

CYNICAL PARRHESIA AND CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN DANCE

RAMSAY BURT

Abstract

This paper draws on Michel Foucault's discussion of the concept of cynical *parrhesia* to explore some similarities between the kind of provocative dialogue practised by the Cynics and the provocative way in which some recent European contemporary dance pieces criticise contemporary dance as an institution. It focuses on one ancient and one modern, twenty-first century example of provocative dialogue: the meeting between Diogenes and Alexander the Great, and that between gallery visitors and dancers in *Production* (2010) by Xavier Le Roy and Mårten Spångberg in response to an invitation to create a work for exhibition in an art gallery. The purpose of provocative dialogue, Foucault argues, is not to make someone to accept the truth but to persuade them to internalise the voice of the provocateur and thus initiate within themselves a process of ethical self-criticism. This paper argues that *Production* offers opportunities for this ethical practice both to gallery visitors and to the institution that commissioned it.

Keywords

Parrhesia, Foucault, Xavier Le Roy, Mårten Spångberg, cynical philosophy, contemporary European dance

Michel Foucault turned, in his later writings, to Greek and Roman philosophy in order to trace a genealogy of classical ideas about ethical practices before these were adopted and adapted within Christian theology. In October and November 1983 at the University of California, Berkeley, he gave six lectures on *parrhesia* – speaking the truth – as part of a larger project on understanding the nature of critical thinking. These lectures include a discussion of the radical, deliberately critical and uncomfortable use of *parrhesia* by the Cynics. Cynicism in the ancient Greek sense was very different from its contemporary meaning as negative, nihilistic scornfulness. As philosopher Simon Critchley (2009) points out:

True cynicism is not a debasement of others but a debasement of oneself – and in that purposeful self-debasement, a protest against corruption, luxury and insincerity. Diogenes, the story goes, was called a “downright dog”, and this so pleased him that the figure of a dog was carved in stone to mark his final resting place. From that epithet, *kunikos* (“dog-like”), cynicism was born.

The cynical use of *parrhesia* included what Foucault calls “provocative dialogue”. This kind of provocative dialogue practised by the Cynics, I will show, has some similarities with the provocative way in which some recent European contemporary dance pieces criticise contemporary dance as an institution.

The main example of “provocative dialogue” that Foucault discusses is the account by Dio Chrysostom (c. 40 – c. 115) of the meeting between Alexander the Great and Diogenes. Famously this began with Diogenes ordering Alexander to stand to one side since he had been enjoying sitting in the sun. Chrysostom states that “Alexander was at once delighted with the man’s boldness and composure in not being awestruck in his presence” (Chrysostom, *Fourth Discourse*). A long dialogue between the two ensued during which Diogenes continually provoked Alexander, speaking truth to power.

Speaking truth to power is something that some contemporary artists engage in through works that critique the forms and conventions of their art. Such works often implicitly or explicitly challenge dance institutions where the latter are responsible for supporting or perpetuating the conventions and traditions that these artists are criticising. One example of a recent dance work that does this is *Production* (2010) made by Xavier Le Roy and Mårten Spångberg in response to an invitation to create a work for the exhibition “Move: Choreographing You” at the Hayward Art Gallery in London.¹ In *Production*, a dancer or pair of dancers would engage in conversations with individual visitors to the exhibition that could sometimes be uncomfortable in the way they challenged normative expectations about the relationship between performer and spectator. This short essay identifies and discusses parallels between the conversations in *Production* and the dialogue between Alexander and Diogenes, doing so by drawing on Foucault’s insights into the Cynics in his Berkeley lectures.

Foucault states that the *parrhesiastes* – the one who tells the truth – is always in a less powerful position than the one to whom they are speaking: “The *parrhesia* comes from ‘below’, as it were, and is directed towards ‘above’” (Foucault, 1983, p. 5). There is often a danger that by telling the truth the *parrhesiastes* may hurt or annoy the person they are talking to. “*Parrhesia* is thus always a ‘game’ between the one who speaks the truth and the interlocutor” (ibid., p. 7). Diogenes, for example, set out to hurt Alexander’s pride, at one point calling him a bastard (which was technically true) and telling him that by calling himself king he was like “a child who, after winning a game, puts a crown on his head and declares that he is king” (ibid., p. 54). The reason for doing this, Foucault argues, is not to make the king recognize the truth but to inspire him to internalize “this *parrhesiastic* struggle – to fight within himself against his own faults, and to be with himself in the same way that Diogenes was with him” (ibid.). *Parrhesia*, thus, not only involves provocative dialogue but also has the aim of inspiring an ethical practice of caring for oneself.

1 *Production* has also been performed in art galleries in Munich, Düsseldorf, and Seoul.

Just as Diogenes spoke to Alexander from an inferior position, the dancers in *Production* were also inferior in relation to the gallery visitors, as the latter's entrance fees were collected by the institution that paid the dancers' wages. The dancers were not, however, in exactly the same relation to the visitors as Diogenes had been to Alexander. The dancers' dialogues were with the visitors whereas it was the gallery itself as an institution that exercised power over them. I will show that the dancers spoke truth to the gallery visitors but I will also argue that the gallery itself, as an institution, was nevertheless allowing itself to be challenged by the work and its choreographers, so that *parrhesia* was taking place in two different ways through the performance of *Production*.

The exhibition "Move: Choreographing You", curated by Stephanie Rosenthal, opened at the Hayward Art Gallery in London in October 2010, with the aim of exploring common concerns and overlaps in the practices of dance artists and visual artists since 1960. This put dance into an art gallery setting alongside films and installations, including sculptural environments in which visitors could actively engage in movement through climbing ropes or hanging from hoops. It included pieces by artists who began making work in the 1960s, such as Simone Forti, Robert Morris, and Bruce Nauman, alongside the work of a younger generation of artists like Maria La Ribot and Isaac Julien.²

A number of young dancers performed the exhibited dance works daily in the gallery,³ some of whom were also involved in Le Roy and Spångberg's piece. Amanda Prince-Lubawy, who was one of these dancers, explains what happened. When performing *Production*, the dancers chose to go into the gallery and rehearse any of a set of relatively well-known post-modern dance works, most of which were performed using spoken instructions or scores stored on mp3 players. If a gallery visitor looked too long at the dancers while they were doing this, the dancer (or dancers) could choose to approach the visitor and initiate a conversation.⁴

2 The artists whose work was presented in the exhibition were: Janine Antoni, Pablo Bronstein, Trisha Brown, Tania Bruguera, Rosemary Butcher, Boris Charmatz, Lygia Clark, William Forsythe, Simone Forti, Dan Graham, Anna Halprin, Christian Jankowski, Isaac Julien, Allan Kaprow / Rosemary Butcher, Mike Kelley, Michael Kliën, Thomas Lehmen, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, The OpenEnded Group with Wayne McGregor, João Penalva, Yvonne Rainer, La Ribot, Xavier Le Roy and Mårten Spångberg, Franz Erhard Walther, Franz West, Nevin Aladağ, Siobhan Davies, Everybodys/Générique. Performances during the run of the exhibition included Rosemary Butcher's reinterpretation of Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, *Schrottplatz* by Thomas Lehmen, *Llamame Mariachi* by La Ribot, Anne Collod's reinterpretation of Anna Halprin's *Parades & Changes*, *Replays*, *Low Pieces*, and a work by Xavier Le Roy.

3 The dancers "activated" certain works in the exhibition and performed actual choreographies created for Mike Kelley's *Test Room* (1999) and Simone Forti's *Huddle* and *Hangers* (both 1961). A separate group of dancers "activated" sculptural pieces by Franz Erhard Walther, Tania Bruguera's installation *Untitled (Kassel)* (2002) and a new commission by Pablo Bronstein. Ten dancers also performed Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* (1966) in the gallery.

4 Although I did spend a couple of hours in the exhibition, I did not know about *Production* (as it was not announced) and do not know whether I saw it or not. I did not take part in the interactive situation that Prince-Lubawy describes.

Upon noticing the gaze, we would ask, “Are you looking for something?” When confronted with this question, an attentive visitor would respond in their own way, and the seemingly separate roles (performer and spectator) could now be perceived as a border that shifts. (Prince-Lubawy, 2011, p. 18)

It didn’t matter whether the conversation stalled immediately or went on for hours. As Le Roy (ibid., p. 29) observes:

Production is successful as it transforms and acts on the time that the visitor spends with the work. The way each one engages with the work doesn’t depend only on them but is negotiated between them and the participants.

The actual words exchanged did not constitute the work, although they were part of it. What mattered was the fact that some sort of exchange was initiated.

The resulting conversation questioned the separation between performer and beholder, turning the latter from a passive consumer into an active participant with the potential to make a creative contribution to the performance. It was an opportunity for both to be productive. *Production* does not, therefore, set out to be provocative. However, as Prince-Lubawy (ibid.) explains: “The interaction with the viewer becomes the opportunity to notice oneself through the relationship with the other”. Noticing oneself, or engaging in a process of self-examination, is a goal that Foucault identified in the cynical use of *parrhesia*. As Spångberg (ibid., p. 22) observes, “in *Production*, the execution is constantly challenging the participant, addressing quite unorthodox modes of responsibility, exposure and ability to negotiate”. This provocation to rethink the way they approach dance is an instance of *parrhesia*.

Prince-Lubawy, in her discussion of *Production*, applies methodologies that seem perhaps partly to draw on ideas about the gaze developed by feminist scholars, as she seeks to account for the ways in which the work troubles and subverts normative modes of spectatorship. In an art gallery, the visitor looks at objects. So, if a dancer performs in a gallery, they may become objectified. The spectator, Prince-Lubawy suggests, “engages in an act of looking to satisfy their need for enlightenment” (ibid., p. 23). She describes some encounters during *Production* where she and a gallery visitor had long, interesting exchanges during which the dancers were definitely not reduced to objects of the spectators’ gaze. Other encounters that she mentions were evidently quite alienating, characterised by misunderstandings, and limited by the visitors’ narrowly restricted expectations. For example, in one instance, a pair of visitors, who had been approached by three dancers, said that, rather than talk to them, they wanted to see the dancers do some more of the dance movement they had been performing before their approach. Prince-Lubawy describes, with some irritation, occasions when visitors evidently expected the performers to provide a service for them by dancing.

On these occasions, the dancers' provocative relations with the gallery visitors would have resembled that of Diogenes with Alexander. Just as Diogenes targeted Alexander's pride, the dancers challenged the visitors' preconceptions about performance. These preconceptions resulted in an expectation that the dancers would perform a form of emotional labour. This, in Rachel Lara Cohen's useful definition, "comprises the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (Cohen, 2010, p. 198) which produces the appropriate state of mind in the person for whom the service is being delivered. What is alienating about emotional labour, Cohen argues, is that, within a capitalist economy, the customer's response "is owned by the capitalist who reaps the rewards" (ibid.). At the Hayward Art Gallery, the visitors bought their entrance ticket from the gallery ticket office and, in Prince-Lubawy's account, some of them expected to get their money's worth from watching the performers dancing for them.

What emerges from Prince-Lubawy's account is the way that *Production* enables this group of dancers to resist the process through which their emotional labour is turned into a commodity circulating within a market. When visitors had narrow expectations, *Production* challenged and disrupted these. When dancers and visitors had a more felicitous encounter through the piece, they were offered opportunities to have an experience that was not governed by normative expectations produced in a market economy in which dance functions as entertainment or spectacle. It is useful in this context to note Xavier Le Roy's observations about the dance market. In a much earlier piece, *Product of Circumstances* (1999), he observed that the funding system for dance enabled him to research new ways of making dance but channelled the resulting products in particular ways:

I had integrated the economic dynamics of dance production because I wanted to be able to make a living with what I had decided to do. But, even though I was very careful not to find myself under that particular logic, and simultaneously aiming for acceptance and resistance, I was not always completely convinced by my decisions. (Le Roy, 1999)

This degree of autonomy from the effects of the market is what the dancers in *Production* were aiming to achieve. For the latter, *parrhesiastic* provocations were a means to achieving this.

I have been arguing that, through a search for new ways of thinking about choreography, the dancers in *Production* were challenging beholders to reconsider their preconceptions. Beholders were invited to engage in a *parrhesiastic* self-examination not only about their own position as they watched dance performances but also about what theatre dance is meant to be. *Production*, I believe, goes further than this insofar as it draws attention towards normative ideas about the boundaries of what dance is meant to be and, by doing so, challenges the institutional context of theatre dance. The different parts of the dance world as it is institutionalised, including the practices of theatres, production agencies and arts centres, funders, critics,

conservatoires, dance scholars (myself included) and dance journals (like *Choros International Dance Journal*), produce and maintain these norms but also sometimes challenge them through the ways in which they interact and work with one another.

An institution serves and promotes a particular purpose; in the case of an art gallery, this is the appreciation of art. The institution organises the way people engage with this by ordering and regularising means of access and forms of behaviour. What is remarkable about *Production* is that, by challenging gallery visitors to engage in an active, productive way with a dance performance, it offers ways of rethinking the means of access and forms of behaviour that the institution organises. By initiating conversations with gallery visitors, *Production* animates the gallery in each moment that the dancers register on the consciousness of the gallery visitor. In principle, institutions function through such interactions, but *Production* initiates these in ways that challenge and, to a certain extent, disrupt the normative function of the gallery – to offer visitors opportunities to appreciate two- and three-dimensional works of art.

On an institutional level, the shift from solely displaying material art objects to also presenting immaterial art will have necessitated organisational readjustments – changing rooms for the performers, health and safety assessments, insurance, and so on. At another level, it involved rethinking the modes of engagement with art works and their appreciation, which challenged both its aims and practices. The provocative dialogue that *Production* had with the Hayward Art Gallery as an institution was one that had the aim of inspiring an ethical practice of self-questioning. By commissioning *Production*, the exhibition organisers presented a work that had the potential to critique institution. There is a parallel here with the way that Alexander welcomed Diogenes's provocations. One could argue, however, that the commission for *Production* was in line with the kinds of adjustments and restructuring that have been central to recent capitalist production.

Philosophers associated with the Italian Operaist movement have pointed to shifts in the nature of work to new kinds of production which they have labelled "post-Fordism".⁵ The use of mass production assembly line and standardisation known as Fordism that developed in the early twentieth century was transformed through the Neoliberal restructuring of capitalism that began in the 1970s. As production focused on smaller, specialised markets and on immaterial production, the focus shifted from material goods to adding value to products and services through the use of social skills and emotional rather than physical labour. Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne (2009) observe that this requires vitality, creativity, flexibility, and communication skills so that the artist has become the model employee of the new post-Fordist work ethic. By showing immaterial art works and presenting performances in art galleries, the institution could be said to be conforming to these shifts in the nature of capitalism. To function within the art

5 This is also known as the Autonomist Movement, in Italian *Autonomia Operaia*.

world, the gallery as an institution needs to be integrated into the economic dynamics of capitalist production. But as Le Roy suggests in his solo *Product of Circumstances*, it is possible to try to resist being completely taken over by the logic of such production. This, I propose, is what the Hayward Art Gallery was trying to do through commissioning *Production*. Such commissions represent a *parrhesiastic* process of critical examination.

Simon Critchley (2009) argues that “[t]he cynic’s every word and action was dedicated to the belief that the path to individual freedom required absolute honesty and complete material austerity”. I have argued that *Production* offered opportunities to have an experience that was not governed by normative expectations produced in a market economy in which dance functions as entertainment or spectacle. The gallery was therefore offering its visitors opportunities to be active participants with the potential to make a creative contribution to the production of an immaterial artwork. I noted earlier that Foucault argued in his lecture on *parrhesia* that Diogenes’s aim was not to get Alexander to accept the truth but to internalise the provocative voice and engage in an ethical practice of caring for himself. *Production*, I have argued, inspired both the gallery visitor and the institution to engage in this kind of ethical practice. As the piece’s name implies, *Production* engages in the process of production itself – on becoming something – rather than focusing on the value of the finished object. Cynical *parrhesia* offers ethical ways of behaving in response to the demands of post-Fordist times.

References

- Cohen, R. L. (2010) “When it Pays to be Friendly: Employment Relationships and Emotional Labour in Hairstyling”, *The Sociological Review*, 58 (2), pp. 197–218.
- Critchley, S. (2009) “Cynicism We Can Believe In”, *The New York Times* [Online], March 31. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/01/opinion/01critchley.html> [Accessed 20 April 2016].
- Foucault, M. (1983) *Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia*. Michel Foucault Info [Online]. Available at: <http://foucault.info/doc/documents/parrhesia/foucault-dt4-prati-ceparrhesia-en-html> [Accessed 20 April 2016].
- Gielen, P. and De Bruyne, P. (2009) “Introduction: Fresh Air and Full Lungs”, in Gielen, P. and De Bruyne, P. (eds) *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, pp. 7–16.
- Le Roy, X. (1999) “Score for *Product of Circumstances* (1999)” [Online]. Available at: <http://www.xavierleroy.com/page.php?id=63e83a12f776477d633187bdfbdb1c24c130da87&lg=en> [Accessed 20 April 2016].
- Prince-Lubawy, A. (2011) “Speak, Listen, Look, Move: Art Talks”, *Dance Theatre Journal*, 24 (2), pp. 17–25.