Reworkings, and Mats Ek’s *Giselle*: Challenges for Analysis

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*Giselle* is a two-act ballet which originated in the 19th century. Set to music by Adolphe Adam, it was originally choreographed by Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot. The choreography in modern productions is taken from revivals by Marius Petipa, and has become renowned today as a tour de force in the classical ballet canon—“the supreme opportunity for every ballerina.”

The ballet tells the story of a peasant girl, Giselle, who falls in love with a nobleman, Albrecht. In the first act, Giselle is courted by Albrecht and invites him to join her and the other peasants in several dances. She does so despite her mother’s warnings regarding her weak constitution. Hilarion, another peasant who is in love with Giselle, is enraged by this, but is unable to challenge Albrecht. Giselle, however, then discovers that Albrecht has lied to her, and is actually betrothed to Bathilde—a noblewoman. Heartbroken, Giselle goes mad and dies. She returns in the second act as a member of the wilis, vengeful spirits of women who have died of heartbreak. Led by Myrtha, their queen, they force the men who have spurned them to dance to their deaths. Hilarion is killed in this way when he visits Giselle’s grave. However, because of Giselle’s enduring love for Albrecht, she dances in place of him in order to protect him from the curse of the wilis, and to allow him to survive till dawn.

The choreography and staging of *Giselle* may vary slightly across different generations and productions, but modern productions of this ‘classical, original version’ are nevertheless consistent with the Petipa version. The movement itself is derived from the tradition of the Romantic ballet and is significant in the way it attempts to present the ballerina as an airy, ethereal being. Apart from dancing *en pointe* which is meant to give the ballerina the feel of an unearthly lightness, there is a consistent focus on soft arm movements and a calm, graceful comportment. On the other hand, the *Giselle* by contemporary choreographer Mats Ek, first produced in 1982 for the Cullberg ballet, breaks away from these traditions. Widely reputed to be a masterpiece of re-interpretation of the classical *Giselle*, Ek’s *Giselle* not only modifies the narrative, the roles and natures of most of the characters, and the central symbols and images used in the ballet, but also departs from the movement vernacular of the romantic ballet.

In Ek’s version, Giselle is the village simpleton kept on a tight leash by her fiancé Hilarion. Her encounter and subsequent relationship with Albrecht is one of sexual awakening, realized through physical intimacy between the characters on stage. After Giselle is pushed into madness by Albrecht’s betrayal, she is sequestered into a psychiatric institution, where the wilis of the original story have been transposed as mental patients in white hospital gowns. Giselle, having undergone a lobotomy, is now prevented from having contact with the outside world. Hilarion returns in an attempt to bring her to her senses, but fails. Albrecht, in Ek’s version, is ‘saved’ by Giselle because when he realizes that she continues to love him despite what he has done to her, he is made a better person for it. The wild night in the asylum and Giselle’s simple and enduring affection returns Albrecht to a state of “primitive purity” and he is thus able to “reach the essence of being.”

Set to music from the original, the movements in Ek’s *Giselle* are at times clearly founded in classical ballet training, but also feature deep bends, rolls on the floor, contractions of the ribs and core muscles, and huddled, broken lines—clear breakaways from the romantic ideal of movement. Ek’s work has been lauded for its “audacity,” such as in tapping on and fleshing out underlying possibilities supposedly inherent in the original. These include the cruelty of Albrecht’s unfaithful love, Giselle’s madness, and the inherent sexual tensions between Giselle and the men.

Ek’s *Giselle* has been noted in most readings to be part of a ‘revisionist’ body of work that also includes choreographers such as Matthew Bourne and Mark Morris. In *Reworking the Ballet*, Vida Midgelow terms the choreographed pieces within this body of work ‘reworkings’. These choreographed works, she argues, makes specific references to a particular source text, and then “substantially alter” these ballets to create entirely different works that have a “significantly different resonance” or overall artistic vision. Not to be confused with restorations and revivals of traditional ‘classics,’ reworkings are made deliberately distinct and separate, “emphasiz[ing] their difference” from the idea of the originals, and engaging with the original only in order to comment on discourses contained within it. In this way, the sources also become “target texts”—the original subjects have now become the object of critique and commentary. In this category, she names Ek and Bourne as examples of choreographers who, in maintaining close structural and musical links to the original ‘target texts,’ can be considered to fall on the end of a “continuum” of reworkings that most closely parallels the ballet. It is not uncommon to identify Ek and Bourne as examples of ‘reworkers’ of the ‘classics,’ such as *Swan Lake* and *Giselle*, and many texts in fact make reference to or analyse the particular manner
in which these ‘revisionists’ make key structural or narrative changes to the original ballets. Giannandrea Poesio, in *Elusive Narratives: Mats Ek* narrows Ek’s approach toward revisionism as working on three “layers of the dance text: the dramatic narrative, the musical narrative and the dance narrative.” Similar to Midgelow, Poesio also delves into an analysis of the specific changes Ek has made to the original, in order to glean messages signified by these choices—such as themes, what the images symbolize, and what Ek is trying to say about the characters or events in the story.

It seems interesting that the key concern brought out in this vein of analysis is not of physical movement itself, but of how specific choices of movement-types work within a revised narrative framework to signify certain ideas—ones which Midgelow goes on to show are important in forming a commentary and critique of the originals from which these reworkings sprang. However, does this approach—where Ek’s revised choreography is broken down into chronological, symbolic or thematic categories for comparison with the original—do investigative justice to this work, and by extension, to the body of ‘reworkings’? This is a question that arises when we consider certain theories of movement and dance analysis in recent scholarship.

Brian Massumi, in his introduction to Parables for the Virtual, makes a criticism of cultural theory of the past twenty years, stating that approaches in these theories tend to focus on movement and sensation as a “rupture” from the everyday at the expense of the “slightness of ongoing qualitative change.” Discourses that approach the body in motion as comprising of a number of “signifying gestures”—sequences of meaningful points or positions—limit themselves to a too easily diagnostic approach that ignores a whole spectrum of sensation (sense-experience). Simply put, this approach is akin to taking photographs of a series of particular moments in a dance performance and using them to make an argument for what the dance ‘means,’ ‘seems to say’ or ‘feels like for the audience.’

Earlier “phenomenological investigations into the sensing body” are often marginalised in analytical discourse because they are viewed as being “redundant” to an analysis of signification since “[u]nmediated experience” cannot be quantitatively regarded. Instead, signifying subject formation is structured as “positioning[s] on a grid” which is conceived of as an “oppositional framework of culturally constructed significations,” or oppositional theoretical binaries. The body, ‘positioned’ and ‘sited’ on the grid, is thus defined by which halves of the binaries it overlapped with. Massumi argues that the body thus came to be “defined by its pinning to the grid.”

Restricting and subordinating movement analysis and body discourse to a definitional grid prioritises readings of theoretical signification. This results in a failure to properly recognize and to possibly address a “notion of movement as a qualitative transformation.” Notably, in addition to current models of analysis, Massumi suggests that the scholar consider subjective, unmediated sensation, as well as the nature of movement as “nondecomposable[,] a dynamic unity.” This approach is not irreconcilable with the previous approaches; on the contrary, it can serve to inform or critically enhance theories of signification already in use by writers such as Midgelow and Poesio.

Both Midgelow and Poesio mention the role of poststructuralism in the creation and critical reception of contemporary ballet works such as Ek’s *Giselle*, but neither fully delves into the possibility of a poststructural approach towards analysing such works. Such an approach seems to be in line with Massumi’s notion of a “nondecomposable dynamic unity;” since, as Helen Thomas writes, poststructuralism “rejects the idea of a fixed subjectivity ‘in favour of a dislocated, fragmented subjectivity which is not fixed but is constituted [...] on each and every occasion.” I would venture to suggest that one way in which one might be able to do this is the consideration of the aesthetic experience encompassed by these reworkings. As quoted by Terry Eagleton, Baumgarten writes that, “elements of aesthetic representation resist that discrimination into discrete units which is characteristic of conceptual thought.”

A study of the manner in which the body operates in the reworked ballets might give greater insight into their significance or, in tandem with the categorized signifiers already identified, construct for us a new and more comprehensive understanding and appreciation of the work.

Thus, a consideration of the aesthetic of the body should be made in examining Ek’s *Giselle*. In it, such a great number of elements (apart from the choreography) make reference to the ‘body’ that it seems almost necessary that we consider how these elements work collectively in one’s subjective sensory experience. The curves of the (clearly) female body, entrenched in the backdrop landscape of the first act, might indeed be “Freudian inspired” and symbolic of fertility, sexuality, and the female body as organic and life-giving, but how do they work in combination with (and in relation to) the three-dimensional curves of the large eggs rolled out by the peasants, and the circular-themed motions in *Giselle*’s very first solo? In this solo, Giselle stretches an arm outwards and upwards, moving it in an arc on the vertical plane before bringing her other arm up to join the first above her head. She then tiptoes lightly, moving downstage while simultaneously spiralling her body and arms. Then she touches the ground and sweeps...
her hands along it in another arc, keeping her body extremely close to the ground and gently swaying from left to right. The effect of this is calming; the movements are flowing, full and continuous.

In mentioning Giselle’s solos, Poesio only points out how Ek turns the classical “bravura” choreography into “dramaturgically salient narrative episodes” in order to highlight Ek’s choreographic departure from the classical Giselle. He fails to note how, for example, the calming effect of the circular motions seems to convey a notably similar aesthetic sensation to that of the original, pastoral scene in the classical version. In this way, perhaps it is less distant from the original than we would expect, despite the complete replacement of the actual movements of the dance.

It is clearly no accident that Ek chooses also to change Giselle’s prominent grand jeté en manège sequence—which, in the original, actually constitutes the very first appearance of Giselle on stage—into a sequence of attitude leaps pictured above with the aforementioned landscape:

In these attitude leaps, the legs are bent at angles that facilitate a curvilinear shape; the arms are bent as well, extending the curved lines of the body. This is a clearly deliberate aesthetic form which the audience is unlikely to miss. How is one’s aesthetic reception then affected when the peasants enter in grey, with sharp, straight pitchforks, and jerky, angular movements?

The juxtaposition of these small, jerky movements with the sweeping beauty of Giselle’s extended lines have a comic effect, but then seems to make an ironic statement when we consider how the peasants ostracize Giselle because of her curious behaviour. Hence, significations gleaned from an analysis of specific narrative points or design choices should be considered in conjunction with the movement aesthetic (or kinaesthetic) of these reworkings.

The aesthetic sense of each reworking needs to be considered in its entirety, and should not—as has been done by Midgelow and Poesio—only be considered in the superficial ways it differs from the classical. Midgelow, in particular, ranks reworkings along a spectrum of differentiation from the original—one end being for reworkings which ‘closely parallel’ the original text, and the other end being for those which do not. This ranking is done according to a mapping of significations which first arise from how different the piece’s movements are from the original, and then from considering these movement differences in tandem with narrative and thematic changes. In light of the observations made above on the aesthetic effect of the movements in Ek’s Giselle, however, can this method of mapping significations be enough to examine how similar or not Ek’s Giselle is to the classical version? Should we not consider, as well, the way in which the aesthetic effect of a reworking affects its relation to the original ballet?
I would argue that without a consideration of the aesthetic effect—the subjective sensation—of the entire work, Midgelow’s classification of Ek’s work as belonging on a spectrum of sorts, closest to the original, is not sufficiently justified. The apparently classical movement vernacular might be no more or less displaced from the original than what we might consider of a reworking with a more ‘un-classical’ vernacular. I would venture to suggest that perhaps, in the same way that Massumi denounces the ‘definitional framework’ of current analytical methods for “prescri[pt]ing every possible signifying and countersignifying move as a selection from a repertoire of possible permutations on a limited set of predetermined terms,”25 all movement—especially in any work considered a ‘reworking’ of a classical ballet—might be seen as drawing from a repetition or counter-repetition of a repertoire of possible permutations on a limited set of predetermined movement potential. After all, movement in the human body—with the exception of those with unique physical abilities—is determined by a generically similar skeletal structure, set of muscles, hinges and joints. Since movement choices are variations of a physically limited number of possibilities (such as turning out of the legs versus not turning out, pointing the feet or not, and at which height, speed, or angle), what real value is there to be gained from the conceptual analysis of movement in terms of differences, then? A consideration of how different or how un-classical the movement of a number of reworkings is not sufficient to justify differentiation on a spectrum of similarity to or difference from the original. We should instead consider how movement might affect or effect one outside of these limited conceptions of signification. In fact, Midgelow does cursorily note how creators of reworkings can be seen to have “[mapped] out an alternative aesthetic terrain, which [. . .] diverges in the perspectives evident in the dances that they rework”26, but unfortunately does not go on to form an analytical framework for this observation.

Now, if we were to use the ‘sensation’ of the movement of joy as being important in determining this ‘placement,’ Midgelow’s choice might seem more understandable. Giselle’s leaps in Ek’s choreography, like her leaps in the original work, signify joy. If one were to view another reworking of this scene, in which Giselle sits alone on stage and smirks and twiddles her thumbs, then a signifier of joy is clearly common throughout all three—negating any sense of a disjuncture or ranking in similarity between them. Moreover, in the aforementioned grand jeté en manège sequence, it might be argued that the sequence of leaps in Ek’s version repeats the movement of the classical—with only minor changes to the shape of the leaps. However, while visual aesthetic of the leaps in Ek’s Giselle might be very similar to that of the original, their sensation is quite different. In an aesthetic consideration, the airborne, light quality of the leaps in the classical Giselle clearly conveys a much different kinaesthetic sense than those in Ek’s version. After all, the leaps in the classical version are based on ideals of the Romantic ballet: the aesthetic focus of the dancer on the lightness and ease of jumping, and on hiding the technical effort required to lift the body off the ground. Contrastingly, in Ek’s version Giselle leaps off the ground with force, not negating her need for it, but instead relishing in the manner in which it allows her to push off. With her front leg lancing through the air, and her back leg curved to form a split, there is a sense of strength and forceful spontaneity. Therefore, Ek’s Giselle, at this moment in the piece, might be considered closer to the original. However, as mentioned before, these particular instances of differentiation cannot be taken in isolation. The entire aesthetic experience of the reworking should be taken into consideration if one were to examine its relation to the original.

A consideration of aesthetic senses of movements also adds another dimension of analysis to the study of reworked ballets that is not found in the current paradigm. Why, if all we look for in a reworking is the retelling of the narrative, and the analysis of specific moments of movement (operating almost like the ‘sequence of points or positions’ mentioned by Massumi,27 is a reworking not simply a picture book? The fact that reworkings continue to attract audiences to live performances, and continue to be personally reinterpreted by specific dancers and companies, is evidence of the fact that there is more value to be had in addition to what the work ‘means’ or ‘signifies,’ or how (in what manner, and to what extent) it is ‘different’ from the original.

Susan Reed, quoting CJC Bull, mentions that the “transmission and performance” of dances “encourage ‘priorities of sensation that subtly affect the nature of perception itself’.”28 These “priorities of sensation” naturally differ from person to person, and fundamentally affect the very way in which they experience the movement performance before them. Sally Ann Ness, echoing Massumi’s conception of the body as ‘indeterminate’ and open to “an elsewhere and otherwise than it is, in any here and now,”29 expresses it most comprehensively when she states that an “embodied understanding” of dance is “temporally complex or plastic, sometimes conditionally subjunctive or futuristic, as opposed to declarative in mood [. . .] The present movement is described with reference, both to what it is not, and to what it should or should not be, to a subjunctive, conditional, or yet-to-be fulfilled cultural given.”30 In these theories, what is being called for is an approach that considers the conception of movement as existing within an infinite and indefinite number of possibilities of viewers’ subjective experience.

While seemingly hypothetical in nature, these
theories can actually be seen to apply in our aesthetic perception of reworkings. In the same manner in which people go to watch numerous different performances of Giselle by different companies or different principle dancers, one might presume that audiences pay to watch reworkings of a ballet to perceive and appreciate the potential for movement in the bodies on stage. For example, if one considers for a moment the classical tradition of Giselle, we see not only a diversity of interpretation, but also a plethora of technical abilities. Dance techniques evolve over time—the current obsession with hyperextended legs, fully articulated arches, turn-out, extensions, and body proportions is a distinctly modern preoccupation. Richard Glasstone, for example, writes that “the greatly increased concentration on high leg extensions” is a product of “recent years” and that there are, across the years, “technical differences” in ballet techniques attributable to a constant “evolution of style.” Yet, the audience packed those theatres as they still do today. Similarly, different dancers have different builds: proportions differ; legs, arms, necks all vary in length, as do facial structures which affect one’s perception of beauty. It is clear, then, that a dancer does not aspire towards a specific point of achievement (such as a specific height of extension of the leg when lifted off the ground), but instead some sort of personal fulfilment of an inexplicable ‘potential’ for movement—it is the ‘fulfilment of potential’ that creates aesthetic appeal. The aesthetic pleasure gained from the perception of a ‘fully extended leg’ is thus not attributable to the attainment of a quantifiable ideal, but instead arises from the perception of a subjective, qualitative fulfilment of individual movement potential.

Such an approach towards analysis, then, helps to formulate a greater understanding of the nature of movement in these reworkings. Consequently, as well, it will affect our conception of the ‘proximity’ each reworking has, not only to the original text, but also to the larger body of reworkings. Accordingly, this approach might thus support or challenge Midgelow’s ‘ranking’ of reworkings. For example, the nature of repetition in Ek’s Giselle differs from the original version. As with most classical ballets, repetition in the original Giselle serves almost completely to appeal to that aesthetic response that arises from a fulfilment of potential. The full split achieved in an initial grand jeté or the successful completion of an initial set of multiple pirouettes compounds and raises the ‘potential’ for a repeated occurrence of fulfilment—a full second, third, fourth grand jeté, or another successful series of multiple pirouettes. For example, Giselle’s famous solo variation from Act I in the original version features a series of hops en pointe on a single leg while traversing diagonally down the stage. Each successive, successful hop makes the audience more excited to see another, and another. In most productions, the audience has already begun to applaud two-thirds of the way through this series of hops—way before the variation even ends. Simply put, the audience gains pleasure firstly, from watching the dancer fulfil that subjective movement potential, and secondly, from having their expectations (and thus their pleasure) re-matched, repeated or exceeded.

The nature of repetition in Ek’s Giselle, on the other hand, does not explicitly pander to that specific formula for spectacle so central to the classical version. While specific movements such as leaps and extensions are still used to create pleasure from fulfilment of those movements, they are not primarily repeated to indulge the audience in the pleasure of watching difficult movements done successfully. It is clear in most cases that Ek makes a deliberate effort to only consecutively repeat any particular movement once.

Instead, Ek uses a wide variety of different movements for the dancers—all of which intrinsically contain that potential-for-movement which, in finding fulfilment, create pleasure for the audience. For example, in Act II, where the wilis dance in unison in the classical version, Ek has three of the mental patients engage in a little game, hiding from and tugging at one another. Patient A pulls at Patient B, who rolls backward over Patient C. The three of them shuffle their feet in a circle, with their noses almost touching, before breaking apart—each engaged in a different movement. B bends backwards, extending her arms and right leg outwards, while the other two bend low. Just as A and C peer outwards, B contracts forward and collapses her core. C then kicks her leg is a high arc above B, who crouches and shuffles under C’s leg. As she does so, A moves away and pulls her knee to her chest, tilting her body up-stage and away from the pair. This interaction of different movements engages the audience as the dancers fulfil a range of constantly varying movement potentials.

Moreover, repetition in Ek’s Giselle is used mostly with signifiers: emphasis of symbolic movements (such as peasant movements to show harvesting, the pressing of bodies front-to-front to show intimacy) or characterization (such as height and grand sweeping movements to represent the pompous nature of the aristocrats). In this respect, the nature of aesthetic engagement with the performance in Ek’s Giselle thus differs from the original, classical Giselle. The pleasure one derives from watching Ek’s Giselle is of a different nature, and arises from a different set of stimuli.

In conclusion, I have argued that current approaches towards analysing reworkings have thus far been limited to a predetermined framework of signifiers. Given the nature of dance works, in order fully to comprehend the value of these reworkings
and to justify comparisons with the original and other reworked texts more fairly, it is important also to study the body and movement outside of this definitional gridlock. Critical analysis should be made of what is expressed through the body and movements and also what value can be gleaned from them. I have suggested that an aesthetic approach be considered, and have expounded on two possible ways in which this might be done: one, an organic and holistic investigation of the aesthetic responses one might have to the various elements of the work itself, being careful not to focus on specific elements for analysis and neglect considering the work as a dynamic unity; two, an investigation into the manner in which the reworking as a work of dance utilizes or challenges the nature of the type of aesthetic appreciation which is gained from perceiving a potential-for-movement being fulfilled. In this way, I believe it is possible to gain even greater insight into these valuable creations—creations which now constitute so significant a body of work that one that could arguably be noted to form a new, modern ballet canon.
Notes

2. Dancing on the toes (in toe shoes).
7. Midgelow, Reworking the Ballet, 10.
8. Midgelow, Reworking the Ballet, 11.
9. Midgelow, Reworking the Ballet, 10.
10. Midgelow, Reworking the Ballet, 15.
14. Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 2.
15. Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 2. Massumi provides “male versus female, black versus white, [and] gay versus straight” as some examples of these binaries.
17. Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 3.
23. Straight-legged and straight-armed split leaps made around the stage.
24. Bent-legged split leaps. The legs can take a variety of angles.
25. Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 3.
27. Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 6.
29. Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 5. The phrase has to do with philosophical conceptions of the body as being wholly indeterminate, only definable by the contexts (place - here, time - now) and where and what the ‘body’ is not (elsewhere and otherwise), and hence an eternally subjective thing.
31. A moderate or slow raising and straightening of the leg off the ground.
33. A leap in which the dancer’s legs are straightened in the air in a split.
34. Turn(s) on a single leg.

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