

Relational Attention in Choreography and the Felt Sense of Motor Learning

A Atenção Relacional na Coreografia e a sensação corporal da aprendizagem motora

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Abstract

This paper examines the conceptual foundations of *Rethinking Choreography*, a collaborative research project developed by Jonathan Burrows and Bojana Cvejić through workshops with dancers between 2020 and 2025. Since November 2025, the project has received AHRC funding in the U.K. and continues in collaboration with Guido Orgs, a psychologist specialising in the neuroscience of movement. Combining studio-based experimentation with insights from neuroscience, anthropology, and cognitive philosophy, the research challenges the prevailing distinction in contemporary dance between choreography as an external authorial structure and dance as embodied, spontaneous expression. The project argues that choreography should be understood not as a compositional act imposed upon movement but as an intrinsic human capacity for sequencing, anticipation, and adaptation that underlies all dancing. Workshop prompts invited dancers to reflect on improvisation, set material, and embodied skill, revealing both the persistence of these conceptual binaries and their instability in practice.

This paper is a version of the keynote (“Relational Attention in Choreography and the Felt Sense of Sequenced Behaviour”) that Jonathan Burrows and I presented at the conference “Cadences: Attentional Moves in the Arts and Everyday Life” at the Communication Institute of Universidade Nova on May 29, 2025. It is a revised version of Cvejić’s sections of the lecture, incorporating Burrows’ comments and reflecting on the findings of the project’s preparatory phase (2020–2025) in response to the topic of the conference.

Keywords

choreography | joint attention | motor cognition | movement sequencing | nonconscious and deliberative movement | relational attention

Resumo

Este artigo examina os fundamentos conceptuais de Rethinking Choreography, um projecto de investigação colaborativa desenvolvido por Jonathan Burrows e Bojana Cvejić através de workshops com bailarinos entre 2020 e 2025. Desde novembro de 2025, o projecto passou a receber financiamento do AHRC, no Reino Unido, e prossegue em colaboração com Guido Orgs, psicólogo especializado em neurociência do movimento. Articulado a experimentação em estúdio com contributos da neurociência, da antropologia e da filosofia cognitiva, a investigação questiona a distinção dominante, na dança contemporânea, entre coreografia enquanto estrutura autoral externa e dança enquanto expressão incorporada e espontânea. O projecto defende que a coreografia não deve ser entendida como um acto composicional imposto ao movimento, mas como uma capacidade intrinsecamente humana de sequenciação, de antecipação e de adaptação que subjaz a todo o acto de dançar. As propostas de trabalho feitas nos workshops convidaram os bailarinos a reflectir sobre improvisação, sequências coreografadas (*set material*) e competências incorporadas, revelando na prática tanto a persistência destes binarismos conceptuais como a sua instabilidade.

Este artigo é uma versão da comunicação (*keynote*): “Relational Attention in Choreography and the Felt Sense of Sequenced Behavior”, que apresentei com Jonathan Burrows na conferência *Cadências: Movimentos da Atenção nas Artes e Quotidiano*, na Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Instituto de Comunicação da Universidade NOVA, a 29 de maio de 2025. Trata-se de uma versão revista das secções da palestra da autoria de Cvejić, que integra comentários de Burrows e reflecte sobre os resultados da fase preparatória do projecto (2020-2025), em resposta ao tema da conferência.

Palavras-chave

coreografia | atenção conjunta | cognição motora | sequenciação do movimento | movimento não consciente e deliberativo | atenção relacional

Mapping the Assumptions Underlying the Choreography–Dance Distinction

Since 2020, Jonathan Burrows and I have been preparing the ground for the research “Rethinking Choreography” through a series of workshops that we held at dance schools (P.A.R.T.S. Brussels, KhIO Oslo) and other contexts (Impulstanz 2024, and Forum Dança 2025). These workshops provided an opportunity for reading a varied selection of research papers in neuroscience, cognitive philosophy and anthropology by Andy Clark (Clark 2013), Greg Downey (Downey 2010), Tim Ingold (Ingold 1997 and 2018), Stephanie Bunn (Bunn 1999), Mauro Adenzato and Francesca Garbarini (Adenzato and Garbarini 2006), and others. Drawing on these texts, Jonathan and I queried dancers about their innate experience of choreography in both spontaneous and rehearsed movement through studio prompts. Dancers were asked to work alone on the prompts based on a task and a question, and then record their observations in writing. Their responses provided crucial

evidence for us to flesh out empirically the assumptions that led us to this research. In other words, the dancers justified our intuition about the necessity of rethinking choreography beyond the perennial divide between dancing spontaneously and structuring dance. The last instance of our work, just before we embarked on “Rethinking Choreography” with Guido Orgs, took place at the conference “Cadences: Attentional Moves in the Arts and Everyday Life” (hosted by the Communication Institute of Universidade Nova de Lisboa, FCSH, and Culturgest in Lisbon, Portugal), at the invitation of Silvia Pinto Coelho *et al* in May 2025. We presented our theses, including the insights we collected through workshops, in a shared lecture for an international gathering of researchers, in the presence of the media theorist Yves Citton, whose book *The Ecology of Attention* (Citton 2017) was one of the conceptual cues for the conference.

Jonathan explained first why choreography merits a new understanding, as an ‘innate experience felt by all who dance’: “An image of something that’s so lived and repeated and mapped so often, and connects so strongly to memory and anticipation, that it becomes a feeling. That’s how I experience choreography, and that is a form of embodiment” (Burrows and Cvejić 2025). Shifting the question from what is choreography to where is it located, Jonathan asked how the temporal sequencing that is processed in the brain might relate to the sequences of movement that dancers experience as something intuitive and complex; and whether sequencing in the brain and the bodily movement alike should be regarded as a manifestation of an intrinsic human capacity. If that is the case, our understanding of choreography fundamentally shifts from an authorial decision-making process to an inherent property of all dancing.

Part of the reason for re-conceptualising choreography as it intersects with neuroscientific findings on sequencing lies in the context of Western contemporary dance and in the prominent notions of dance and choreography circulating among a younger generation of makers today. These assumptions arise around labour, authority and authenticity in dance-making processes; they separate choreography and dance in a charged opposition. Choreography, and especially the choreographer, are notions built on a postconceptual legacy of disembodied authorship executed through concepts and decisions that are deemed to colonise bodies. Choreographers, after all, don’t have to be dancers; they can direct movement without embodying it themselves — or so we have learnt through the definition of ‘expanded choreography,’ a term under which several MA programs in Northern Europe have been shaped. In a conversation with ‘Funmi Adewole, a dancer and scholar associated with “Rethinking Choreography,” ‘Funmi unfolded the genealogy of the choreographer in contemporary transnational dance practice. Adewole contended that ‘choreographer’ in a credited role was established in late Western modernity to match the authorial status of composers and visual artists. Until then, choreographers mainly referred to themselves as being dancers in the first place (recall Martha Graham’s “I am a dancer”). In the context of West African dance, choreographers have opted for this title in order to distinguish their work, expertise and status from social or traditional dance.

In a more concise version, choreography here means a structural blueprint that harnesses dancing bodies, whereas dance improvisation provides privileged access to the body, where one can locate and feel oneself — the experience of oneself in the body being understood as true. No longer an expression of ‘homo ludens,’ where the dancer exercises playfulness and surprising consciousness, improvisation has regained currency as a template for an individual’s expression of free will. As a preferred mode of genesis of material, it reformulates composition as a live nonconscious action, rather than a deliberative, pre-formed decision. In the most orthodox approach, somatic practitioners often claim the exclusive right to the sensing body as prior to movement, which has two consequences: motor action is considered an effect, or an ‘afterthought,’ of sensation and is thus rendered secondary; and the priority granted to the sensing body leads to a devaluation of form as a secondary, imposed mediation.

In response to a prompt that starts from free improvisation and then asks the dancer to learn and set the movement, a student from an M.A. program in dance, Mooni Van Tichel, reported:

Setting movement, I feel, is something of the past; moving against it I come across difficulty; the movement is wild and needs that aesthetic, falling and things that go wrong; difficulties when I try to set that. At a certain moment, I had to do justice to set movement. What is the version of this set phrase in this body today rather than the formality (the ideal phrase). The attitude from the improvisation into the set movement is to apply the feeling right now. (recorded during P.A.R.T.S. workshop, 2020).

Jonathan and I took the informal expressions of self-understanding of the dance practitioners in our context seriously. Even if jargonised, they are important because they illustrate not only the notions but also the faith and passion with which dance makers invest themselves. Our research is directed to these practitioners, or to many different forms and traditions encompassed by the field today.

Where dance happens: dance studio and the social worlds of dance practice

The division between the notions of choreography and dance discussed above further maps onto the environments in which dance emerges and is cultivated. The studio is pitted against places in which dance is lived as a social practice. A seat for experimentation in Western dance tradition, the studio is synonymous with separation and isolation, sterility and luxury; novelty arising from the disruption of tradition and discontinuity; individuals training to acquire a skill or technique (more often a versatile combination of several techniques) or to reject a technique and dismantle it; the arresting of movement, and stillness or slowness as interruptions of flow. These are some of the attitudes that have shaped contemporary dance in Europe over the past three decades and have led dance

makers today to question the studio as an apparatus of decontextualization. By contrast, lived traditions are understood as environments that host a community: they are imbued with spirit and belief, and the community grants permission to individuals as it transmits knowledge from predecessors or ancestors to newcomers.

In a prompt, we asked the dancers to: “Practice a dance you love, and while you practice allow yourself to experience it as empty movement and then allow yourself to feel it as meaningful movement.” In response to this prompt, Stanley Ollivier, a dancer trained (B.A. and M.A.) in contemporary dance at P.A.R.T.S. (Brussels) and a prominent performer in *Ninja House* in Paris, wrote the following:

I did it with vogue: vogue is urban, underground, performative. What is empty for me — abstract dance, contemporary, incomprehensible and pointless; to erase the feeling of self-love and full presence, it became a dead body; I was gesticulating as an amateur, made another character of myself, making the real voguer invisible; erasing face, gaze, slowing down the movement; the emptier it was, more concentration on the somatic aspect of the movement. What made it meaningful: sensual and sexual, to have the spirit of the culture; imagining that you are at the ball; already in the studio it is a different environment.

In another prompt, where we asked the dancers to play a short complex dance in a style that is unfamiliar and to imitate it as closely as possible in real time as they are watching, Stanley wrote:

I chose house dance — took the time to understand the steps and the flow and the rhythm; I could do it because I could feel the spirit (because of the past spirits, I think); conscious of movement (of not having skills, meaning of it) but nonconscious, not informed about the style. There is experience of danger in the community; you are always in the process of actively arriving into the community; only as long as you do the work (the same goes for contemporary dance).

Stanley’s remarks testify to the ground of the practice and the importance of the contextual registers of social liveness (in the case of vogue and house, ‘process of arriving’, the ‘danger’ of community, the ‘sexual’, ‘sensual’ and ‘spiritual’), in which motor cognition acquires meaning as feeling. Or as Funmi put it in a studio session (May 16, 2026): “It’s about the body attitude of the form”; where attitude or feeling is both motivated by and motivates the form of the dance.

Attention and practice in the motor learning of dance movement

Rethinking Choreography began by challenging the assumption that perception precedes motor action: that the body first receives sensations, which are then translated

into mental representations (i.e., ideas in the brain), which in turn result in movement. According to this input-output schema, movement is a reaction, an afterthought of sensation as the primary source of inhabiting the world. By prioritising sensation over movement, this approach has led somatic practices in dance to privilege listening over motor action as a way of perceiving and being in the world, represented in the following works (Bainbridge Cohen, 2008; Fraleigh, 2015).

In learning about how the input-output schema has been challenged in neuroscience in the last three decades — especially György Buzsáki's *The Brain from Inside Out* (Oxford, 2019) — Jonathan underlined the following, quoting Buzsáki: “We connect to the world not through our sensors (although they are essential), but through our actions” (Buzsáki 2019, 59). Movement coincides with perception, and it is through movement that we perceive, connect to, and anticipate the environment we inhabit. We found this proposition in Alva Noë's *Action in Perception* (Noë 2004), in which he draws on cognitive science and the philosophy of mind to argue that movement provides our experiential grounding in the world, enabling perception to register and become meaningful.

What path must we follow to examine this proposition in dialogue with the dancers in the studio? At this early, preliminary stage of our research, during which the workshop at Forum Dança, Lisbon took place (May 26-27, 2025), our method consisted of prompts based on an exercise and a question for reflection. To articulate the felt sense of choreography, we asked dancers to examine the passage between familiar and unfamiliar movement, set and improvised movement, learnt improvisation and spontaneous improvisation, and to use binaries to distinguish between ‘conscious’ and ‘nonconscious,’ ‘empty’ and ‘meaningful,’ ‘superficial’ and ‘embodied’ movement. The findings revealed contradictions in the dancers’ responses. For some, ‘conscious’ referred to familiar, grounded, and effortless movement they could understand, and thus carried a positive connotation. ‘Nonconscious,’ by contrast, was associated with doubt, insecurity, and confusion, and was perceived negatively. Other dancers reported the exact opposite: ‘conscious’ carried negative connotations of unfamiliarity, constructedness, and a lack of grounding, while ‘nonconscious’ was understood positively—as moving with momentum, mastering movement, and feeling at home in a deeper, more layered way.

While it was difficult to draw any clear knowledge from these reports, however rich and intriguingly contradictory they were, we became more interested in understanding how acquiring motor skills leads to the nonconscious feeling of movement. Yves Citton provided us with the concept of ‘automatic recognition’, which usefully approximates the nonconscious feeling of movement:

Automatic attention within which — in a complex relationship of suggestion, attenuation, reinforcement, and filtering with the other cerebral systems — a ‘perceptive system’ engages in an initial labour of identification without intention, without consciousness and without apparent effort from the subject. (Citton 2017, 33-34)

We tested this kind of attention in a prompt where we asked the dancers to describe a dance they ‘know by heart.’ A Danish dancer in a workshop at Impulstanz in Vienna reported:

When I was young, hip-hop dance always worked for me, which reminds me of the Danish phrase ‘I can do it without anything’.

Knowing something by heart = knowing without anything = effortless.

Hip-Hop dance is me; it isn’t something that has become me, but isn’t inside of me because it feels like cooking or doing the dishes. I would never forget the steps, but I would forget that I know them. (Anton Skaaning Thomsen, July 23, 2023)

Notice the words the dancer uses here to describe the process of identification: the movement literally passes into his body, which absorbs it without allowing him to isolate it or create distance through observation.

Where does dance go when it disappears into the background — in other words, when it becomes so internalised that the dancer knows it by heart without being conscious of that knowledge? Does it become part of the dancer’s personal capacity or does it point to something more generic and social about motor learning?

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* promised to explain how skills shape practice as a socially rooted embodiment in his famous definition:

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce the habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations. (Bourdieu 1977, 72)

In “Practice without theory: a neuroanthropological perspective on embodied learning” (2010), anthropologist and dancer Greg Downey revisits *habitus* through the learning process in capoeira from a Brazilian master:

What is ‘learned by body’ is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be branched, but something that one is [...] Imitation isn’t reproduction of something external, but immediate identification” [...] Practitioners repeatedly asserted that learning capoeira movements affected a person’s kinaesthetic style, social interactions, and perceptions outside of the game. (Downey 2010, S24–S25)

Following Bourdieu, though arguing for a vaguer and less structuralist notion of *habitus* as ‘embodied knowledge,’ Downey understood the acquisition of motor skills to have broader consequences that spill over into the dancer’s life — physical, neurological, and psychological. Learning begins with imitation, but over time, through the honing of skills, mastery yields a sense of emergence rather than mere copying. For Tim

Ingold, the anthropologist under whose supervision Downey presented his research on capoeira, the education of attention through imitation is key to motor learning. Rereading Bourdieu with Ingold, we are inclined to adjust the claim that the nonconscious movement generated by *habitus* is automatic. Following Tim Ingold's "Five Questions of Skill" (Ingold 2018), we became wary of using the attribute 'automatic' for the non-conscious movement, since it implies a pathway from sensation to motor action that excludes the creative aspects of cognition that must be in place in motor learning. Ingold writes:

Somewhere out there, perhaps in fields of cognitive or educational psychology, there may still be scholars who remain convinced that skill is the poor relation of knowledge, that its acquisition is 'merely' imitative, that it resides in the body rather than the mind and that its application is more or less automatic, running from sensory input to motor response while bypassing the realms of thought or imagination. (Ingold 2018, 7)

As Ingold argues, skill is not "automatic, running from sensory input to motor response while bypassing the realms of thought or imagination"; rather, skilled action involves an attentive engagement of perception, movement, and environment.

Returning to an earlier seminal paper by Ingold that frames this orientation, "From the transmission of representations to the education of attention" (1997), we found his account of what happens in motor learning from an anthropological perspective to be crucial.

In every case, the particular capacities of perception and action constituting the motor skill are developmentally embodied into the *modus operandi* of the human organism through practice and training, under the guidance of already accomplished practitioners, in an environment characterised by its own textures and topography, and littered with the products of previous human activity. (Ingold 1997, 446)

Ingold singles out three elements here: practice and training, the guidance of "masters" (to use a term that is nowadays unpopular in contemporary dance), and an environment that transmits previously acquired knowledge.

To show something to someone is to cause it to be made present for that person, so that he or she can apprehend it directly, whether by looking, listening or feeling. Here, the role of the tutor is to set up situations in which the novice is afforded the possibility of such unmediated experience. (Ingold 1997, 450)

The situation he describes is similar to Citton's account of 'joint attention': co-presence in a shared space without necessarily implying symmetry among all participants, for example, dancers. In the learning situation, observation and dancing are coordinated and

sometimes even short-circuited. When a dancer observes another person's movement, their observation implies a computation of that movement, which is sometimes visible in shadowing, i.e., echoing by copying the movement in a marked way. This means that even before trying the movement, the dancer is simulating it while watching it. Observation depends on relational attention, on empathy or affection, and on the transmission of a world rather than simply a skill. In Citton's notion, joint attention arises from interaction, dialogue, synchronisation, and affective harmonisation in a situation. He also refers to it as 'crossed attention' or 'presential attention.' From his account, what we retain as important for motor learning in dance is the role of emotional connection.

Downey suggested that imitating the capoeira master can be understood as a game of belief and a search for approval, while also possibly pointing to kinaesthetic empathy, informed by the then-current interest in the discovery of 'mirror neurons' (in 2010). In a recent conversation, he acknowledged that 'mirror neurons' are no longer thought to underpin empathetic movement responses. Empathy might be the word to describe the emotional connection, as in Citton's statement above; although movement is mirrored through imitative learning, it remains unclear whether mirror neurons are responsible for it.

Choreography: remembering forward in and with environment

Let us now move to the third element in Ingold's account of 'educating attention': the environment. We will see how the agency of the environment makes every instance of practice always already a performance. An apprentice does not simply reproduce or execute a retained phrase. Because of continual readjustment to the environment — and for dancers, the floor and performance situation, who is watching the dance, are always different — there is always an element of improvisation in copying, which gives it an emergent quality in experience. Ingold writes in the same paper: "The essence of dexterity lies not in bodily movements themselves but in the tuning of the movements to an emergent task, whose surrounding conditions are never precisely the same from one moment to the next". (Ingold 1997, 447). Attunement is essential to attention, to which he attributes movement:

The movement of the skilled practitioner, by contrast, is continually and fluently responsive to perturbations of the perceived environment. This is possible because the practitioner's bodily movement is, at one and the same time, a movement of attention; because he watches, listens and feels even as he works. (Ingold 1997, 448)

The sensorimotor apparatus of an experienced mover is attuned to picking up critical features of the environment that the novice simply won't be able to notice. Recall Stanley Ollivier's reflection in the earlier example about being a novice when he was learning *House* as an unfamiliar movement, yet relying on his practice of *vogue*. Part of

attention is to be able to anticipate specific moves based on something that is not immediately perceived and available, and yet it is as if this ‘something’ were somehow already present.

What Jonathan and I found here is that the ability to anticipate movement, and the feeling of anticipation that is retroactively coded as (spontaneous) emergence, demonstrates choreography. As our research speculatively proposes, everyone who dances is already choreographing — a sequencing that may feel nonconscious or be explicitly declarative but which runs, as a matter of course, through all motor action. And this might apply to any dance idiom or tradition in practice, as we have subsequently investigated in the studio with dancers specialised in a wider variety of dance traditions: Bharatanatyam, West African theatre dance, Popping, contemporary score-based dance, and contemporary improvisation.

How does memory tie in with anticipation to qualify the motor skill as choreographic? Ingold gave us a poetic metaphor of whistling a tune as remembering:

I would now argue that recall and performance are one and the same: that whistling a tune is remembering it. This [...] is to understand remembering not as the accessing of a complex structure, but as the unfolding of a complex process. To whistle a tune or tell a story that you have heard before is like taking a walk in the country along a route that you previously travelled in the company of someone else. [...] Just as to follow someone is to cover the same ground through the world of lived experience, so to remember is to retrace one's steps. But each retracing is an original movement, not a replica. (Ingold 1997, 452)

Aptness, grounded in motor skill in the moment of moving, implies that memory is enacted through the necessary variations that arise from adapting to a new environment. This begs the question of where the skill or aptness lies. Are they properties of the dancer, as Western disciplinary training claims? — one learns by heart by learning ‘by hard’? — to quote a Greek dancer from a workshop in Vienna (2024). Or, to pose a different question: does the situation shape the performance more than the dancer's capacity? Cognitive philosopher Andy Clark formulated the problem as follows:

It makes no sense to ask whether the capacity to climb lies with the climber or the ladder, or whether the capacity to play the piano resides in the pianist or the instrument. These capacities exist neither ‘inside’ the body and brain of the practitioner nor ‘outside’ in the environment. They are rather properties of environmentally extended systems that cross-cut the boundaries of body and brain. (Clark 1997, 222).

The body-brain-environment forms an ecosystem where both action and perception occur in-between and through the three elements.

The environment introduces an in-between space that connects the body and the brain in relation to other bodies and minds, within a space larger than the mind-body

dichotomy: a social, biological, and also psychological and historically framed, transindividual space. By transindividual here I mean two things: the transmission of the memory of the species through tools as external memory supports, and a generic base that each individual individuates in relation to others. The external memory support discussed here may take the form of a method that a dancer employs while teaching or performing. It transmits knowledge across bodies and generations while manifesting in each body as a singular variation. The individuation of movement is always more than an individualised skill possessed by a practitioner. The performance of skill is inherently relational and variable, emerging through the ongoing development of practice and its environmental or contextual conditions of belonging or estrangement.

In closing this paper, which considers studio-based findings through a transdisciplinary framework of concepts on motor learning from neuroscience, anthropology, and cognitive philosophy, two conclusions can be drawn. First, the research remains speculative in its intention; in other words, it hypothesises a correlation between dancers' understanding of embodied movement learning and motor cognition as a way of perceiving, anticipating, and inhabiting the environment. Second, this speculative effort provides the ground for rethinking choreography in a broader sense and with wider applicability across a variety of dance traditions, beyond current assumptions in Western contemporary dance that separate choreography from dance.

Acknowledgments Agradecimentos

Not applicable.

Funding Financiamento

There is no funding to declare.

Conflict of interest Conflito de interesses

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Authors contributions Contribuições dos autores

Not applicable.

Data availability statement Declaração de disponibilidade de dados

Not applicable.

AI tools Ferramentas de IA

Not applicable.

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How to cite Como citar [Chicago]

Cvejić, Bojana. 2026. "Relational Attention in Choreography and the Felt Sense of Motor Learning." *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens* (64): 55-67. <https://doi.org/10.34619/mn3h-suri>.

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Received Recebido: 2026-02-02**Accepted** Aceite: 2026-04-03

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