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FOOTBALL AS A CHOREOGRAPHY.

On the relationship between the game and the interaction of improvisation in dance

“I never missed a chance to score a goal because I
was too rushed, I rather wasted time.”

Willi (Ente) Lippens

Abstract

This text examines the similarities between football and dance. In doing so, the focus is not on the many possible metaphoric relationships between football and dance. This happens for example when film clips of football games are called ‘football ballet’, or when fans are dancing Samba, or when players perform a dance with corner flags. The text rather aims to answer the question which structural characteristics football and dance share.

Key words: *interaction, improvisation, dance, performance, football as choreography, social figuration and event.*

Introduction

“Football, c’est full impro, quoi”. With this sentence, French choreographer Philippe Decouflé, who was responsible for the choreography at the opening gala of the 2006 FIFA World Cup, puts the fascination for football in a nutshell. When case and order, system and disorder, dancing elegance and playful efficiency are intertwined, football inspires the most. In such moments, the closeness of football and dance becomes visible.

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The French choreographer Xavier Le Roy dealt with the similarity between sports and choreography in his performance “Project” (Lisbon 2003). Le Roy invited 20 actors, including dancers, choreographers, playwrights and scientists, to a choreographic game that connected three types of sports: football, handball and four corners. First, every single game was played individually, after that the “Three Games Game” which connected the three mentioned sports. On the square stage 4 goals were arranged: Handball could be played on all four goals; for football, two goals were available. The handball teams set itself apart from the other teams by wearing hats, while the football teams wore skirts or pants, and the corner players wore yellow or purple T-shirts. Since all players participated in all three games, specific ‘individualities’ arose, no combination of clothing appeared twice.

The performance played with what makes a sports match a cultural performance (Milton Singer) and an unrepeatable event: the oscillation of chance and order, system and situation, power and powerlessness, victory and defeat, profit and loss, rules and their violation, triumph and tragedy, tension and relaxation, heroism and fan culture, masculinity and the will to win, presence and representation. “Project” was played in the dark, sometimes only bad players were deployed to the field. A rank list of players was based on points that they were given, offenses did not ‘happen’, but were deliberately staged. Sometimes the participants moved in slow motion while the balls still followed physical laws, which provoked a game of two different time units.

Structure and situation

Specific spatial structures characterising the games (such as e.g. the circle, penalty area and goal area, penalty or centre spot) were neglected. Unlike a ‘real’ game, the viewers stayed mostly passive. They rather staged themselves as a theatre audience and not as sport fans, the more so as “Project” did not thematise what characterises cultural performances: the decomposition of stage and auditorium, actors and audience, which are stabilised by a ritual praxis. In football, these rituals are cheering songs, chants, drumming, using clappers, clapping, carrying fans vests, scarves or wigs, and having body painting. “Project” was a project of the participants on the ‘field’.

“Project” had the finger on the pulse of time. It is an example for the contemporary art of dancing raising the question of choreography and separating itself from dance as an aesthetic form. However, it converges the game, which is at the same time being played and performed as a masked dance. Both dance as an aesthetic usage of forms and the fascination for playful perfection and dance

virtuosity are taken a backseat. Hence, the actors were neither worried about playful efficiency nor about the elegance of the dance. Nonetheless, "Project" is not just an art project. It aims to question 'reality' and the performative conditions and forms of reality between the poles of structure and situation, case and order, system and action.

Thereby, "Project" thematises a basic problem that is not unique to football and dance, but characterises the social: The social, too, can only be understood through a mutual relationship of macro- and microstructure, that is, on the one hand structures, norms, values, rules, rituals, system and order, and taking action on the other hand. It is therefore no coincidence that social and cultural scientists repeatedly concerned themselves with football, also as movement cultures demonstrate vividly the praxis of the social as well as order of the body.

At least in Europe, no other kind of sport was subject to that many scientific papers than football. Also in sociology, football was and still is today a favourite subject of observation to elucidate sociological theory. Norbert Elias, for example, explained his figural-sociological theses using football as an example: Elias argued, that social change takes place in a coordinated and structured way, but that is not plannable by the individual. Pierre Bourdieu, too, chose the pitch as an object of observation for his field theory: There as here, he claims, certain rules, norms, conventions and rituals exist. There as here, a struggle for social positions takes place. There as here, the agents perceive the structure of the field and its mechanisms as something natural, which makes the 'performative magic' that binds people to the structure of a powerful order. Alike Le Roy in "Project", Elias and Bourdieu call the coaction of micro-and macro level into question: Is it praxis, that changes social structures, or can praxis only take place within the powerful orders? How is it possible to break out of conventions and discard habitualised patterns? Both of them answer this question from different constructivist positions: Elias from a figurative-sociological perspective, and Bourdieu from a praxeological approach.

The Praxis of social figuration

Writers, theatre makers, visual artists and filmmakers alike were fascinated by what "Project" staged with choreographic tools: performance, presence, eventness and corporeality of sport events as well as its symbolic power. Pasolini, Nabokov, Camus² and Dario Fo alike were thrilled by the passion that football

² For more details: Elisabeth Tworek/Michael Ott, *SportGeist. Dichter in Bewegung*, Arche: Zurich-Hamburg, 2006.

can generate. A passion, that seems to fade social and cultural differences behind the aura of an event. The fascination of football lay and still lies in the experience of communication beyond words.

It is said that the game takes place on the ground and that dance is when there is dancing. In other words: Sports and dance must occur in order to exist. This sounds like it is a distinctive feature of body and movement cultures only, but this is also true for the social: It also has to become 'real' in, through and as praxis, which performatively happens through the agents and their actions. Insofar, football and dance are each in its own instance vivid fields to explain the impact of the social in and as praxis.

The Event

The football game and the dance performance do not produce a piece of art, they are an event - and they only educe as an event. The separation of the author from the text, which in recent years was intensively discussed in philosophy and literature, does not play any role here. In football and dance, there is no piece without the author, that is, no match without players, no dance without dancers. The presence of the producer, that is the dancer or the athlete, is constitutive for the event. As Erika Fischer-Lichte noticed, the aesthetic perception of dance cannot be geared to a term of artwork. This also holds true for sports. The difficulty lies in the fact that the aesthetic perception of sports and dance can only be grasped as an absence³, as an event that no longer exists, as a memory, as a trace. A choreography like "Project" or a danced dance as well as a football game are not repeatable. The agent's handling of space and time, which change themselves, will be different, as will the interactions and their interdependent non-reproducible progressions. Therefore, a manipulated game also cannot be 'performed' again.

Moreover, media, like television or video, are needed to re-present the event. The re-emergence of the event therefore is only possible by using technical media. Technical media transform the sport's or dance event into something else by converting the three-dimensionality of space into two-dimensional images as well as by directing the viewers gaze through technical apparatus and media (e.g. cinematography, cutting). What happened on the pitch, in the ballroom or on stage, remains unknown to those who followed the event only through technical media.⁴ For those who were able to experience it live, it is a memory

³ See also: Gerald Siegmund, *Abwesenheit*, Transcript: Bielefeld, 2006.

⁴ However, the opposite was on the World Cup 2006. In the stadiums, television pictures were broadcasted 'live' on countless screens and monitors - such as pop concerts, so that even in the

like an encounter on the street, which is – as Erving Goffman⁵ convincingly demonstrated – ephemeral, but follows an interactive system. Even this ephemerality does not necessarily lead to superficial experiences; it can also be a very special and rewarding. Ephemerality, which is attributed to dance as its specific characteristic, is also an important feature of sports and everyday activities.

The Practice of the Body

Football and dance are specific forms of cultural practices. As distinct from other practices, such as reading or writing, their uniqueness lies in the fact that they are genuine body and movement practices. Unlike acting, which also is a body practice, in dance, lyrics, face and facial expressions play a minor part. However, here the foot takes centre stage. The foot being the part of the body that became more important on the courts of the Italian commercial capital and took on greater significance through the 'civilization of warriors' at the royal courts of the 16th and 17th century. Here, the former warriors mainly learned from dance teachers to pose properly in order to express their social position at the court. Dance teachers taught them to turn outward the peaks of their feet to be able to show the whole leg and move with more grace. At the same time, also in Italy, the game "calcio" was developed⁶. Calcio can be translated as 'step' or 'kick'. It became the epitome of delicate manners under Medici rule. Calcio made the foot movement socially acceptable by declaring the throwing of the ball with the hand as being ungraceful.

The moving body in dance and sports is medium and creator of practice at the same time. The fact that, from the standpoint of sociology, the moving body is producer, instrument and result of social praxis at the same time, leads to the question, how the body expresses itself, how it speaks, if it speaks at all. Philosopher Dieter Mersch argues that the body does not speak but show⁷. According to that, the body is ambiguous in its expressions and does not follow an Aristotelian logic, but expresses itself in the in-between. The utterance within the non-identical makes its subversive and innovative potential. Choreographer William Forsythe introduces this utterance in the non-identical as choreogra-

stadium the difference between image and reality, between football as an 'authentic event' and its 'media performance' was fading.

⁵ Erving Goffman, *Interaktionsrituale*. Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1986.

⁶ See: Horst Bredekamp, *Florentiner Fussball: Die Renaissance der Spiele*. Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 2001.

⁷ Dieter Mersch, *Was sich zeigt*. München: Fink, 2002.

phy by locating the search for movement in the interstice of what cannot be choreographed.

Precisely because the body has no contingency of language, it can be positioned between structure and action, as a medium and agent of praxis. Therefore, the body is “structured and structuring structure” (Bourdieu): As the materialised form of internalised social structures, norms and values, the body is the representative of structures. At the same time, dancing and playing football is carried out by physical performance, in which, however, the relevant canon of social rules is expressed, but is not completely absorbed in it. For praxis - not only for playing football and dancing – agents need certain knowledge, which is being performative one not necessarily cognitively available. It is available as a practical knowledge though and expresses itself as a sense of practice. It is a knowledge in which the order of the field – as space and power order as well as a ritualistic and a symbolic one – becomes corporeal. Specific dance and sports terms such as player intelligence, space awareness, sense of time and rhythm, indicate the physical structure of the field for the purpose of a space and time order, which is as incorporated as the field specific rules, conventions, norms and rituals.

Structured Improvisation

The habitual fixation of the agent in the specific field shows that the event does not take place in an unstructured way. In her dissertation on dance improvisation, Friederike Lampert characterised this phenomenon of interaction between order and coincidence as a structured improvisation⁸. She showed that contemporary choreographers do not understand choreography as a fixed order, but as a structured improvisation. The well selected examples of her work also apply for a danced dance, which has a certain repertoire of steps and figures, but is always brought forth in a new - and therefore different - way. This holds true for football. It could even be said: Improvisation is a technique of contemporary dance, whose origin lies in popular performances, in popular dances or games. Tango, for example, is a structured improvisation, because rules are known and work as a guidance note. It is also improvisational, because tango as every other couple dance never is completely ‘choreographable’ and repeatable. On the other hand, Brazilian choreographer Deborah Colker’s piece “Maracana” (Hamburg 2006) presented a choreography on the occasion of World Football Championship, which - different from “Project” - was completely cho-

⁸ Friederike Lampert, *Tanzimprovisation*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007.

reographed. Insofar, it could only *represent* a football game by means of a dance aesthetic language, but not as an event.

A football game is choreography, if it is not understood as a fixed spatial notation. Applying the concept of choreography to sports as well as to society⁹ and politics only seems sensible, when the structured improvisation is understood as choreography itself, as it is the case in contemporary debates on choreography. Coincidence and disorder as components of order play an important role in this kind of choreography. Choreography as a structured improvisation therefore always is an aesthetic reflection on what is so fascinating about football. In other words: Football performs the 'turn' towards a performative society, a society that de-structures and de-stabilises itself, that generates and needs flexible and mobile subjects.

In sports, structured improvisation is called 'playful interaction'. Here, it becomes obvious: What matters is what happens on the pitch. Even if tactical plans are made and the opponent's game was analysed, if the game system was practised and the individual positions on the pitch were thought through, if the turf was well cared for and the football shoes fit, if the mood is good, the single players are motivated, and media gives a positive report: all this does not decide on the actual course of the game. To put it in Norbert Elias' words, the game takes place in a structured and co-ordinated manner, but not rationally and planned. It symbolises the principle of social sequences of actions.

Elegance and Virtuosity

Sociologists like Norbert Elias, Michael Foucault or Pierre Bourdieu argued, that the order of the social field is inscribed in the body structure. Following these theses brought forward in different ways by each of them, it becomes obvious why football players and dancers belong to different worlds when it comes to posture, general attitude and lifestyle. Even though both are movement cultures, the field specific rules are quite different in sports and dance: With its competition and achievement orientation, sport is the epitome of modernity: Sports, especially football, is popular, masculine, omnipresent in the media, and part of an eventised culture. Principles of social in- and exclusion, distribution battles and power play here take place in a different way than in the field of dancing. Dancing being a movement culture and an art-form, was marginalised and mythicized in modernity, and appears as the 'other' of modernity ever since.

⁹ In 2006, a symposium entitled "Choreographies of the Social" ("Choreographien des Sozialen") took place at the Universität Oldenburg.

The difference in the different field-specific orders also becomes apparent in the defence that occurred when the French national team coach wanted to commit his team to a dance lesson on the occasion of World Cup 2006. He wanted to re-awaken abilities that dancers stand for, and that football players lost due to a new rapid and regulative game technique: sense of rhythm, quick coordination, agility and balance.

The dance-like qualities actually still make a football player unforgettable, that make him a star, a virtuoso with the ball. Dancing requires a sense of form and the ability to perform the executed movement meaningfully. The difference between dancers, people moving in every day life and football players in regards to movement execution is that the dancer gets the movement into shape. Modern dance, which established beyond the former aesthetics of ballet, is continuously questioning the difference between dance and movement for a century until today and searching for an aesthetic in those interstices. It is the ability to give shape to movement that makes it emerge as a dance movement.

The sense of form corresponds with the ability to give movement a spatial-temporal contour, i.e. to inscribe it into space, to choreograph it. Choreography as space-notation implies the reflexive relationship to physical movement. Reflexivity here does not - as commonly used in conceptual history - refer to a cognitive process. In the words of British sociologist Scott Lash, it should be thought of as an “aesthetic reflexivity”, as a contemplation arising from bodily-sensory feelings.

A football player can have a sense of form and make aesthetic moves, like Zidane, Messi or “Kaiser Franz”, but these skills only do not make him a successful football player. Playful elegance is rather an admirable side effect making the player unforgotten. These players will go down in football history as dancers on the turf: Canadian dancer Cesc Gelabert, a former player of FC Barcelona, holds a torch for Johan Cruiff. Gelabert attributes him characteristics that make players – as well as Pelé or Maradona - exceptional: They are perfect examples for a dance-like body balance when allowing the free leg to agitate freely leaning on the standing leg. Their free head position is based on the mobility of the neck. The players need it for orientation in space and head-balls. This also is elementary for dancers in order to be able to rotate and to perform pirouettes. It is as important as a perfect sense of space, as the ability to keep track and to anticipate action: In dance and football, this is called ‘opening spaces’. Constant changes of pace, that only a small number of players perfectly master in order to trick an opponent, also belong to the core actions of shaping movement in dance. Since Balanchine at the latest, they are a basic tool for generating tension in the interplay of dance and music.

It was also Balanchine who gave the virtuoso a new historic opportunity by offering the virtuous dancer a stage, and by elevating the virtuous itself as an element of choreography. The virtuoso is an ambiguous figure: On the one hand, the epitome of perfection, a perfect dominator of technique who achieves superhuman results; the sublime delighting his audience with his perfection and freeing its passion. On the other hand, the virtuoso is somebody bound to technique, who has no soul, is keen on cheap sensationalism, controls illusion, and deceives his audience. This is why in contemporary dance, the virtuosic dancer is a tough act to follow, especially as it is hard to separate dancer from dance in the virtuosic dance.

From 18th century on, the term virtuoso concentrates on the artist. Considering the Latin word “virtus” from which the term virtuoso originates, a similarity with competition becomes obvious: It means “capable of winning” and points to the warlike self-assertion. In football, the game can also be virtuous. It only captivates us, if it is efficient, too.

Un/Ambiguities

Football and dance are live performances. They take place in space and time; they are ritually framed and have a specific bodily medium for expression and action. They are performances with specific performance venues: the stadium and the dance stage. Being performances, they are both play and earnest: They are serious games whose power and fascination lies primarily in the fact that they are always real, unrepeatable and original. The character of the playful performance is different though: Dancing is always playing with the internal and external, or emotion-motion, movement and being moved, expression and feeling, form and sense, however these conceptual pairs are set. Football is a playful interaction, whose tension is not acted out between the poles emotion-motion, but in the fight for victory or defeat. Based on the production of final results and unambiguity, football offers clear calls for identification and awakes emotions, that dance cannot cause. While in dance, the audience can be deeply moved, affected and seduced, it mostly remains a passive consumer. In football, the audience is much more an active part of the event with a high degree of manipulative power. It is the twelfth player.

Probably because of this unambiguity, football can be a seismograph for social and political conditions. Other than dance, which is always ambiguous and because of these ambiguities possesses a mysterious, enigmatic, erotic, seductive and subversive power. This is what makes dance the ‘other’ of modernity.

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