the right-on-time steps of city dwellers. Quality is also an important element in Peirce's semiotics. According to the philosopher, a sign can signify some thing, because the signifying sign and the signified thing share the same material qualities. But the law (intended here as linguistic and cultural convention) requires that, in order to be freely exchanged, the qualities of matter must become meaning; that is to say, they must be redeemed of their sensuousness and be given a sense. The precision of Jeyasingh's movements, for example, seems to gain a lot when transformed into a language, a series of cultural signifiers that can denote many meanings: Indianness, urban contemporaneity, diaspora... The soundtrack of her choreographies, with its use of acoustic and sonorous signs as racial and linguistic signifiers, constitutes another example of this quality-meaning passage. At this point, by making a spatio-temporal jump, we can hear the echo of Fred Moten's words, when he reminds us that, "[f]rom the outset (that is from the moment Creole is forged as a medium of communication between slave and master), the spoken imposes on the slave its particular syntax".[33] On the other hand, "[s]ince speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. ... This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise".[34] The emerging of the voice in its noisy material quality is what characterizes Jeyasingh's use of beatbox as a musical soundtrack for her

[33] F. Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 7.

[34] Ibid.

choreographies, where the voice acquires sense and value beyond meaning/matter oppositions.[35] Furthermore, in all her works, elements such as costumes and facial expressions, hair styles, yogic shapes and eye make-up – are all deprived of their classical meaning and endowed with a new chromatic, acoustic and textural sense, while gestures become the signs of bodies that seem to silently scream the representational exuberance of their qualities.

It is in this sense that, according to Sanjoi Roy, Jeyasingh's work is a modernist choreography mainly focused on form: on the structure, the shape, and the qualities of movement and dance. In this way, her works show that the norm linking modernism (and modernity) to the white West comes from a particular standpoint where every exception to the rule is categorized as 'other'. Where is this standpoint located? As Iain Chambers tells us, "[v]iewed from London, Los Angeles, New York, Berlin, Paris and Milan, the south of the world is invariably considered in terms of lacks and absences. It is not yet modern; it has still to catch up. It remains, as Dipesh Chakrabarty would put it, an inadequate place. … Of course, as we know from Said, and through him from Gramsci, this is a geography of power. It is about being placed and systematised in a manner not of your own choosing".[36] Creating a cultural, political and economic demarcation between a North and a South (or a West and an East), the 'geography of power' is a machine of territorial and identitarian construction. The shortsightedness of this semiotic machine consists not simply in the labelling of the categories, but also in depriving those located on the wrong side, of any creative potentiality. The same shortsightedness prevails when, according to Roy, "Jeyasingh the choreographer fades into the background in favour of Jeyasingh the Indian woman in Britain who engages with questions of migrancy, diaspora, race, heritage and so on".[37] The political strength of Jeyasingh's work therefore coincides with its capacity to associate the question of racial and gender identity to the qualitative sensibility and creative potential of choreographic technique.

As an artist of the Indian diaspora in England, Jeyasingh has often been labeled as a producer of 'hybrid' works, hybridity apparently being the most significant contribution offered by diasporic artists against the semiotics of power, and against racist representations based on notions of purity and tradition. From this point of view, it would be a task, or a mission, of Jeyasingh as a diasporic choreographer, to mix Rukmini Devi with Merce Cunningham, the scores for string orchestra and electronics by Gabriel Prokofiev with Russian classical, tango and dark electronica.[38] Nevertheless, the semiotics of hybridity reveals itself as entrapped into another power mechanism: if the hybrid is an offspring of two animals or plants of different breeds, varieties, species or genera (such as Bharata Natyam and ballet), it is still so in relation to the definition of what a specific genus is. Being interested, from the very beginning of her choreographic career, in the expressive possibilities of Bharata Natyam inserted in the context of Western dance, Jeyasingh can indeed be seen as one of the main exponents of intercultural hybridity. Representing the displacements of Indian dance practices in the postcolonial epoch, early works

[35] The beatbox remix of Steve Reich's sound piece *Come Out* incorporates words first and foremost as sound; the pragmatic defiance and tenaciousness of Daniel Hamm's words are expressed through the voice and its mathematical loops.

[36] I. Chambers, "The Southern Question... Again".

[37] Roy, "Multiple Choice".

[38] Already in her first choreographic work, *Configurations*, created in 1988, it is Michael Nyman's score (which became his *String Quartet No. 2*) which is played live on stage.

such as *Configurations* (1988), *Correspondences* (1990), *Making of Maps* (1992) and *Duets with Automobiles* (1993) perform a cultural decontextualisation of Indian classicism by reorganizing its traditional language into a foreign space. As mere assemblages of gestural citations, still recognisable although displaced and fragmented, these choreographies seem still based on a principle of postmodern hybridization. The basic leg position of aramandi and the arm position of nartiarambe, together with the movements of the neck alternatively oscillating from right to left (adami), the feet movements, and many other adavus, are juxtaposed to contemporary dance gestures, but without any real sensible integration. The two levels limit themselves to coexist, with their identitarian margins still very visible.[39]

It is only after the 90s, that Jeyasingh starts to collaborate with dancers with a mixed formation in contemporary dance practices, Indian dance styles and martial arts. And it is at this point that dance techniques cease to be simply composed by her into hybrids, and become the elements of a new cybernetic semiotics, or a semiotics of qualitative encounters. In order to understand Jeyasingh's cyber-semiotics, we need first to add something to our Peircean semiotic approach, and to redefine the body not as a fixed identity but as a sensori-motor network of intensities connected to two major dimensions: one socio-culturally determined (meaning), the other physically contingent, made of existential singularities and events (quality). From this point of view, 'sense', or the 'becoming sign' of movement, appears more related to a bodily sensibility than to a linguistic logic: from the body as an anatomical entity utilized as a tool of signification, to corporeality as a sensible and fragile entity open to encountering the other (and, it is worth remembering, Peirce's theory was in fact already enriched by a consideration for the sign as a 'nervous sensation' and a semiotic meaning). The cybernetic notion of the body as a network of sensible connections induces us to think how the corporeality of a trained dancer incorporates the coordinates and sensations of a new cultural practice. The individual subject, together with its own self-perception, is put into question, destabilised and made fragile, by the tensions initiated by the very act of 'going towards'. These instabilities and re-adjustments allow it to escape the repetition of the same, and to undermine the persistence of habit. As Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela argued, the meeting of heterogeneous sensibilities does not remain on the level of an unsolved contradiction (the hybrid) but produces a systemic reorganisation according to a physical autopoiesis.[40] And yet, as Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers have showed, the problem with the notion of the body as 'autopoietic system' lies in the reversibility of the physical phenomena traversing it: autopoiesis is a tendency of the system towards equilibrium, an integration which, according to the two scientists, is always far from being achieved.[41] Differently from this autopoietic dynamics, it could be said that Jeyasingh's dancers enact a sort of 'ecological wisdom' that "traverses different domains... capable not of integrating but of articulating singularities of the field under consideration to join absolutely heterogeneous components".[42] In other words, they physically perform a series

[39] Jeyasingh's choreographic practice has also produced many disciplinary hybrids: from the cellular biology principles influencing the composition of *In Flagrante*, to botanics and the movements of flowers and plants reliving in *Strange Blooms*.

[40] H. Maturana and F. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1980).

[41] I. Prigogine and I. Stengers, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 1997).

[42] F. Guattari, *Chaosophy: Texts and Interviews 1972-1977* (Semiotext(e), 2008), 40.

of encounters that neither remain detached as citational fragments nor resolve themselves into an equilibrated dance figure but, rather, keep their qualitative singularities alive. The same systemic ecology, or inseparable unity of kinaesthetic experiences, is also at work beyond the incorporation of gestural techniques, implying for example a tight interrelation between human and technological components. Such as in the performance of *Phantasmaton*, a proscenium performance for six dancers featuring an artificially intelligent digital video of a devadasi dancer by Pete Gomes; or in *[h]Interland*, a site-specific work created for the hall of London's Greenwich Dance Agency, including video (again by Gomes) and a live webcast (directed by Terry Braun) of dancer Chitra Srishailan in Bangalore, performing alongside London dancers Mavin Khoo and Sowmya Gopalan.

This cybernetic semiotics of technical and technological encounters is the expression of a different sense of the 'sacred' emerging in Shobana Jeyasingh's chaosmopoligraphies. Instead of being transmitted by the representation of a religious meaning linking the contemporary choreography to the movements of the ancient devadasis, and instead of manifesting itself as a spiritual devotion to the gods, sacredness is now produced in the embrace between the moving bodies and their whole spatiotemporal environment. Intended, rather similarly to Gregory Bateson's conception, as the sensation of being one component of a unique system (in this case, a choreographic system), sacredness is signalled by the many kinaesthetic differentials emerging in all the systemic relations, between past and future, jumps and slidings, the silent quietness of classicism and the turbulence of urban and technological environments, the orange, yellow, brown colours of spices and the electric blue grass of digital video. A feeling not suggested by the dances through the faithful reproduction of ancient rituals but, to use Massumi's words, through their being 'thought out in their environment', or trough their faithfulness to that environment.

Conclusion: The Curve of Moving-With

A choreographic environment can cover an experiential territory of thousands of years and kilometres. But how does a dance manage to be thought, across such enormous spatiotemporal distance? At this point, Peirce's theory can be useful again, and reconnected to the cybernetic idea of connectedness, when he argues that not only we need to take into consideration the direct resistance of bodies to each other, or their contact, but also their attractions and repulsions at a distance: a thing is wherever it acts.[43] We can thus return to the image of the rhizome, which does not cease to link different, apparently distant territorial layers or levels, its topological deformations stretching and bending across them without any break or cut. When Jeyasingh performs Bharata Natyam, she is embodying a sense of sacredness, by actually rhizomatically connecting times and spaces: she starts from a *natya aramba* position showing her body lowered along the central axis of a circle and divided along it through the *araai mandi*, the demi plié of Indian classical dance, creating three equilateral triangles. In

[43] C.S. Peirce, "Notes on the Question of the Existence of an External World", in *Writings of Charles S. Peirce; A Chronological Edition*, vol. 8; 1890-1892, Peirce Edition Project, 2010, 78.

Western ballet, the same position is used as a transition point to spring board away into characteristic, light buoyant movement, whereas in Bharata Natyam it acts as the point of arrival in order to draw attention to the angularity of the bent limbs, and to consolidate the weighted tension that is typical of its line and dynamic. As Jeyasingh topologically imagines, lowering one's legs is always and everywhere perceivable and thinkable as the gesture of lowering one's legs, while one lowered leg is never quite like another.

Along the same topological line, the choreography of *Faultline* is composed of movements coming not only from the Bharata Natyam tradition, but also from martial art forms such as Kalaru and Capoeira, and from Western traditions of contemporary dance, street dance styles and jazz. Here, a flick of the hand performed by the male protagonist to dust down his shoulder (a gesture typical among members of street gangs) encounters a Bharata Natyam open (alapadma) or closed (katakamukha) hand gesture, as they are not simply sensed as gestures per se (though the gestures are indeed present), in their formal distance or resemblance, in their meaning and intention, but in that topological becoming one into another, in that difference and continuity, that give to the movements their rhythm. Adopting Erin Manning's words, we can say that the gestures "move-with the togetherness of a curving that fields metastable equilibriums".[44] Between two gestures, between two ways of moving, a wave always forms in-between, creating an interval that makes itself felt, at the cusp of their actuality. A folding, a proximity, a non-linear contact. From one gesture to the other, tension disappears, as "one senses the intensity of an opening, the gathering up of forces toward the creation of spacetimes of experience ...". In this imperceptible interstitial intergestural opening, the sacredness of Jeyasingh's choreography resides, as a force able to continuously morph itself. "If we lose this intensity of force ..., what we have first and foremost is a step".

[44] E. Manning, *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge: MIT, 2009,) 47.