

Book Review

On the Beauty of Tangoing

Review of *A Somaesthetics of Performative Beauty: Tangoing Desire and Nostalgia* by Falk Heinrich

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The Routledge Research in Aesthetics series has published a new and original volume that aims to apply the concept of beauty to the first-person experiences of dancing the Argentinian tango. This attempt by Falk Heinrich is novel. Typically, beauty has been considered to be involved in the appreciation of external objects. Therefore, philosophical aesthetics has mostly neglected investigating the aesthetic qualities of one's own movement and action and their potential for beautiful experiences specifically. The detailed analysis that the book offers extends the field of aesthetics, mainly in the areas of everyday aesthetics and somaesthetics, by scrutinizing the performative beauty of kinaesthetic awareness in one's own bodily actions. While taking tango dancing as its case study, the book argues that similar experiences of performative beauty detailed within it also belong to other bodily practices. Thus, this book should interest anyone studying the experiential qualities involved in their own performative bodily practices, as well as scholars working in the areas of dance, theatre, and performance studies, among others.

In the following paragraphs, I will introduce some of the main tenets of the book, which consists of eight chapters, each addressing a different aspect related to the objective of investigating and experiencing the beauty of tangoing. In addition to what is presented below, the book discusses the significance of practice, skill, rhythm, time, and music in tangoing, as well as the history and techniques of Argentinian tango.

In Chapter 1, *Preface and Introduction*, Heinrich criticizes aesthetics of mainly addressing the judgment of beauty of external objects in ways that bring action and movement to a halt, as a way of motivating his approach. He likewise briefly introduces his contemporary view of Argentinian tango as a social and ameliorative somatic practice. He himself is an ardent practitioner of this dance form and convincingly argues that in order to analyze the performative beauty of the experience of dancing tango, he needs to draw on his subjective experiences.

The main analysis begins in Chapter 2, *Preparing the Philosophical Dance Floor*, by arguing for pleasure as an embodied sentiment and the beautiful as both grounded in and transcending practical and theoretical insights. Here, the author draws informatively on insights from Plato, Baumgarten, Kant, and more recent thinkers to detail pleasure as a somatic reaction to beauty. He argues that we should investigate beautiful pleasure more closely. In doing so, he comes to

the conclusion that exploration is part of the process that leads to a beautiful experience. For him, beauty is paradoxically both a prepared and an unpredictable experience that unfolds as an experience of unity. Tango dancers practice their skills, and their intentional preparations work towards an anticipated outcome of pleasurable tangoing. Yet beauty is something that seizes or overcomes the dancer. This second chapter is one of the most cogently written and opens the perspective of the book well.

Chapter 3, *Methodological Dances*, focuses on the somaesthetic and autoethnographic methodology of the investigation. Heinrich notes that in appreciating the interdependence between practical and theoretical analysis, somaesthetics conceives aesthetics from the viewpoint of a practicing and experiencing subject. Correspondingly, the chapter addresses how engaging in social dancing positions Heinrich as an agential part of the event of tangoing without the possibility of adopting a critical distance in observing the phenomenon he is investigating. He discusses the necessity of first-person experience in somatic inquiry by underlining that embodied action includes reflection. He opines that aesthetic experience and aesthetic theory are different forms of observing the complex phenomenon that dancing Argentinian tango is, with its actual movements as well as space, time, and social interactions related performative structures. Heinrich turns to including autoethnographic diary entries on his experiences of dancing tango to account for them in his philosophical analysis. Here, he likewise introduces the notion of post-phenomenology as his main theoretical framework on bodily experiences. He describes this phenomenology as “a miscellaneous field made up of diverse thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty, Schmitz, proponents of enactivism, such as Nöe, Gallagher, and de Jaeger, and all those who discuss the phenomenological approach to artifacts and actions... with an emphasis on the individual’s embedded and embodied being” (p. 63). Of these, it is Schmitz’s thinking that is most prominent in the remaining chapters.

Freedom and Poiesis, Chapter 4, discusses the Kantian conception of the purposeless interplay of imagination and perception involved in aesthetic beauty by tying them to current discussions on the embodied nature of perception and cognition. Heinrich argues that “poiesis – making, creating, bringing forth as a result of some kind of agency – is the forgotten or rather sublimated twin of contemplation, and that only the constitutive pair of action and contemplation can empower Kant’s free interplay” (p. 80). By combining pragmatic aesthetics with Kantian idealism, he goes on to claim that the interplay between imagination and understanding is not possible without bodily and motional perception, which also gives rise to potential actions. Heinrich points out that “pleasures or displeasures lie in the free interplay of exploration (productive imagination) and sense making (understanding), opening a space of possibility for actions that are not initiated by but folded into further aesthetic exploration” (p. 85). While tango dancers address their partners in intentional and purposeful ways to coordinate their movements, tango dancing is still an improvisatory form that is supported by the postures and dance elements that determine its style. The productive imagination that supports the creative aesthetic of tangoing is embedded in the exchange of energies and the expressed bodily intentions between the dancing partners. These importantly influence the kinaesthetic imagery which produces action possibilities. Heinrich opines that beautiful tangoing is to be found in the experience of the agential fusion of two dancing individuals, which implies that the dancing subjects relinquish their self-contained bodily agency. It is in the unfolding of the sense of being danced and the dancing happening without effort that holds the seed for beautiful pleasure to arise. This, in Heinrich’s view, points to the poetic aesthetic involved in dancing tango.

Promises and Grace, Chapter 5, in turn discusses how Argentinian tango involves the promise of potential pleasurable experience and how this relates to the promise that is an integral part of the experience of the beautiful. Here Heinrich addresses the seldom-referred-to conceptions of the beauty and aesthetics of dance by Hogarts and Soriaus and ties them to Schmitz's notions of the felt or living body and vital drive. Heinrich writes that "I claim that only heightened self-awareness can yield aesthetic judgments of one's own movements...Skilfulness increases one's capability to submit to the dance by allowing the soma to create, act and react to relevant stimuli without volition. This creates the possibility of pleasurable self-awareness" (p. 113). He opines that in the effortless moments of dancing, it is the dance that is dancing the subject. At the same time, the dancer has the freedom to observe their dancing as a mindful following of their own dancing. He continues detailing how the soma creates, acts, and reacts through Schmitz's conceptions. The latter offers a phenomenological view through which dancing can be considered an energetic experience that does not differentiate movement from affection and emotion. According to Schmitz, the vital drive transgresses the body's physical limitations and involves the dynamics of contraction and expansion as well as incorporation and excorporation. Schmitz considers the felt body to be more like a fluctuating atmosphere that is brought about by contraction and expansion. In turn, perceived objects are felt as immanent parts of the felt body. This is incorporation. In the opposite, excorporation, the body impacts others and the environment. Heinrich writes that "the skilled dancer trusts their body's agential possibilities by allowing for, first, the felt contraction of incorporating the partner's and the nearby dancers' actions, and second, the expansion of their body by excorporating it into the space and into the partner, so to speak. This dynamicity sustains an immediate, somatic interaction between the dancers. The flow of movement is based upon the interplay between contraction and expansion and between en- and excorporation as the "vital drive" of tango. I experience the mere awareness of the seamless flow of contraction and expansion and of en- and excorporation as beautiful" (p. 122). Heinrich follows Schmitz's thinking according to which in beautiful experiences, there is an alignment by the subject with the beautiful object that becomes part of the experiencer's felt-body. Heinrich opines that beauty is thus a bodily feeling of both blissful expansion and excorporation into and a contraction and incorporation of the perceived. Heinrich thus describes "dancing tango as an interplay of contraction and expansion animating my movements as the result of the interaction between two dancers. Yet the experience of beauty is the awareness of this flow of interplays eliciting enjoyment. This enjoyment makes my Leib more expanded, lighter, as though floating in bliss" (p. 122). However, Heinrich ends this chapter with the note that this kind of beauty can only be a promise as it has already passed when realized. Beautiful experiences cannot be created by will; they are gifts and emerge by grace and surprise. The promise of tango is the promise of the re-emergence of beautiful experience.

Eros and Objectivization, Chapter 6, addresses the sensual and erotic aspects of tango and questions how a theory of performative beauty can integrate carnal and sensory desires. Heinrich turns to look at the terms agency and patiency by anthropologist Gell. He does this to surpass perceptual representation and discuss the experience of transcendence of the agential subject in dancing. Drawing from Sheets-Johnstone, he also introduces the notion of kinaesthetic melodies through which dancers can observe and be aware of their own and others' actions already on a bodily level. On this basis, he continues to argue that in dancing, aesthetic judgments are ongoing micro-regulations of one's own movement in relation to those of others and the environment. As patient, the related aesthetic awareness involves the dancer experientially following unfolding kinaesthetic melodies. As agent, the dancer's aesthetic

judgment either accepts or micro-modulates already initiated melodies. Thus, the somaesthetic awareness that Heinrich discusses is not merely passive observation but always already agency. He writes: “Expressed in the language of eros, dancing tango is a free interplay between desiring to move (with) the partner and being desired by being moved by the partner” (p.144–145). He further adds that: “Beautiful experiences are moments of somatic awareness of being moved: to be aware of oneself by being out of oneself is pleurably erotic and life affirming” (p. 157).

Selections and Unity (Sensus Communis), Chapter 7, sums up the findings of the previous chapters, underlines the social aspects of tangoing, and aims to substantiate how somatic understanding lies at the root of common sense. Here Heinrich discusses Argentinian tango as a secular interaction ritual, in which the awareness of others through the interaction between dancing couples builds a transient experience of performative unity, *communitas*. He brings his insights to a conclusion by, among other things, noting that: “Performative *sensus communis* is not an empathic or anticipated aesthetic judgment but a feeling of unity created through selections by the members of the *communitas*. The awareness of the interplay between the dancing agent (the dancing couple I am a part of) and the community of all dancing agents contributes to my experience of the beautiful because the interplay creates a unity supporting the continuation of the milonga (*communitas*)” (p. 179).

Heinrich’s is a rich and detailed analysis of tangoing that offers novel insight into the aesthetics of the beautiful. Despite its quite precise argumentation, what makes the book somewhat challenging is its eclectic theoretical framing that draws from classical Greek philosophy, idealism, pragmatism, phenomenology, enactivism, somaesthetics, new materialism, anthropology, and ethnography without much critical discussion on their relationships. This choice is obviously motivated by the aesthetic features that Heinrich considers relevant for clarifying the performative beauty of tangoing. The use of the author’s autoethnographic diary entries to evidence and concretize the experiential qualities of tango dancing could have been expanded on and potentially offered clearer rationale for the eclectically framed conceptual analysis. The descriptions of dancing tango remain somewhat general and even repetitious. This continues until the final chapter, an informatively written appendix describing the main features of Argentinian tango in ways that support the insights and conclusions made in the previous chapters. Additionally, the volume only narrowly utilizes the potential phenomenology has to offer in relation to experiencing one’s own body and engaging in bodily interaction with others. Contrary to Heinrich’s views, several prominent phenomenologists detail intersubjective bodily interaction. Additionally, phenomenologically informed dance studies, where the lived moment of dancing has been actively discussed for several decades, could have supported and strengthened Heinrich’s arguments. Against his claim that dance studies mainly focus on dance through external observation, in phenomenological dance studies, dancing has been analyzed as a form of thinking in movement, an experience of oneness, or that of being moved, for example. The writings of such authors as Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, Susan Fraleigh Horton, Jaana Parviainen, Philippa Rothfield, Susan Kozel, and myself could have offered better insight into how to utilize subjective and embodied experience as a basis for philosophical inquiry.