

The Cultural Context of Reception: Merce Cunningham and John Cage in Helsinki in 1964

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ABSTRACT

The reception of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and John Cage's visit to Helsinki in 1964 revealed local, Finnish aesthetic priorities. In the dance critics' texts, Cunningham's style seemed to create confusion, for example, with its mixture of styles vis-à-vis avant-garde music. Music critics, mainly avant-garde and jazz musicians, had high expectations for this theatrical event. In their reviews, comparisons were made between Cunningham's style and the productions of Anna Halprin. In this paper, I analyse the cultural perspectives of this encounter and utilize the theoretical framework of Thomas Postlewait's pattern of cultural contexts. Additionally, I follow David M. Levin's argumentation about changes in aesthetics. Local and foreign conventions become emphasized in this kind of a transnational, intercultural encounter. Time and place are involved in the interpretations of the past as well as later in the processes of forming periods.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Merce Cunningham, John Cage ja Cunninghamin tanssiryhmä vierailivat Helsingissä vuonna 1964. Esitystapahtuman kritiikit heijastelivat suomalaisten vastaanottajien omia esteettisiä mieltymyksiä, vallitsevia ilmiöitä ja käytäntöjä. Cunninghamin koreografinen tyyli, eri tanssityylien ja genrejen synteesi yhdistettynä avantgarde musiikkiin, lähinnä hämmensi tanssikritikoita. Musiikkikritikot – pääasiassa avantgarde- ja jazzmusiikin edustajia – odottivat innokkaina Cagen Suomen vierailua. Esitysarvioissaan he vertailivat Cunninghamin koreografista tyyliä Anna Halprinin tuotantoon. Teoreettisina viitekehyksinä käytän artikkelissani Thomas Postlewaitin ja David M. Levinin argumentaatioita tarkastellessani esitystapahtuman kontekstualisointia sekä ajallisia esteettisiä muutoksia. Ylirajaisissa, kulttuurienvälisissä kohtaamisissa paikalliset ja "vieraat" näkemykset, intentiot ja käytännöt korostuvat. Aika ja paikka ovat läsnä menneisyyden tulkinnoissa aivan kuten ajallisten identiteettien muodostumisprosesseissa myöhemmin.

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Introduction

“A hectic activity surrounded the Swedish Theatre” in Helsinki in September of 1964 when “a radical dancer of the atomic period” performed “in the most peculiar event”.¹ This was how the visit of Merce Cunningham (1919–2009), John Cage (1912–1992), and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (MCDC) was described in the local newspapers. This visit was Cunningham’s only journey to Finland.² In this article, I examine the reception of his company’s performance in Helsinki. I claim that the local context influenced the reception of his work. Local aesthetic priorities played a central role in how the performance was evaluated. My aim is to emphasize how the reception reflects the features of the era, and furthermore, how the characteristics of historical periods of art forms are connected with their culture and society.

Cunningham’s dance style was completely new in Finland. Besides reactions to his style, I consider what the texts reveal about the local dance culture. The Finnish reception of Cunningham’s performance seems to have been affected by several contextual factors. Firstly, the Martha Graham Dance Company, which

visited Helsinki in 1962, had imposed the idea of ‘American modern dance’ on Finnish audiences. Secondly, the critics compared Cunningham’s style with the characteristics of the waning Finnish early modern dance (*free dance*),³ and thirdly, the strong enthusiasm for classical ballet affected critics’ opinions when they evaluated Cunningham’s style. In addition, I examine the texts of the music critics, who seemed to have had high expectations for Cunningham’s choreographic style vis-à-vis avant-garde music, in particular Cage’s music.

The repertoire of the MCDC in Helsinki consisted of four choreographies by Cunningham: *Septet* (1953), *Antic Meet* (1958), *Night Wandering* (1958), and *Story* (1963).⁴ *Story* (1963) was at that time a new, rather radical experiment that led the way to one of Cunningham’s most famous performance

3 On style and genre in dance, see Cohen [1983] 1991, 339–54; Copeland [1983] 1991, 225–37. For an introduction to Finnish modern dance history, see Suhonen 1997, 248–9 (English summary).

4 The programme leaflet, *Merce Cunningham Dance Company, Helsinki 1964*. TeaMA 1419/18. The Theatre Museum’s Archive. The dancers, besides Cunningham, were Carolyn Brown, Viola Farber, Deborah Hay, Barbara Lloyd, Sandra Neels, William Davis, Steve Paxton, and Albert Reid. The composers, besides Cage, were Bo Nilsson, Erik Satie, and Toshi Ichihyanagi. The musician onstage with Cage was David Tudor. The stage décor and design were by Robert Rauschenberg. For information concerning the choreographies, see *Story* in Baner 1994, 103–09; *Antic Meet* in McDonagh [1973] 1992, 4–5; *Night Wandering* in McDonagh [1973] 1992, 5–6. For all works, see Copeland 2004.

1 RV [Vainio, Riitta]. 1964. “Merce Cunningham – atomiajan tanssija.” *Helsingin Sanomat*, September 19; iso [pseud.]. 1964. “Happeningiä ilman happeningiä.” *Kansan Uutiset*, September 20; Halonen, Antti. 1964. “Amerikkalaisen tanssin vallankumousilmiöitä.” *Uusi Suomi*, September 20.

2 Two days before the performance in Helsinki, the MCDC performed in Turku, Finland. See also Brown 2007, 410. John Cage visited Finland later during the 1980s.

series, *Events* (1964).⁵ In the choreographies *Septet* (1953) and *Antic Meet* (1958) the distinctive characteristics of Cunningham's 1950s style could be seen in his mixture of different dance styles and genres, such as balletic steps combined with other movement material.⁶ *Night Wandering* (1958) was an intense duet choreographed in Stockholm and danced by Cunningham and Carolyn Brown.

The research material consists of the written texts concerning the visit to Helsinki. The critics represented various art forms. Four dance critics and one cultural critic concentrated mainly on dance in their texts. In the texts of seven music critics, of which two wrote under pseudonyms, I will mainly observe the manner in which the connection between dance movement and new music was discussed.⁷ Additionally, it should be mentioned that since the MCDC performed in Helsinki as the guests of the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE), the performance was recorded,

and the filmed recording is still available.⁸ Some of the observations mentioned in this article have been confirmed by viewing the recording of the Helsinki performance in 1964.

In the following analysis, the reception of the performance is considered through the theoretical framework of Thomas Postlewait's (2009) pattern concerning the cultural contexts of theatrical events in a certain period. While each period reflects the characteristics of that time, at the same time they echo the past. In interpreting the moments of change in the aesthetics of dance, I will utilize the argumentation of David M. Levin (1990).

Reception, Context and Aesthetic Moments

A visiting performance in a foreign country can be understood as a 'cultural collision' in which different cultures meet in a certain place and time. The visiting performers interact with the local traditions. The reception of such an encounter often reveals something of the local context as it influences the way the local writers observe a foreign performance. For example, Johanna Laakkonen's (2009) study on the tours of the Imperial Russian Ballet demonstrates how different cultural contexts influenced the local reception in the cities where the company performed. The reception in each country reflected the values of the receiving cultures.

In Postlewait's argumentation, several contexts emerge in the documenters' texts on historical events. Reception represents one of the contextual aspects of a historical event.⁹

5 Banes 1994, 103–4. See *Events* e.g. Anderson [1976] 1992, 95–100.

6 Copeland 2004, 104; Morris 2006, 79–80. Besides balletic steps, ballet productions influenced the Cunningham-Cage productions. Cage especially underlined that those performing modern dance should study ballet productions, for example, the structures and rhythmic changes of the works. Morris 2006, 79–80. In *Septet*, one scene and the characters had their origins in George Balanchine's *Apollo* (1928). Copeland 2004, 104. *Septet* also relates to the image of Romantic ballet: one of the sections starts with an image, which could be paralleled with the image of the *Pas de Quatre*. See the picture in Au [1988] 2002, 44.

7 Some of the reviews that were published under pseudonyms (e.g. pseudonym koc in *Hufvudstadsbladet*) might have been written by same persons who wrote the pre-performance introductory texts. Some writers wrote only introduction texts. In addition, it was common that pre-performance texts were published with no author name and that the same person wrote the review (e.g. in *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti*).

8 The tape recording of the performance at the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki, 18 September 1964. The Archive of the Finnish Broadcasting Company (*Yleisradio*, YLE). The copy of the tape is in the author's possession.

9 Postlewait 2009, 9–20; 144. On contextualizing a performance in time and place, see also Koski 2005, 126–49.

The review, besides being a personal evaluation by one writer, might entail “community factors and conditions”,¹⁰ which include among other things “the beliefs and values of the society, the aesthetic tastes and expectations of the era”.¹¹ It is important to notice that certain responses emerge during specific periods in certain geographical settings. Thus, these particular conditions should be taken into account.

As historians, in arranging segments of time, we try to capture certain characteristics that give each era a specific identity.¹² Along with disparate cultural circumstances, activities and agencies create different characteristics and identities for their periods.¹³ For instance, in relation to Finnish and American modern dance, in one of the nations, stylistic features of the genre might completely differ from those of the same genre in the other nation at the same time. How are different aesthetics and artistic practices seen and evaluated in the contexts of another culture? Postlewait argues that in the arts a historical period and its embeddedness in its local society and culture are unique. This “implies that the art of one period cannot be understood or judged adequately by the standards of art from another period or culture”.¹⁴ Furthermore, the periodical frameworks that indicate certain trends for each art form settle in time differently when compared with other art forms.¹⁵ In my research, the latter argument comes up in the viewpoints of the dance and music critics; they both evaluated the

same performance from different perspectives and with different expectations. For example, their perceptions and values concerning the avant-garde music in connection with the dance movements differed significantly.

The aesthetic characteristics of art forms in cultures, besides being tied to and exemplifying their era, also give some indications of the preceding aesthetic conventions. In relation to the changes in the aesthetics of dance, Levin concurs that “each aesthetic moment constitutes itself as a critical commentary on the preceding aesthetic moment.”¹⁶ If the aesthetic choices are commentaries on preceding conventions, the question is what those previous moments are. By emphasising the ‘cultural collision’, I investigate what ‘moments’ – aesthetic choices and practices – both counterparts brought to the discussed encounter and what different features from the past affected that particular moment. I ask what features Cunningham’s style represented and against what previous aesthetics he worked with. How were these phenomena interpreted by Finnish writers? What special remarks did the critics mediate, and what interpretations can be made from these comments? In the next section, I present more closely the strands of Finnish and American dance that came across in the meeting.

Encountering the Cunningham Style

The foreign trends affecting the Finnish arts

10 Postlewait 2009, 13.

11 Postlewait 2009, 13–4.

12 About periodization, see e.g. Postlewait 2009, 157–95; 2005, 53–89. On periodization in dance research, see e.g. Carter 2004, 10–14.

13 Postlewait 2009, 157–95.

14 Postlewait 2009, 163.

15 E.g. Postlewait 2009, 182–3; Levin 1990, 214.

16 Levin 1990, 221. On the concept of *change* in aesthetic modernism, see e.g. Calinescu [1987] 2003, 10; 46–7; 66–8; 77–8. The concept of change is understood as a transformation process in the art genre that occurs against the older tradition of that same genre. The change is understood a commitment to ‘the other’, a new element against previous elements. Change could also be considered a concept of crisis that gives birth to something new or modern (a novelty). Ibid.

during Cunningham's visit were compactly described by the composer and music critic Kaj Chydenius: "We can generally say that there are two opposite sides in our conception of art: the *free American* one and the *strict Russian* one."¹⁷ This expression also depicts the state of Finnish dance. During the 1960s American modern dance companies performed for Finnish audiences for the first time. In addition, American modern and jazz dance techniques were taught by visiting teachers, though Cunningham's dance technique was not yet included.¹⁸ Finnish modern dance was changing as it processed new aesthetics and dance techniques practiced by a new generation of dancers. The free movement dance schools no longer fulfilled the topical requirements that seemed to interest dance students, so new dance schools were established, such as the Modern Dance School (1962) run by dancer-choreographer Riitta Vainio. The progressive infrastructure of the modern dance field was still struggling, a lack of resources was a continuing problem, and audiences followed new trends and developments in modern dance with varying degrees of interest.

Quite the opposite circumstances were found on popular ballet stages. The status of Finnish classical ballet was more stabilized than that of modern dance, and Finnish ballet was strongly

influenced by Russian ballet.¹⁹ In ballet, the Russian influence on dance – "the strict Russian one" – pointed to the austere ballet training method of Agrippina Vaganova (1879–1951), which was practiced in the Finnish National Ballet (1922). Characteristics of her method were the technical virtuosity and emotional expression that were attached to movements.²⁰ In the Finnish context, the Vaganova method defined what ballet should look like and how the norms of ballet were fulfilled. When Finnish critics realized that balletic steps were included in Cunningham's choreography, they used the standards derived from the Vaganova style and technique to evaluate balletic connotations seen onstage, regardless of what the balletic steps were supposed to signify in the choreographic style. I argue that the expectations and function of balletic steps onstage were seen through the local *Vaganovian* gaze, as I will refer to later in this text.

Already in the pre-performance publicity for Cunningham's visit, the connections between Cunningham and the previous visit of the Martha Graham Company were emphasized: Finnish spectators expected to see the former Graham Company soloist. Cunningham's approach to dance was described as a "brilliant but radical by-product of Graham's style".²¹ Finnish dance critics had appreciated Graham's choreographic style, movement vocabulary, and the narrative approach in her works. Her company's 'barefoot' dancers received acclaim for their technical virtuosity and for their

17 Chydenius, Kaj. 1964. "Mot den fria konsten." *Hufvudstadsbladet*, September 19. My italics.

18 Other American modern dance visitors, besides Martha Graham Company and the MCDC, were the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre (1965), Anna Halprin and the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop (1965), and Donald McKayle and Black New World Troupe (1967). Among dance techniques introduced and trained were the Louis Horton technique, the Nadia Chilkovsky technique, the May O'Donnell technique, and later in that decade also the Martha Graham technique. At the same time several jazz dance techniques and primitive dance were taught by American dance teachers.

19 On the history of Finnish ballet, see Suhonen 1997, 248–9. On the Russian influence on Finnish ballet in its early stages, see also Laakkonen 2009.

20 On the Vaganova method, e.g. Reynolds and McCormick 2003, 257–8; 503.

21 Halonen, Antti. 1964. "Amerikkalaisen tanssin avant-gardistaja Suomessa." *Uusi Suomi*, September 18.

strong emotional expression.²² These features seemed to satisfy the Finnish expectations for professionalism in modern dance. When Cunningham arrived, Finnish dance critics expected a similar sublime atmosphere; they did not realize that Cunningham's innovations had been created to a large extent in opposition to his past generation, namely to Graham.²³

Cunningham's dance style has later been situated between modern and post-modern dance. Thus, his style has also been referred to as *objectivist*.²⁴ Roger Copeland (2004) labels Cunningham as a *modernizer* of modern dance. Cunningham and Cage together began to reshape the style of modern dance and performance concepts in the late 1940s. The new choreographic structures, the multi-dimensional use of space, and chance methods introduced a sharp change in the performance style. Other new elements were the objectivist and impersonal approach to performing and to the contents of the works.²⁵ A mixture of dance styles and genres was characteristic of the modernization process already in early modern dance;²⁶ it was so in Cunningham's work too. Cunningham's movement style moved away from earlier modern dance by synthesizing it with certain aspects of ballet.²⁷ The new features that Cunningham's style presented are nowadays considered characteristics of what is referred to

as the first phase of post-modern dance.²⁸

While performing around the world, Cunningham and Cage wanted to deliver the ideas of their performance concept through written texts as well. This was the case in Helsinki too. According to dancer Carolyn Brown, this 'Cage-Cunningham philosophy' never changed.²⁹ The text appeared translated into Finnish in several Finnish newspapers before the performance, and it was exactly the same text that Brown cites as an example of this philosophy:

Merce Cunningham... has, since 1944, developed his own school of dancing and choreography, the continuity of which no longer relies on linear elements, be they narrative or psychological, nor does it rely on a movement towards and away from climax. As in abstract painting, it is assumed that an element (a movement, a sound, a change of light) is in and of itself expressive; what it communicates is in large part determined by the observer himself. It is assumed that the dance supports itself and does not need support from the music. The two arts take place in a common rhythmic structure, but each art expresses this structure in its own way. The result is an activity of interpenetrations in time and place, not counterpoints, or controlled relationships, but flexibilities as are

22 Korppi-Tommola 2010.

23 Copeland 2004, 2–3; 121–43.

24 Copeland [1983] 1991, 225; 2004, 243–45; Foster 1986, 32–57; 167–71; Banes [1977] 1987, xvi; Morris 2006, 166–81.

25 Au [1988] 2002, 155–58; Morris 2006, 166–81; Reynolds and McCormick 2003, 354–70; Copeland 2004.

26 Burt 2006; Copeland 2004; Banes [1977] 1987.

27 Banes [1977] 1987, xvi; 7.

28 Levin 1990, 207–33; see also Banes [1977] 1987, *Introduction*.

29 Brown 2007, 119.

known from the mobiles of Alexander Calder.³⁰

It is precisely these aforementioned elements – later characterized as modernist features in modern dance³¹ – that puzzled the Finnish critics.

“Ridiculous Fooling Around”

In this section, I discuss the features that Finnish critics found unfamiliar and how their confusion was visible in their texts. One review appeared a week after the evening of the performance, and the description was simply presented in two short paragraphs: happenings onstage were “ridiculous fooling around”.³² Obviously, more complicated reactions and interpretations appeared as well, for instance, in the way in which modern dance terminology was used and in the expressed attitudes towards dance aesthetics.

The complex usage of dance terminology reflected the changing conditions of Finnish modern dance. Some of the terms used in the dance writings echoed the past (for instance, ‘plastic dance’), and some indicated new

trends, although without yet established, precise definitions (such as ‘modern jazz dance’). From the 1950s on, negative connotations were attached to the term ‘free dance’.³³ Gymnastics had been intertwined with early modern dance,³⁴ but in the 1960s, references to gymnastics referred to an amateurism and unprofessionalism in dance.

Two dance critics, former ballet dancer Elisabet Valto and writer and theatre director Antti Halonen (1903–1985),³⁵ who wrote in the two main newspapers of Helsinki, the capital city of the country, *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Uusi Suomi*, echoed their balletomanian attitudes in their writings, condemning any other dance style to be mere gymnastics. Halonen had publicly debated in favour of ballet against new dance styles as early as 1929.³⁶ In their pre-performance texts, they introduced Cunningham and American modern dance history properly using the given and relevant terminology: American modern dance. They also expressed their enthusiasm for the new visitor and his Company.³⁷ Nevertheless, their tone changed in the reviews. Valto wanted to use the word gymnastics to describe what she

30 Brown 2007, 118–19. I have used Brown’s text because it is in English. The text is exactly the same as that appearing in Finnish newspapers (in Finnish) during the MCD’s visit to Finland in e.g. Valto, Elisabet. 1964. “Merce Cunningham saapuu.” *Ilta-Sanomat*, September 14; “Merce Cunningham.” *Kansan Uutiset*, September 18, 1964; Vainio, Riitta. 1964. “Merce Cunningham ja moderni tanssi.” *Helsingin Sanomat*, September 20; “John Cage & kumppanit saapuvat perjantaina,” *Helsingin Sanomat*, September 14, 1964; Heikinheimo, Seppo. 1964. “John Cage – filosofi vai musiikillinen ilveilijä.” *Helsingin Sanomat*, September 18; Oramo, Ilkka. 1964. “John Cage – ilveilyn filosofi.” *Uusi Suomi*, September 18.

31 Modernist according to e.g. Levin 1990, 218–23; see also Banes [1977] 1987, *Introduction*; Copeland 2004.

32 F-duuri [pseud.]. 1964. “Cunninghamin baletti.” *Kansan Uutiset*, September 23.

33 It is interesting that in Sweden, the reaction to the use of the term ‘free dance’ was quite the opposite, especially later. See Hamnergren 1992, 181–2.

34 On the connections between women’s gymnastics and free dance, see Makkonen 2007; 2010.

35 See concerning Valto, Vienola-Lindfors and af Hällström 1981, 22, 30–1, 242; concerning Halonen in “Tanssi. Tutkimusliite 1/98.” *Tutkimusliite 1, Tanssi 3:4*, 1998. On their balletomanian attitudes, see also Arvelo and Räsänen 1987, 33.

36 The debate between Halonen and Irja Hagfors is reprinted in “Tanssi. Tutkimusliite 1/98.” *Tutkimusliite 1, Tanssi 3:3–11*, 1998.

37 Halonen, Antti. 1964. “Amerikkalaisen tanssin avantgardisteja Suomessa.” *Uusi Suomi*, September 18; Valto, Elisabet. 1964. “Merce Cunningham saapuu.” *Ilta-Sanomat*, September 14.

had seen: “dance (gymnastics-dance)”.³⁸ She explained that these gymnastic movements were initiated both by ballet and by the modern dance schools. She proclaimed that “real modern progression” cannot be attained in this style until the movements and activities onstage were thoroughly reconsidered.³⁹ Valto’s review was titled “Cunningham’s Waltz Group”.⁴⁰ Relating the style of Cunningham’s movements to the waltz was a way to distance Cunningham’s work completely from professional, performing dance arts. To Valto, the performance was neither modern nor dance instead it was either gymnastics or waltzing. Halonen referred to the movements onstage as “plastic movements”.⁴¹ In his review, he did not use the term modern dance at all. The changes in terminology in their texts were statements that similarly reflected the changes in the critics’ evaluations of Cunningham’s style after they had seen the performance.

The reason for this change in terminology becomes apparent against the background of Martha Graham’s visit. In her press conference, Graham was asked about her dance style and especially about her relationship to the term ‘free dance’. Graham confirmed that the word ‘free’ in her style did not mean free from technical demands in dance. In the Finnish reviews, her dance style was referred to as modern dance.⁴² Then references to gymnastic movements or plastic movements with their negative connotations were not made as they were during

Cunningham’s visit. Some of the critics wrote about both performances. By using terms that indicated older traditions, the critics attempted to point out that Cunningham’s dance was not new in the way that they believed modern dance art at that time should be.

All things considered, the genre Cunningham represented confused all the critics. The word ‘ballet’ was commonly used to describe the performance, especially among the critics unfamiliar with dance aesthetics and terminology. For example, Maria Laukka (b. 1942), who was a cultural critic from outside the dance world, seemed to be terminologically confused. She used a variety of terms when writing about the performance: “Cunningham and his Ballet Company”, “modern ballet”, “ballet night”, “performance” (with inverted commas), “a multifaceted performance”, and “a Contemporary Gesamtkunstwerk” (the last one derived from the information material that the Comapany delivered).⁴³

The choreographies *Story* and *Antic Meet* were considered to be the “most peculiar creations”, in Valto’s opinion. Cunningham “had gone to extremes” in these works.⁴⁴ She argued that nothing happened onstage, dancers “did not dance”, and real ‘action’ or movements were not included. According to my notes – relying on the tape recording and research on Cunningham’s work (Copeland 2004; Baner 1987; 1994) – both choreographies included plenty of motion and action. What might have created this impression in *Story* for the critic was the general atmosphere in the

38 Valto, Elisabet. 1964. “Cunninghamin valssiyhtye.” *Ilta-Sanomat*, September 21.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Halonen, Antti. 1964. “Amerikkalaisen tanssin vallankumousilmiötä.” *Uusi Suomi*, September 20.

42 Korppi-Tommola 2010.

43 [Laukka, Maria]. 1964. “Cunningham ja kumppanit – Amerikan taide vieraillee.” *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti*, September 18.

44 Valto, Elisabet. 1964. “Cunninghamin valssiyhtye.” *Ilta-Sanomat*, September 21.

piece, which was produced by incorporating a chance technique in the changing order of the dance sections. In relation to the humorous *Antic Meet*, which consisted of many balletic steps and connotations, I assume that this kind of entertaining action rather alienated this critic from the piece.

Furthermore, Valto argued that the dancers performed without any stage expression, only with a hollow stage presence. To her, the dancers merely “posed expressionless and unfocused”.⁴⁵ She considered the stage presence to have no stage rules, just a “naturalistic appearance in the explosive décor and noise”.⁴⁶ This distanced way of performing was one of the features that differentiated Cunningham’s style from that of Graham’s. In the Finnish context, the overall reaction to this essence of Cunningham’s style was rejection. This distanced ‘natural’ way of being onstage meant not ‘performing’ at all.

Modernist features provoked criticism, whereas in the other two pieces, *Septet* and *Night Wandering*, elements that could be considered characteristics of earlier American modern dance, such as Graham’s style, were appreciated. For instance, movement combinations were made more in accordance with the music, the works were understandable owing to some kind of story line, and the works even had a sentimental atmosphere, even emotional movements, which this particular critic was surprised to notice.⁴⁷ Furthermore, *Night Wandering* had symbolist elements.⁴⁸ In fact, the critic complained that she had been misled since these elements had been claimed not to be part of Cunningham’s style in the material handed out before the performance.

These aforementioned “linear elements” were recognized,⁴⁹ though they were disavowed by the Cage-Cunningham philosophy. Thus, whatever the pre-performance ‘philosophy’ had tried to mediate concerning the new ideas of the works, it seems that the critics mainly observed the performance through their own cultural understanding, reflecting in and through their own cultural contexts.

Balletic Amateurism

Introducing different, unfamiliar aesthetics and artistic practices side by side with balletic connotations intensified the atmosphere of confusion among the critics. The vocabulary of ballet had been introduced as part of Cunningham’s style in the pre-performance publicity.⁵⁰ As a consequence, the Finnish critics were expecting ballet as they knew it. However, the idea of the ballet movement being part of the modernization of modern dance did not exist in the Finnish context in the 1960s.⁵¹ According to local conventions, performing ballet vocabulary in any other way than the Vaganova method was interpreted as amateurism.

For the critics who were not accustomed to

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Brown 2007, 118–19; Finnish pre-performance texts and some reviews (see footnote 30).

50 E.g. “Merce Cunningham.” *Kansan Uutiset*, September 18, 1964; “John Cage & kumppanit saapuvat perjantaina.” *Helsingin Sanomat*, September 14, 1964; Brown 2007, 119.

51 There is no Finnish research on how new influences affected ballet in the Finnish National Ballet during these decades. Critic Elisabet Valto rejected new trends and the ‘modern’ in general on the stage of the Finnish National Ballet. Valto, Elisabet. 1963. “Modernismi ja aikamme tanssitaide.” *Teatteri 4*; Valto, Elisabet. 1963. “Valoisia ja synkkiä mietteitä suomalaisesta baletista.” *Teatteri 7–8*. On the other hand, Birgit Cullberg’s choreography *Neiti Julie* (*Miss Julie*, 1952) at the Finnish National Ballet had been appreciated. Vienola-Lindfors and af Hällström 1981, 88–90; 135; 146.

observing dance in general, the perspective of ballet guided the identification of movements onstage. This was the case with critic Laukka. According to her, *Story*, which did not include balletic movements, did not have choreography at all. She writes: "It [*Story*] contained a movement style that we have not been accustomed to in ballet."⁵² The comparisons were made with the knowledge of ballet, however, in her case, not with a precise Vaganovian gaze. Her argumentation was 'value free', without any connotations in favour of any particular dance genre. Cunningham's choreography became accessible through the information given in the pre-performance texts: for her, the work of Cunningham was abstract, since dance did not mediate meanings and since an abstract event did not need representational substance for support.⁵³

Several critiques mentioned the supremacy of the ballet technique that was visible as the background training of the dancers.⁵⁴ For example, Halonen praised the dancers' technical abilities: "They have an excellent training system as a support, a basis in classical ballet. You can immediately see that they are sophisticated and hard workers."⁵⁵ The credit for excellence was given to ballet. Still Halonen considered the whole performance as "Much Ado about Nothing", in honour of Shakespeare.⁵⁶ Here he agreed with the two other dance critics

that, concerning the dance and choreography, he saw nothing worth mentioning.

In Finland, parody was seldom associated with ballet, at least in the way that Cunningham used it in *Antic Meet*. Laukka pointed out that *Antic Meet* represented a parody of ballet; she considered the work a lovely set of fireworks.⁵⁷ In the choreography, "ballerinas constructed a major parody dressed in the draping designs of Rauschenberg".⁵⁸ Dancers were dressed in modern tutus. Another critic mentioned parody and humour, but did not connect them with the ballet world. Instead s/he interpreted them as an absurd reflection of everyday life.⁵⁹ Neither of the ballet-orientated writers mentioned the idea of making a parody of ballet nor did they mention the humour in the choreography of *Antic Meet*.⁶⁰ They ignored the connections between ballet and parody, and simply failed to appreciate these works. As Copeland has clarified, in this work, Cunningham was poking fun at classical ballet.⁶¹ The poking fun at ballet must have been the basis for the rejection of and irritation about this piece by both of the ballet-oriented critics.

Dancer and choreographer Riitta Vainio (b. 1936) was an exceptional critic of the performance. She had just begun working in the field of Finnish modern dance after completing her dance studies at the Philadelphia Dance Academy. To some extent, she was aware of the changes in modern dance aesthetics and techniques at the turn of the 1960s in the United

52 Laukka, Maria. 1964. "Tanssiva mobile." Suomen Sosialidemokraatti, September 20.

53 Ibid.

54 Valto, Elisabet. 1964. "Cunninghamin valssiyhtye." Ilta-Sanomat, September 21; Halonen, Antti. 1964. "Amerikkalaisen tanssin vallankumousilmiöitä." Uusi Suomi, September 20.

55 Halonen, Antti. 1964. "Amerikkalaisen tanssin vallankumousilmiöitä." Uusi Suomi, September 20.

56 Ibid.

57 Laukka, Maria. 1964. "Tanssiva mobile." Suomen Sosialidemokraatti, September 20.

58 Ibid.

59 F-duuri [pseud.]. 1964. "Cunninghamin baletti." Kansan Uutiset, September 23.

60 Valto, Elisabet. 1964. "Cunninghamin valssiyhtye." Ilta-Sanomat, September 21; Halonen, Antti. 1964.

61 Copeland 2004, 110; also McDonagh [1973] 1992.

States. In her text concerning Cunningham, she acknowledged what Cunningham had presented in his pre-performance material: both dance genres, ballet and modern dance, were part of Cunningham's movement style. However, even she did not consider ballet as a modernizing element in modern dance. In her reviews, Vainio mentioned that clear boundaries between genres should be eliminated when considering Cunningham's work, and she admitted that fluctuation between the genres appeared in the movements.⁶² Still, she considered *Septet* to be old-fashioned, belonging to "an old dance style conception".⁶³ The overall Finnish view placed ballet as a genre outside of the scope of modern dance.

Cunningham's use of avant-garde music irritated some of the dance critics.⁶⁴ I assume that the volume of the objection was enhanced due to the balletic connotations in the choreographies. The ballet-orientated critics could not accept the new music, and the other dance critics hardly mentioned the music. Halonen's reaction to the new music was furious:

Do you [Cage] think it is your business to explain to us that we have to be deaf in order to prepare an instrument, which is called a piano – just to amuse us with that barrel organ, not our contemporary ear, but our contemporary bad nerves! We have our amusement park, *Linnanmäki*, and it has a noisy slide. Haven't you thought about that kind of an instrument to perform with in order to solve your "sociological

problems"? Start your music studies all over again!⁶⁵

The tone of Halonen's text also acts as a good example of a Finnish critic's 'normal' reaction to any new element in dance at that time. Quite the opposite reactions came from the music critics' texts; they also addressed the style of the movements, but for different reasons.

Avant-garde Music contra Movement Style

Cage's visit to Finland was eagerly awaited by Finnish musicians. The music critics happened to represent the contemporary, avant-garde and jazz music of the time,⁶⁶ such as Seppo Heikinheimo, Erkki Salmenhaara, and Kaj Chydenius.⁶⁷ At the beginning of the 1960s, special concerts of new music and *happening-events* were arranged, and some of these musician-critics were involved in these activities.⁶⁸ Cage's composition, 4'33", had just been performed in Helsinki when Cage and

62 Vainio, Riitta. 1964. "Merce Cunningham ja moderni tanssi." Helsingin Sanomat, September 20.

63 Ibid.

64 Lena Hamnergren notices a similar reaction in the Swedish reviews of Cunningham's visit to Stockholm especially in 1958 and still in 1966. Hamnergren 1992, 176.

65 Halonen, Antti. 1964. "Amerikkalaisen tanssin vallankumousilmiötä." Uusi Suomi, September 20.

66 According to Mikko Heiniö, avant-garde music in the Finnish context at the turn of the 1950s and the 1960s was "mainly the extremist trend of new music". Heiniö 1984, 120. In the first half of the 1960s, Finnish avant-garde music aimed for free expression. It withdrew from the theoretical orientation and academic strictness of the 1950s. Heiniö 1984, 116–27.

67 Ilkka Oramo and Pekka Gronow only wrote pre-performance texts mainly concerning John Cage.

68 On the concept of a *happening* in the Finnish context, see Elovirta 1995; Erkkilä 2008. The concept of a *happening* and its historical development differs between the US and the Nordic countries. In Finland, the term was used to refer to special performance events where several arts were involved, at that time, mainly new music and theatre. Ibid.

Cunningham arrived.⁶⁹ Since the Finnish music critics were oriented towards the new trends, and as they valued Cage's music and ideas, they had high expectations for the movement style attached to the new music.

The music critics paid more attention to the idea of a *total work* of art in relation to the MCDC performance. In their pre-performance texts they had analyzed the relations between the art forms and had seen music, dance, and décor as being autonomous elements of a "contemporary Gesamtkunstwerk".⁷⁰ In it dance was considered a connective element between the other arts.⁷¹ Cunningham and Cage used the *collage* technique, where music, décor, and movement converged as equal and autonomous elements in a performance that was specifically interpreted as a reaction against a total artwork.⁷² The collage technique diverged from Graham's intention to treat the performance as a unity of music, choreography, and décor.⁷³ It was part of the avant-garde idea of viewing the arts as separate elements within one work, and apparently the dance critics may not have

been familiar with this thought in connection with dance. In any case, they did not discuss this issue in their texts. One exception was Vainio, who stated that movement in itself and about itself is sufficiently expressive.⁷⁴ This indicates that the music critics were obviously more alert to avant-garde ideas.

The expectations were more radical than the actual theatrical performance that took place in the traditional atmosphere of the Swedish Theatre. The music critics were disappointed when "no scandals happened, or were seen or heard at the theatre".⁷⁵ One writer even expressed disappointment after the first press meeting since the visitors did not seem to be "scandalous radicals".⁷⁶ Another writer criticized the performance as "a happening without a real happening".⁷⁷ These two critics were expecting a happening-event to occur in the Nordic context, meaning an interactive audience event, perhaps conducted outdoors. Chydenius also observed that Cunningham's company performed to "a passive audience".⁷⁸

The more radical the expectations, the more peculiar Cunningham's movement style seemed to be in connection with the new music. Also, the music critics recognized the influence of the ballet world and ballet steps in the performance. They commonly used the term ballet in their texts; "modern ballet" was also mentioned.⁷⁹

69 Heiniö 1995, 151–58; Koskinen, Juha T. "Musiikin avantgarde 1960-luvulla, lastenkamarikonserdit kyseenal-aistivat musiikin piintyneitä arvoja." <http://yle.fi/teema/sini-nenlaulu/artikkeli.php?id=283>. Accessed June 15, 2010.

70 The term *contemporary Gesamtkunstwerk* (*nykyaikainen Gesamtkunstwerk*) was used in "Cunningham ja kumppanit – Amerikan taide vieraillee." Suomen Sosialidemokraatti, September 18, 1964. The separation of the arts was discussed e.g. in iso [pseud.]. 1964. "Happeningiä ilman happeningiä." *Kansan Uutiset*, September 20; "John Cage & kumppanit saapuvat perjantaina," *Helsingin Sanomat*, September 14, 1964; Heikinheimo, Seppo. 1964. "John Cage – filosofi vai musiikillinen ilveilijä." *Helsingin Sanomat*, September 18; koc. [pseud.]. 1964. "John Cage slopar tid och notation." *Hufvudstadsbladet*, September 18. See also Brown 2007, 118–19.

71 Ibid.

72 Copeland 2004, e.g. 22; 45–6; 167.

73 Ibid., 25–51.

74 Vainio, Riitta. 1964. "Merce Cunningham ja moderni tanssi." *Helsingin Sanomat*, September 20.

75 iso [pseud.]. 1964. "Happeningiä ilman happeningiä." *Kansan Uutiset*, September 20.

76 koc. [pseud.]. 1964. "John Cage slopar tid och notation." *Hufvudstadsbladet*, September 18.

77 iso [pseud.]. 1964. "Happeningiä ilman happeningiä." *Kansan Uutiset*, September 20.

78 Chydenius, Kaj. 1964. "Mot den fria konsten." *Hufvudstadsbladet*, September 19.

79 Gronow, Pekka. 1964. "Cage & Cunningham." *Ylioppilaslehti*, September 23.

Most of the critics referred to the MCDC as “an avant-garde ballet company”.⁸⁰ The avant-garde connections were obviously strengthened because of the music. However, the basic problem was revealed in Salmenhaara’s comment that even though the MCDC represented avant-garde ballet, “the avant-gardist label in the evening was minor”.⁸¹ The critic wanted to give a better example of the way in which to connect new music and dance movements: the way the American choreographer, Anna Halprin (b. 1920), had done.⁸²

Halprin seems to have been better known among contemporary Finnish music critics than Cunningham.⁸³ She and the San Francisco Dancers’ Workshop had performed at various music festivals in Europe, even in co-operation with Cage, and the Finnish avant-garde musicians (and visual artists) had paid attention to them at the festivals.⁸⁴ Indeed, Halprin’s movement style and approach to music seemed to have made

an impression on those who saw her in these festivals. Salmenhaara was amongst them. In his review, Salmenhaara concluded that Halprin had succeeded better than Cunningham in “merging the music and the visual elements into an organic entity in which both areas follow the same principles of composition”.⁸⁵ Salmenhaara appreciated the fact that Cunningham’s movements did not continuously accompany the rhythmic schema of music as “in traditional ballet”. However, he was critical because Cunningham’s movements did not follow the same free creative process as the music. In his view this desired result in dance should have been created differently and he even suggested how: “by letting both [the dance and the music] emerge from the free and limitless power of expression in the rich soil filled with ideas.”⁸⁶ According to this critic, movement style should not represent any pre-existing, recognizable dance technique. This more open, free subtext of the movement vocabulary was something he had recognized in Halprin’s choreography.

Cunningham’s idea of the collage permitted the ‘autonomy’ and ‘equality’ of each art form, but the Finnish music critics could not allow dance to occupy an equal position to the other arts since they did not consider Cunningham’s choreography to be as avant-garde as the music and as Rauschenberg’s strongly avant-garde décor. Thus, dance did not achieve an autonomous identity. I assume that the strongest reason for underestimating dance owed to the ballet vocabulary, which in the Finnish context was conceived to belong to the old tradition of the ‘strict Russian style’. In other words, ballet did not act as a modernizer of dance for them.

80 Salmenhaara, Erkki. 1964. “Cage & Co.” *Helsingin Sanomat*, September 20; iso [pseud.]. 1964. “Happeningiä ilman happeningiä.” *Kansan Uutiset*, September 20.

81 Salmenhaara, Erkki. 1964. “Cage & Co.” *Helsingin Sanomat*, September 20.

82 Ibid.

83 About Halprin, see e. g. Reynolds and McCormick 2003, 395–6; 402–3; Ross 2007. Halprin avoided a movement-based approach in her works. She used improvisation and later a therapeutic approach to movements. Halprin was the teacher of many American postmodern choreographers. Ibid.

84 E.g. the visual artist Eino Ruutsalo, who worked with choreographer Riitta Vainio, saw Halprin and John Cage in Music Biennale Zagreb. Af Forselles 2001, 21. Composer Otto Donner became acquainted with Terry Riley, who had worked with Halprin. Concerning Donner, see Heiniö 1995, 163. Halprin in Zagreb, see Ross 2007, 172; Music Biennale Zagreb, Archive. <http://www.mbz.hr/eng/arhiv/1963/#1963-05-11>; <http://www.mbz.hr/eng/arhiv/1963/#1963-05-10>. Accessed July 1, 2010.

85 Salmenhaara, Erkki. 1964. “Cage & Co.” *Helsingin Sanomat*, September 20.

86 Ibid.

Reflections

In the 1960s, trends, aesthetic aims, choices, and artistic practices concerning Finnish modern dance differed from those that the MDCD production represented. In this article, I have discussed Cunningham's dance style from a quite specific perspective, namely, by analysing four of his choreographies from the viewpoints of Finnish critics in 1964. Each of these perspectives reflected contextual factors in which the historical event of Cunningham's performance took place in Helsinki. The reviews are encompassed by a place and time. Besides the mediation of perceptions and viewpoints of the time, the texts implicitly convey traces of actions and ideas. They might refer to the past; they might implicitly be reflections of previous events and thus also act as commentaries for previous moments.

If I had interpreted Cunningham's reception without analysing the context of my research period – mainly the dance context – without the knowledge of prevailing or preceding conditions and circumstances, my interpretation would have been different. The context correlates clearly with the reception, as Postlewait has stated (2009). Since I investigated the reception of the cultural encounter, it was important to be acquainted with both 'participants' involved in the encounter. Cunningham brought to Finland his production, which was created in his local cultural contexts. In this study, this meant relying on analytical research on Cunningham's production and the background against which he worked, as well as, exploring how these features and representations were later interpreted – mostly by Anglo-American dance research.

Categorizations of the periods have been created by later generations. Different aesthetic

characteristics and artistic practices work as essential analytical tools when categorizing events and phenomena. They offer insight into diverse eras and cultural embodiments. The challenge is how to interpret the features considered typical for a certain period in one region in relation to another place or time, or in comparison with other phenomena in another place or time. Even though modern and postmodern dance are international phenomena, the features and especially changes in the aesthetics related to these periods in dance should be interpreted as being unique in each culture.

Without the knowledge of how Martha Graham's work had previously been received in Helsinki, I would probably have made other conclusions about the reception of Cunningham's performance. The critics evaluated Cunningham's style against the idea they already had of American modern dance. Cunningham's style did not replace their conception of what American modern dance 'should' look like. The critics favoured the characteristics familiar to Graham's style that, according to Levin (1990), would be categorized as 'classical' modern dance. Most of those features were preceding aesthetic moments for Cunningham's aesthetic choices. Those later categorized as modernist features were the ones that Finnish critics rejected in Cunningham's performance in Helsinki. The short time span between Graham's and Cunningham's visits in Finland strengthened the comparisons that exist in the texts.

On the other hand, the comparison of Halprin and Cunningham in the music critics' reviews proved that Cunningham's style was considered less avant-gardist than Halprin's. The music critics' reactions also show that the

temporal identities of the periods differ between different art forms. The music critics viewed the performance from a different perspective than most of the dance critics, including the representative of Finnish modern dance, Vainio, though she had the analytical tools to perceive Cunningham's style. The way that the dance critics discussed ballet mediated local attitudes and conventions as well. My interpretation of the texts was confirmed after I saw the tape recording of the 1964 performance. In it, the way in which balletic movements in particular were performed supported my analysis. For instance, Cunningham's *grand jetés* were free and light, but without any extensions of the ankles. This execution of the jumps was not included in the Vaganova ballet technique.

The way in which dance terminology was used in my source material also signals the attitudes and values of the Finnish dance culture during the discussed era. Yet again, the connection is underlined by comparison with the Graham visit. By using certain terminology, critics created evaluative statements on what they had perceived onstage and how they reacted to the new experiments.

In transnational and intercultural encounters, such as has been discussed in this paper, local and foreign conventions become emphasized. The foreign and local features of the period are both accentuated when juxtaposed with each other. The collisions highlight the differences. It is interesting that, according to David Vaughan, who participated in and later analyzed the world tour of the MCDC in 1964, the diverse reception of Cunningham's work abroad increased curiosity towards Cunningham's style in his own country.⁸⁷ Perhaps highlighting the

different characteristics in the style, pointing out special features that occur in foreign contexts, increases the interest in one's own culture. In the future, it would be interesting to thoroughly compare how Cunningham's dance styles were received in different cultures and how the reactions changed in different periods.

Reception, as texts from the past, has a role when periods are being formed. Time and place are involved in the interpretations of the past and the processes of forming periods. However, interpretations in dance history should not rely exclusively on mainstream narratives, which in my case include the narratives of how Cunningham's dance style has been analysed and canonized in (Anglo-)American dance history. A more detailed understanding of the different characteristics of dance styles that take cultural circumstances into account is required. My study indicates that Finnish periodization – or any other national periodization – is not synchronous with American dance history periodization. This is why we need 'national' interpretations concerning internationally important artists.

87 Vaughan 1992, 24.

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