THE PERPETUAL MIDDLE

A talk between Andros Zins-Browne and Frederik le Roy.

FLR: You title your piece “The Middle Ages”. How did this title come about?
AZB: I started the project thinking about how present representations of other times are in our time now, and how the presence of those representations create a self-consciousness in us about times that we possibly haven’t lived in. Which was for me a strange disconnect. This became very clear for me when I worked on a collaborative project with a visual artist where he asked me to bring in scores from 1960s happenings, - Alan Kaprow-type scores - for a film he was making.. I remember feeling I was doing something which was at the same time dated, in which I felt self-conscious offering, but at the same time recognising that it comes from a time before I was born. So it’s not a regime that I passed through.

FLR: It was of the order of history rather than memory, or perhaps better, something that has been transmitted through other people and sources but not through yourself. A mediated memory.
AZB: Exactly. So I had this misrecognition of history as if I experienced it. In order to feel something that is old or dated that one hasn’t themselves gone trough, is a strange feeling. It’s a strange feeling to do something in the style of something which is passed and which is considered old-fashioned. In this film the artist employed a bunch of different actors who within the film were shooting 16mm, while others worked with HD cameras and one actor with an iPad. So there were different layers of time present. In that experience it made me think of layers of times, which I linked to a feeling of dread when we think of a notion of progress and realize that we can’t keep going at the rate we’re going now. So if we take that question that we can’t keep going forward at the same speed with which we’re going, what position does that put us in? And I was interested in how this creates a vacuum these past times can fill in. Past times are folded back into this vacuum. If one can’t go forward, how does our relationship to the past change? At the same time I was reading a lot around the philosophical topic of ‘accelerationism’ which has been around since the 80s but has gained popularity recently. Accelerationism revolves around the idea that in order to create the strongest political changes we need to speed up the system.

So I started to think about these two notions. On the one hand speeding up and pushing forward, not necessarily with a belief in the future but with a belief of what speeding forward might bring, what new future it might produce.

On the other hand, there was the idea of going back and wanting to revert to earlier times. You see this everywhere today: in media with series like Mad Men but also in folk cultures. Let's slow down, move to the country, take more time off, not give into the system of speeding up. I start to think about us being in the middle time. We don't want one or the other fully. We're left in this middle state of not ever knowing, so we rely on the society we are in to determine if we should go forward or back and how fast or slow. So, The Middle Ages refers for me to this Now as a time which is in such a way inherently "middle".

FLR: The French historian François Hartog describes our contemporary regime of historicity in a similar vein as a 'presentist' age. Post-1989 we've entered an era, which has left behind the belief in progress that marked the modern thinking about time and history. Rather than clear images of a better tomorrow that can guide our current actions, the future promises catastrophes like global warming or overpopulation. At the same time, the traumatic 20th century challenges our belief that we can learn from the past. Like you, he describes our time today as a moment of temporal crisis in which we are somehow stuck in the middle between the future and the past. Interestingly, you propose to translate this temporal crisis into a performance in which you constantly play with different temporalities in movement, costumes, sounds, etc. Strangely enough, that evokes the temporality of the Middle Ages - the historical period - but with a distinctly contemporary twist. According to the French historian Jacques LeGoff there was a vast indifference towards time in the Middle Ages and Erich Auerbach spoke about the 'omnitemporality' of the Middle Ages' sense of time. Put simply, without the modern sense of chronological history, past, present and future existed on the same plane and could exist together. To what extend do you return to the pre-modern times and appropriate the Middle Ages as a historical period through choreography?

AZB: I'd agree', but I'd maybe put it differently and try to make the distinction between a sense of being 'in time' and being 'for time'. I think of pre-modernity as characterized by a kind of being in time which gets mechanized, formatted and allows for greater organizations but also, ironically, greater bifurcations. In The Middle Ages, we begin in fact with Renaissance dances where movement was first mechanized into what we now call choreography. This is also an expression of being in the same time together - a form of dance which is easily identified as old fashioned to the point that I want to ask if it might be appealing to us, and if so why and how. Of course other choreographies existed before but not that have lasted until today -

meaning that today we still live with the possibility of spending our time in that way. By embodying these dances, we try to find a middle point, a time that is neither fully then nor completely now.

We are working in the form of dance and written choreography started in the Renaissance. Before that, it is very vague what dances like the Carole might have looked like. Every choreography, implicitly or explicitly woks with time. For instance we start from where we do a dance that is deconstructed, out of time with each other, and are trying to get on the same page timing-wise. This metronome begins and there's this externalisation of time where, rather than relying on each other to decide when things should start or how long they should last, we have this external time to rely on. That's for me one of the primary notions of the classical sense of choreography: we belong to the same time. We are doing these actions in time together and in order for that agreement to happen, the idea is that we need an external measure. This of course changes with the piece- how it is that we dance in time together.

FLR: Is this also when the piece makes the transition to the Modern age?
AZB: It goes there. We call it the Victorian transition. There's this moment where the metronome starts dropping out and as this happens our speeds start to fall out of time with each other. Some things slow down, others speed up, and the whole tendency goes towards accelerating. We lose the rhythm. For me, that's a much more modern notion of time: each individual carries their own sense of time. There's no longer an externalised agreement on what the pace should be. Each individual has, or even better, should have the will and power to determine that.

In the Modern section of the piece we begin to interpret acceleration in a different way. We see it not only in terms of time but also in terms of increasing complexity. Not just speeding up what you are doing, but doing more things within a certain rate of time. So the changes between bodies become faster. Almost all the material has been created on our own but through sourcing various modernist choreographers from Mary Wigman to Martha Graham, Charlie Chaplin, Maurice Bejart, Bob Fosse… it becomes a kind of Modern blur. This comes to a tipping point in the piece when we go back - or forwards depending on how you see it - to the age of the Neanderthals. For me this moment of the Neanderthals makes the connection with the era of the 90s and early 2000s, which is an era historically where time becomes very blurred. Generation X for example is where the necessity of time pushing forward, the belief in its momentum and progress starts to get lost.

FLR: Although the structure of the piece suggests a certain chronology it also contains anachronistic elements. Anachronism,has always been a central problem in historiography. For most historians, for example, contemporary criteria should be avoided at all costs when interpreting the past. Instead, historical events should fit their context - the historical period they belong to, which in itself is a construct of historiography - and thus be 'timely'. You are a lot keener on looking to the past from the 'middle age' - the present - and also on exploring clashes and combinations of different times. How does anachronism play a role in The Middle Ages?

AZB: An anachronism is linked to a sense of reality. Once you enter the domain of fiction we know that chronology can be easily fictionalised and dressed up. There's a huge amount of possibilities for how to represent time. Once we started to work, I had the feeling that we already displaced ourselves in a fictional zone of time, which made me less interested in the notion of trying to make something look anachronistic, for example by using a cell phone in the Renaissance. I think of the performance rather as a certain chasing after time. The performers are searching for what timefiction we could be in and chasing after what time we could settle our dance in. There's some layering there. We're dealing with layering and notions of non-linear time but ultimately in the performance itself we deal with time in a quite linear way. In order to understand the disturbance of time, one would need to understand what a non-disturbed time - the context - would be. In our case the context is linearity, except for this one moment where we break that.

One of my main questions became, how can we contextualize the movement in the last part as 'future'? How can you propose to an audience without giving chapter titles that this should be understood as 'existing in the future'? The only way we found this to be possible is when we follow a certain linearity, - which in our perception we are already following historical periods - whereas if we had jumped around and used time chronology as freely as we wanted, I don't know if the context could exist. It would likely come across as a lot of 'being weird' with historical references, which would become very easily quite blurry. What's interesting for me is to think not only about chronology as a topic but as an experience of the viewer, which is something we can't break in a theatre setting. In theatre we have a beginning, middle and end. Other forms of art are much better at breaking the idea of chronology.

FLR: Inevitably, one thing is put after the other, however, some elements in the performance are less bound by the constraints of linear time and allow for visual collages of different times - the costumes for example.
AZB: The costumes make a Renaissance or a Modern version of us now. This isn't historical re-enactment. The costumes work as a sign: although the choreography in the Renaissance section is quite historically accurate, the costumes give us a sign that we are in this negotiating space with this other time.
FLR: That's a major difference with most historical re-enactments where re-enactors attempt to travel to another time, falling together with their historical character and desire to be taken over by history. As a spectator of The Middle Ages you constantly experience a gap that exists between the present dancer with his or her body and everything that is somehow 'put on' that body, be it costumes or choreography.
AZB: To think about the relationship between body and history it's interesting that biologically we haven't evolved very much since any of the periods that we are performing in the piece - at least in terms of the visible appearance of the body. At the same time, what we put on the surface of that body and what certain ideologies allow our bodies to do or not do physically has radically changed. And that goes pretty far out. For instance: one of the dances we do in the future section at the end is called "butt crack sealer". How is it that the same body gets from a Pavane in the Renaissance to the" butt crack sealer" where you drop on your knees, stick your butt out and lift your hand between your butt crack as a performative mode. That trip is pretty exciting. What possible things we can still do with this same body are now impossible for us to measure.

FLR: When you explore what was physically possible but historical impossible due to culture or ideology and thus ask the question what body fits (or doesn't fit) what time, it also pushes you to consider what movements or bodies might become possible in the future. At the end you even create a 'future dance'. It seems to refer back to the Renaissance court dances at the beginning of the piece. Is the link that both are social dances for which a kind of social role-play, different in each case, is crucial?
AZB: There are certain similarities where the court dance is a way to be doing something while being looked at. The notion of entertaining voyeurism is what is really important there. When we talk about the future dance we talk about Twitter, Vine and so on. They all revolve around the idea of distributing your image in very short formats and performing with the intention to invite as many viewers as possible. Contrary to modern notions of performing where there would be a fourth wall or a turn to the psychology of the inner self, we return to the surface. There's a return to performing while self-consciousness of spectatorship, of being watched.

Movement in the case of the future dance, like performing in media like Twitter and Vine, isn't about expressing an inner truth but a means of gaining attention. We might think that it's cynical to be performing to be seen rather than from this modernist notion of necessity or internal drive. To perform for the viewer for the sake of gaining attention might be seen as crass or lowbrow, however, I think that while the goal might be cynical, in the process of achieving this goal some very strange creations are produced along the way. That's the point where it seizes to be cynical for me. It founds another motivation of possibility. For me it is the dominant mode of creativity today and I can imagine the raison d'être of movement going further in that direction. The majority of creation right now is in response to other creations. Someone tweets something and you could say that the most creative act is all the responses. It's about producing an expression and then the simultaneous variations on that expression. The most powerful expressions are the ones that engender the most referencing creations or responses. Here, the reference is being created simultaneously with the creation. That dynamic is quite fascinating to me and informed our future dance.

FLR: The break in the piece comes with the cave-man scene. You also call these "Neanderthal hipsters". Could you explain this conflation of the Neanderthal and the hipster?
AZB: There's something about hipsters which is very representative for the time we are in now. It's a position for someone who's looking for a time to be in - where there is no necessity culturally or historically. There's very little belief that one can or should 'make' history anymore, but rather, have a good time, enjoy the present and so on. In many ways this is similar to the position - at least as far as I can imagine it - of the Neanderthal - an existence with a very short outlook on the future and a great importance put in the present. For the hipster there's some minimal fashion movement forwards and some miminal movements back wearing retro and so on. But it's kind of a position without a future. For me there's something interesting about that emptiness of time of the hipster and the emptiness of time of the Neanderthal. Two very different types of emptiness, but in this performance, one goes on top of the other.

FLR: 'See and be seen' is also enhanced by your decision to put the audience on both sides of the stage. As a spectator, you become part of the performance other spectators are witnessing. How did this decision for this setup came about?

AZB: Mainly, it was a spatialisation of a temporal idea. The movement of going forward and backward, which we use in the beginning and again in the future scene at the end, became interesting because it suggests that we have a kind of future and past towards which the dancers can direct themselves.

FLR: You translate concepts of time and history into physical movement and choreography. This seems to exemplify your over-all way of working. What terminology do you use to describe this practice?

AZB: We work very 'outside-in'. I don't work from the sensation of the body, I don't work from physical practices but maybe rather towards them from outside. I work from appropriation, but not allowing the appropriation to stay at the level of appropriation like a pure imitation. If I pretend to be a monkey you see a man pretending to be a monkey where the term man and monkey respect each others borders, and I'm interested in - to continue the example - a man pretending to be a monkey to the point where man and monkey become something third which is neither one nor the other. Aside from the short moment of dances in the 90s dance-section which is pure superficial representation, we try to do that with each of these histories in the different section of the piece: we try to deal not just the form for movement but also with the presence and how to work with it as a contemporary body. We appropriate not on the level of pure imitation, but in terms of what third that might produce. It's an appropriation of time that comes with certain associations and images but also distinct temporalities.

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