

REVIEWS

Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason (eds.)

Kinaesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices

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There is a current interest in embodied knowledge that engages scholars in many disciplines all over the world. The volume *Kinaesthetic Empathy*, skilfully edited by Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason and based on a longer research project called *Watching Dance*, should be read in this context. Focusing on the various ways in which empathy functions in different kinds of human communication, the book investigates the concept of kinaesthetic empathy in analytical detail and with an innovative interdisciplinary and cross-methodological approach. It consists of fifteen chapters, divided into five thematic parts, each with an informative introduction.

The empowering result of applying kinaesthetic empathy is well articulated in the chapter on the joint creation of music by Tai-Chen Rabinowitch, Ian Cross and Pamela Burnard. The authors describe the components of musical group interaction (MGI), among them imitation, synchronization, affiliation and trust. They argue that with “proper guidance and attention [...] MGI can offer a perfect setting for strong intersubjective interaction” (p. 115), and thus intensify the positive effects of the subjective experience. A similar stress on the beneficial effects of embodied interaction is related in Bonnie Meekums’ engaging chapter on Dance Movement Psychotherapy. This movement practice can be described as a process in which therapist and client/s together form “a common intercorporeality” (p. 54). The use of characteristic working modes such as mirroring, witnessing and

dancing without a leader are all examples of kinaesthetic empathy.

One aspect that I find worth reflecting upon is the distinction between kinaesthesia and kinaesthetic empathy. We can understand the former simply as embodied experience that does not demand a correlation between our own experiences and how the other feels. When it comes to performance analyses, ideas of kinaesthetic empathy might lead us to think we can achieve a coherency between the artistic intentions and viewer responses. By doing so we disregard the multi-dimensional aspects of a performance that move beyond artistic intent. In the part of the book that concerns practice-based research, there are two chapters, which come close to this viewpoint. Victoria Gray writes about her own performance practice in an intriguing manner, recounting how she arrived at wanting to embody stillness after a career of rigorous conservatoire training. However, when she describes processes in which she creates the conditions for a specifically embodied relationship with the spectators, there is a risk of a too tightly knit correlation between the artist’s intention and audience reactions. Gray argues: “It is intended that spectators of my own performances [...] empathise with my physical state and enter into this acute mode of perception by being enabled to witness my body close up” (p. 206).

Musician and digital media artist Brian Knoth ends up with a similar problem. He describes a fascinating interactive multimedia performance

in which he wanted the viewers to focus on “its visceral qualities alone” (p. 288). In order to investigate the outcome, he designed an audience questionnaire aiming at eliciting the embodied multisensory experience of the performance. One of Knoth’s hypotheses was that this kind of interactive work could enhance the spectators’ perceptions of kinaesthetic empathy. It is possible that both Knoth and Gray implicitly address the hypothesis of a “merged subjectivity”, which is the focus of the article on musical group interaction, which describes the possibility of a breaking of “the subjective boundaries of the participating individuals” (p. 116), leading to a heightened sense of becoming-the-other. But there is reason to question if playing music together equals the communication between actor and viewer. Gray’s and Knoth’s artistic research is exciting as such, but there seems to be a gap between their views on an intimate performer-audience relationship and the more radical perspectives developed on spectatorship among contemporary performance theoreticians.

Dee Reynolds provides an elegant discussion that departs from a similar problem. She coins the expression “the dance’s body” in order to “designate a body that is not identified with a fixed subject position of either performer or spectator” (p. 123). In addition she turns the discussion away from emotional identification through kinaesthetic empathy to perceiving the dance as an affective encounter. Affects imply to be moved in an embodied sense, but without being “tied to cognitive judgements” (p. 126). Reynolds argues that affect should be conceived as a “fluid relationality” that questions the idea of dancers and viewers being autonomous subjects (p. 127). To the dance spectator this means participating “in a shared materiality and flow of choreographed movement across dancers’ bodies” (p. 129). In this manner it would be the dance’s kinaesthetic intentionality one responds to rather than artistic intent. Reynolds finishes her article by describing affective choreographies that are created from the viewpoint of hoping to provoke spectators into “epistemological shifts” (p. 132), and this is, of course, a development that could have a strong contributory effect to the art form.

In Reynolds’ article there is an interesting passage in which she notes that affects are “embedded in the contexts and histories of personal and cultural uses of the body” (p.126). Rose Parekh-Gaihede, who explores the ethical dimensions of kin-esthetic empathy, addresses the act of recognizing a more specifically positioned body. She makes close readings of two performances, one in Argentina and one in Denmark, in which empathy worked together with different distancing elements. This leads to a stimulating discussion, influenced by philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, on how the paradox of closeness and distance creates a face-to-face encounter that demands a responsibility for the other as well as a responsibility for the other in oneself.

A more explicit investigation of how affect is embedded in historical and cultural uses of the body is unfortunately absent in the anthology, but this does not make it less interesting to read. I consider it a very valuable explication of the current state of research on kinaesthetic empathy, at the same time as some of its articles in different ways point to problems that make fascinating areas for debate.

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