

## **From the choreographer's intentions to the perceived value of the spectator's experience: Immersion in a contemporary dance performance**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of our research is to gain a better understanding of the process that leads from the choreographer's (creator's) intentions to the dancer's performance and the audience's perceived value of the experience during a contemporary dance performance. More specifically, we will focus on the elements transmitted from one actor to another during a contemporary dance performance, elements that - we assume - will be facilitated by the immersion of these different key actors in the experience. Interviews conducted in situ with the choreographer, dancers and spectators after a specific contemporary dance performance have enabled us to highlight a certain detachment on the part of the choreographer, the responsibility of the dancers in transmitting both cognitive and affective elements to the audience, and the dual role of immersion as both a catalyst and a hindrance..

**Keywords:** *contemporary dance, immersion, experiential value, process, transmission*

## **Introduction**

A dance performance, like any live performance, is a complex art form involving several key players, including a choreographer, dancers and an audience. Among the various dance genres, contemporary dance stands out as an art form that, while analogous to reality, invites us to look at the world around us in a different way (Angioi et al., 2009). This genre of dance also emphasizes the role of the dancer as mediator between the choreographer's intention and the spectator's lived experience (Chirazi, 2020). As part of the category of performing arts that allows a great deal of interaction between the actors involved in the experience, it also offers many opportunities for immersion in the experience. Immersion is a concept that has been studied from various perspectives (psychology, consumer behavior, information and communication sciences, etc.) and has already been applied - because the field lends itself to it - to the field of art and the creative industries (cinema, museums, video games, etc.). In this research, we are interested in the psychological immersion (also known as the sense of presence in studies focusing on virtual environments) of actors interacting during a contemporary dance performance. This immersion is fairly close to the notion of 'flow' (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), in which the individual loses all notion of time and space due to total concentration and involvement in a specific activity.

The aim of our proposal is twofold: firstly, we will attempt to better understand the process from the choreographer's (creator's) intentions to the dancer's performance to the audience's perceived value of the experience during a contemporary dance performance; secondly, we will try to identify the role of immersion - of the main key actors involved (choreographer, dancer(s) and audience) in this process. More specifically, we will focus on the elements transmitted from one actor to another during a contemporary dance performance (for example, the choreographer's intentions, the dancer's involvement and emotions, the spectator's emotions, etc.), the elements that - we assume - will be facilitated by the immersion of these different key players in the experience. By considering the entire process from the choreographer's intentions to the spectators' perceived value, and by focusing on the flows from one key actor to another - with the dancer in a way playing the role of mediator - we are proposing a model that goes beyond existing research in the field of live performance on perceived value which, more conventionally, has attempted to identify the antecedents and dimensions of this perceived value (Derbaix and Derbaix 2010; Mencarelli 2008; Pulh 2002; Sohler and Bree 2014) but without considering the actors involved in the pre-existing creative process. We also consider immersion as a catalyst at each stage of the process and we are trying to see whether this immersion - often sought during an artistic experience - systematically favours the experience and the perceived value that results from it.

### **1. Theoretical Background**

#### **1.1. Contemporary dance, creative process and choreographer's intentions**

Unlike the clear, formal style of ballet and modern dance, it is difficult to provide an exact description of the technique used in contemporary dance. Its interdisciplinary nature, however, generates innovative choreography with a mixture of influences resulting from a complex creative process on the part of choreographers and dancers (Sagiv, Simons and Drori, 2020). Dancers use movement to convey emotions and stories, creating a profound emotional connection (Vecchi et al., 2022). Prior to the emotions that the dancers are able to convey, there are the choreographer's intentions. Dancers immerse themselves in the choreographer's vision,

translating it into movements that express feelings and narratives, thus establishing a deep emotional connection (Hanna 2015). The physical aspects of dance involve mastering complex choreography and improvisation, demanding intense physical involvement. The mental aspects require learning choreography and synchronizing with music, which can be mentally stimulating (Harrison and Rouse, 2014). It has also been shown that the creative process - which must be authentic - in contemporary dance requires a certain commitment from the various actors - choreographer, dancers and spectators - in a dialogue and communication (Sagiv, Simons and Drori, 2020). The development of contemporary dance has brought new aesthetic rules into play and offered audiences a new and unique experience which, like any form of live performance, will allow them to become immersed (Carù and Cova, 2006; O'Sullivan, 2009) and increase their perceived value.

## **1.2. Perceived value of a live performance experience**

The dialogue and communication between the various key players in a contemporary dance experience will result in the perceived value of the experience for the spectator. Perceived value is a concept that has been widely studied in economics, marketing and consumer behavior. Rivière and Mencarelli (2012) have identified three types of perceived value depending on when they are formed, including perceived value during/after consumption, the use of the product, also known as consumption value. This value is based on the consumption experience and on the hedonic responses that result. Value is no longer the result of a calculation but the product of experience. Holbrook (1999) defines this consumer value or experiential value as '*a relative, comparative, personal and situational preference characterizing the experience of a subject in interaction with an object*'. By *interactive*, he means that consumer value entails an interaction between some subject (e.g. a spectator) and some object (e.g. a live performance). By *relativistic*, they mean that consumer value is (a) *comparative* (involving preferences among objects); (b) *personal* (varying across people); and (c) *situational* (specific to the context). This more analytical approach has led to the identification of the components of value according to their significance for the consumer: affective, symbolic, social, etc. (Aurier, Evrard and N'Goala, 2004). It seems clear that the perceived value of a performance, such as a contemporary dance show, is more a matter of experiential value.

## **1.3. Immersion process or sense of presence as a catalyst of the experience**

According to Carù and Cova (2003, p. 51), '*if there is one type of experience for which the notion of immersion is very often used, and has been for a long time, it is the artistic experience*'. Immersion has been defined by consumer researchers either as an end state (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) or as a process (Carù and Cova, 2006). Thus, immersion can refer to an immediate plunge into an experience in order to reach a state of flow - a mental state in which a person performing an activity is totally immersed in a feeling of concentration, total involvement and pleasure in the process of the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Immersion can also be a process that takes into account a series of stages that lead to the experience of immersion: nesting, exploration and stamping (Carù and Cova, 2006). Immersion presupposes several components: (1) factor of interaction: interaction is correlated with the immersion felt in the environment (Carù and Cova, 2006; O'Sullivan, 2009), the greater the interaction with the environment (spectator, choreographer, dancer), the greater the immersion felt; (2) social factors and social presence : the social presence of other individuals and the possibility of interacting with these individuals increases the sense of presence (Heeter, 2016); (3) individual factors of perception of information and representation systems: individual differences in terms of perception and representation of information between individuals are determining factors in

the sense of presence. Slater and Usoh (1993) showed, for example, that individuals considered to be visual were more likely to have a high sense of presence than kinaesthetic or auditory individuals; (4) quality of the environment: the quality, realism and ability of the environment to be fluid and to create interaction are determining factors in the user's sense of presence (Slater and Usoh, 1993, Hendrix and Barfield, 1996); (5) finally, contextual and psychological factors influence the sense of presence (Deniaud et al., 2015). For example, the scenario, the participant's attention, the involvement in the task and the participant's performance, the cognitive and behavioral distance between the participant and the immersive environment affect the sense of presence.

Recent research more specific to the context of dance has looked at the immersion of the different actors involved in the experience (Christensen et al., 2016; Deinzer, Clancy and Wittmann, 2017; Pini, 2023) and shows that different elements of the performance allow for greater immersion in the experience.

Figure 1 illustrates the process from the choreographer's intentions to the perceived value of the spectators we are exploring, as well as the role of immersion in this process.

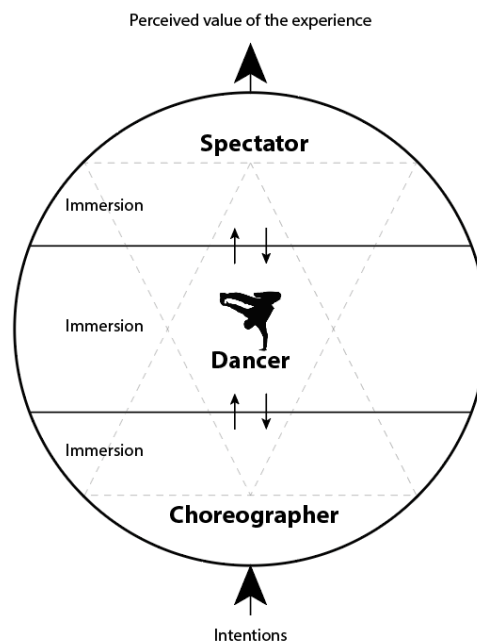


Figure 1. Process going from the choreographer's intentions to the perceived value of the spectator's experience through immersion.

## 2. Methodology

Our research methodology is based on an exploratory qualitative approach aimed at analysing the process of transformation from the choreographer's intentions to the spectator's perceived experience within a specific performance created by Anne Charpentier of the company La Rayure du Zèbre. This performance for two dancers premiered in February 2024 at the Châteauvallon-Liberté, Scène Nationale in Toulon (France). It embodies a bold, innovative artistic approach that pushes back the boundaries of the traditional performance stage. This choreographic work was born two years ago from the desire to work with elderly people. Several residencies were carried out in different EHPAD (old people's homes) to meet and work with the elderly people living in these institutions. A number of interviews, videos and sounds

were recorded, and they form the basis of the performance "L'ombre de soie" (cf. Table 1 for more details).

In order to achieve our research aims, semi-structured interviews were conducted in situ with the choreographer, two dancers and 11 audience members immediately after the performance to explore cognitive and affective interactions and the sense of presence of each participant.

The main questions we asked the choreographer were related to her intentions, the movements she wanted to convey and the interaction she created with the dancers during the creative process. We ask the dancers how they perceive the choreographer's intentions in the creative process and how they dialogue to adapt, interpret and play with these intentions. We also discuss the emotions they feel and how they communicate them to the audience, and what kind of relationship they have with the audience, especially when they are on stage. And we ask the audience about the intentions they perceived and the emotions they felt during the performance. We also ask the audience about the communication of the performance, what will they say about this performance? The common question (for the three types of actors) was about immersion: What are the factors that help or hinder immersion during the performance? How do they manage this state of mind? And how do they live the immersion during the performance?

Thanks to the triangulation of researchers and their expertise (the researchers involved in this project have specific expertise in communication sciences, design and consumer behaviour), our methodology aims to be rich, holistic and comprehensive, fostering an in-depth understanding of the immersion process and how artistic intentions are transformed into sensory experiences for the audience. In addition, the inclusion of a researcher-dancer in our team strengthens the quality of our data and analysis, as she brings a practical perspective based on her experience in the field.

"L'ombre de Soie" is a show that combines dance, theatre and music to explore the duality between body and mind. A dancer-acrobat and an accordionist actor play an old woman in her apartment. They show how she struggles with her memories and reality, particularly through the symbolic presence of her shadow, which represents her fears and desires. The performance, marked by comic and dramatic moments, uses contemporary movement and live music that blends accordion and electro. The work pays tribute to age and love, while emphasising self-acceptance and the richness of past experiences. Inspired by renowned choreographers, Anne Charpentier creates a unique body language to express the deep emotions of this fusion duo.

Watch the teaser on youtube by typing "L'ombre de soie" into your browser.



Table. 1: Information about the performance. Images by Marc Perot.

### 3. Analyses and Results

As a reminder, this exploratory research aims to gain a better understanding of the process and elements transmitted from the choreographer's intentions through the dancer's performance to the spectator's perceived experiential value in the context of a contemporary dance performance. The first part of our analyses will therefore describe the intentions and feelings of the key players in the experience and attempt to explain the elements that are transmitted from one key player to another. In the second part of the analysis, we will focus on the immersion of the various key players in the experience and determine whether this immersion helps or hinders the flows passing from one key player to another in the process.

### **3.1. Process generating the perceived value of the experience**

#### **3.1.1. Choreographer's intentions**

During our conversation, the choreographer highlights technical constraints encountered, she said: *"Contemporary dance is really going to focus on the body and how it feels, how it relaxes, how it contracts, really on the qualities of the body. We work more on the intentions of the body. We don't play a role. The face is neutral. I chose body constraints and worked on improvisations based on the constraints I gave myself"*. She explains that in the first part *"I first wanted to use the rigidity of the body, I used the music a lot, which really led to something almost robotic with stops and isolations of each limb, with a mix between undulations, isolations and contractions and a mix between rigidity and fluidity, like a flowing energy"* and in the second part *"I wanted to move towards something more lyrical, more soaring. I was looking for very fluid, very dancing states of the body. I improvised a lot... There are jumps and a lot of turns"*.

About the narrative of the performance, she says that *"the intention was to talk about memory loss, that she's a bit crazy, that she can't remember"*, which is linked to some emotions: *"In the first part, this granny was almost funny. She's a very helpless grandma who's really struggling and losing her head, falling down and not being able to get back up"*. And: *"I really wanted the second image to be something that lifts people up and reconciles them with life, that is uplifting, joyful and full of hope"*.

For the choreographer, the relationship between emotions and the creative process remains very superficial: *"No emotions, I worked with physical constraints that I gave myself. It's a work that is thought through beforehand and then worked on by myself before being given to the dancers"*.

#### **3.1.2. ...through the performance of the dancers...**

The dancers try to make a connection between the technical constraints imposed by the choreographer, while at the same time trying to create a story to tell the audience. One of the dancers said: *"The choreographic intention is in her hands, I'm clearly at the service of her very precise intentions: she proposes and I dispose. I accept this role"* (Dancer02Man44y) and another added: *"I am hyper-receptive to music, music inspires me enormously. The choreographer may want to work on only one state of the body and in a different way to the music. And then I'll forget the music and concentrate on the state of my body, the tone, the contractions of my body, without necessarily listening to the music"* (Dancer01Woman45y).

These intentions were deepened and transformed during the creation of the show through an exchange between the choreographer and the dancers. This exchange was based on experimentation through body language: *"A choreographer or a dancer, he looks at another dancer and he knows immediately what course he has learnt, how long he has been doing it"*

*and what body awareness he has*" (Dancer01Woman45y); *"She had really created several choreographic parts that existed as such and that we deconstructed and either erased or deconstructed and reinjected"* (Dancer02Man44y).

In this search for meaning, the dancers maintain a relationship of trust and admiration for the choreographer's work, while at the same time being confronted with other aspects: *"I have my own little idea of things. I have my own body, I have my own desires. Of course there are physical constraints"* (Dancer02Man44y).

The co-construction of the choreography is based on trial and error: *"I'm the source of suggestions and it works by trial and error"* (Dancer02Man44a); *"We missed it a lot. It was a disaster. We went back to the drawing board and it's only by doing it again that we're able to listen to each other. It's a language that's not necessarily verbal"* (Dancer02Man44y).

During the performance, they don't necessarily seek out the audience, but they are aware that they are there and that it is they who will validate their work: *"It's the moment to validate everything that has been thought out, imagined, tested, etc. It's the moment of truth"* (Dancer02Man44y).

They remain centered on their emotions, left to themselves and focused on the present moment *"You have to focus on yourself, especially as I'm really at your service in the show and really listening to you"* (Dancer02Man44y); *"When I have to express joy, I have fun, I enjoy myself. I try to be as real as I can. For me!"* (Dancer01Woman45y).

### **3.1.3 ....to the audience's understanding and emotions**

The audience wants to understand the story behind the performance. And when we asked them to tell about the choreographer's intentions, most of them stated that *"the intention is to show the passage of time, to show the memories, in this case of an old person and gradually throughout her life"* (Spect05Man35y). One of them states more precisely that *"I saw a love story, about a woman who had lost the man of her life, perhaps a little young, and who was at the end of her solo life..."* (Spect11Woman32y).

They identify specific details of the performance narrative: *"There were two main passages: the old age in the way she moves, and then a little despair because she forgets. In the second part, it's like a rebirth and a return to youth"* (Spect07Woman67y). A spectator commented on this first part: *"I really like the beginning: moving around as an older person; remembering objects, very choreographed, very precise. It's very poetic, very, very clear; the relationship with memory, repetition and doubling; the problems of old age and forgetting. The decisions they've made, to not look at each other, to look at each other, to do or not to do, you can feel that it's been decided. It's intentional"* (Spect08Woman49y).

And, in terms of emotions, we identified several emotions associated with different choreographic elements and props: *"A kind of nostalgia, with flashes of memories coming back at times"* (Spect01Man56y); *"It's not very cheerful, but it didn't make me sad. I found it beautiful! It's about accepting old age and what is. I'm not sad!"* (Spect08Woman49y)

Other emotions were mentioned, associated with specific moments of the performance: *"It's like a breath of fresh air when she reads this letter, she becomes young again, so that's something to be happy about. But I was really moved, I was almost in tears"* (Spect07Woman67y); *"After the rehearsal I thought to myself, when is there going to be a*

*break in this pattern? I was relieved. I felt relieved when the music started”* (Spect11Woman32y); *“There is perhaps a loneliness when she loses her means, a little fear when she moves her objects. More joy when she tries on her red dress”* (Spect09Man33y).

The youngest spectator said: *“At first I thought it was funny, almost comical. I thought it was really funny. She wants to put something on and she can't”* (Spect10Man21y). However, the older person did not identify her and found it difficult to understand her emotions: *“I can't talk about emotions, I'm just trying to understand: the main thread wasn't very clear to me”* (Spect03Woman80y).

### **3.2. Immersion as a catalyst or inhibitor in the experience of a contemporary dance performance**

In this second part of our analysis, we try to understand whether the immersion of the key players in the contemporary performance experience will act as an element that will facilitate the transmission of the various elements mentioned above (more cognitive and more affective) between the different players or, on the contrary, whether immersion will hinder these flows and the value creation process.

#### **3.2.1. Immersion or sense of presence as a catalyst for experience**

The choreographer did not mention a feeling of immersion during the performance; she seemed quite detached from the interactions with the dancers and the audience and concentrated more on her own work, which implies an immersion focused on concentration and not on emotions. However, immersion seems to have been felt more by the dancers and the audience through irregular interactions. For dancers more specifically, the sense of flow, or losing track of time, is a strong indicator of their immersion. Dancers often report total immersion in their performance when they reach this state, enhancing their experience and that of the audience. The feeling of fluidity comes through the body *“to enter into immersion...you have to be sufficiently posed, centred, in your body”* (Dancer01Woman45y). This feeling of flow also comes from losing the notion of time, which comes from completely mastering your character and forgetting about it: *“I was hyper-excited and my character was hyper-zen... I'm in there, present, and in the moment”*. This feeling of flow is also conveyed through the spectator's body: *“It's downright bodily expression, yes, yes, I was in it”* (Spect01Man56y) and through identification with the characters: *“Yes, you can see yourself in it, you're not in it”* (Spect01Man56y). The emotion felt by dancers is strongly linked to their immersion. Intense emotions, whether joyful or melancholic, strengthen the bond between the dancer and their art, thus increasing their immersion.

Music also plays a fundamental role in the immersion. Dancers who deeply feel the music report a greater sense of immersion, enriching their performance. Music is a powerful immersion lever for the choreographer, the dancer and the audience: *“the music is 50 per cent of the show, and then the fact of really experiencing what you are experiencing, of having a universe, and something real”* (choreographer and Dancer01Woman45y), *“the music is intense and there you were really getting into the thing”* (Spect01Man56y and Spect05Man35y). The music also helped them to immerse themselves by encompassing all their senses: *“When there's music, it really helps me, I had the impression that something was encompassing me, and that I was using all my senses”* (Spect09Man33y). The music was *“like injecting energy”* (Spect07Woman67y).



For the audience, beyond understanding the choreographer's intentions and the emotions - such as joy and nostalgia - felt, other elements such as surprise "*I didn't see it coming, I was completely in it*" (Spect09Man33y) and the changes in rhythm during the performance (contractions between repetitive moments and faster ones): "*immersion came at that moment*" (Spect09Man33y) reinforce immersion and act as catalysts for interaction and communication with the dancers.

### **3.2.2. Immersion or sense of presence as an inhibitor for experience**

The social environment in which the different actors find themselves can be a disruptive element to immersion and therefore to their interactions with the dancers. For example, the presence of the photographer and the noise of the camera going off distracted some of the dancers and reduced their immersion. This was also true for the choreographer, who was disturbed by the presence of her partner in the room, which caused him to lose the feeling of immersion and connection: "*There was my boyfriend in the room and he was very critical, I couldn't get into character any more*".

Lack of temporal fluidity - when dancers fail to enter a state of flow - can hinder the sense of presence. If dancers do not feel transported by time, their immersion in the performance is reduced. It is interesting to see that the choreographer's intention was precisely to exaggerate this state of 'tension' like a rubber band in order to create relief when the music starts, "*I had trouble getting into it because the beginning seemed a bit long*" (Spect04Woman64y).

Finally, it seems that spectators who, beyond the choreographer's intentions and the story conveyed by the dancers, engage in in-depth analysis of the performance, particularly the technical aspects ("*I'm analysing what he's doing and I say to myself, this is work, and I'm not in it any more .... 'I'm a bad spectator because I look more at how they did it'*" (Spect09Man33y)) have more difficulty immersing themselves, with the cognitive taking over too much from the affective and emotional.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of our 'immersion' in a contemporary dance performance was to gain a better understanding of the process of transmission from the choreographer to the spectator via the dancers and the role of the immersion of each of the actors in this process. Figure 2 illustrates both our initial hypothesis or assumption (fairly fluid exchanges between the different actors) and the results obtained after our study. Perhaps surprisingly, the choreographer seemed detached from his dancers - and even more so from the audience - and seemed totally focused on his own work, focused on the dancers' bodies and the technical constraints. The dancers, for their part - while taking into account the constraints imposed by the choreographer - are trying more to make a connection with the audience (telling them a story, entering into communication and dialogue through their bodies) with the aim of receiving and feeling a certain validation from them. The dancer therefore plays the role of mediator, giving meaning to the performance through the technical constraints imposed. Finally, the audience seeks to understand the proposed narrative (the choreographer's intentions as conveyed by the dancers) and experiences various emotions such as joy and surprise, but also nostalgia - linked here to the dance performance studied. Perceived value is therefore mainly linked to cognitive and affective dimensions. The social dimension also seems to be preponderant because of the interactions with the dancers.

As far as immersion and its role in the process is concerned, it varies both in terms of intensity and 'content'. For choreographers, immersion is very much linked to concentration on their work, but not at all to emotions. This immersion did not seem to particularly encourage interaction with the dancers. The dancers, on the other hand, seem to immerse themselves in their performance, which allows them to enter into a dialogue with the audience and encourages the transmission of the story and emotions. As for the audience, they also seem to be immersed (in the narrative and the emotions they are receiving) and interact with the dancers. However, immersion can be damaged and reduce interaction between the key players due to factors such as certain elements of the social context, the fluidity of the performance or certain characteristics specific to the spectators (the cognitive not leaving enough room for the affective).

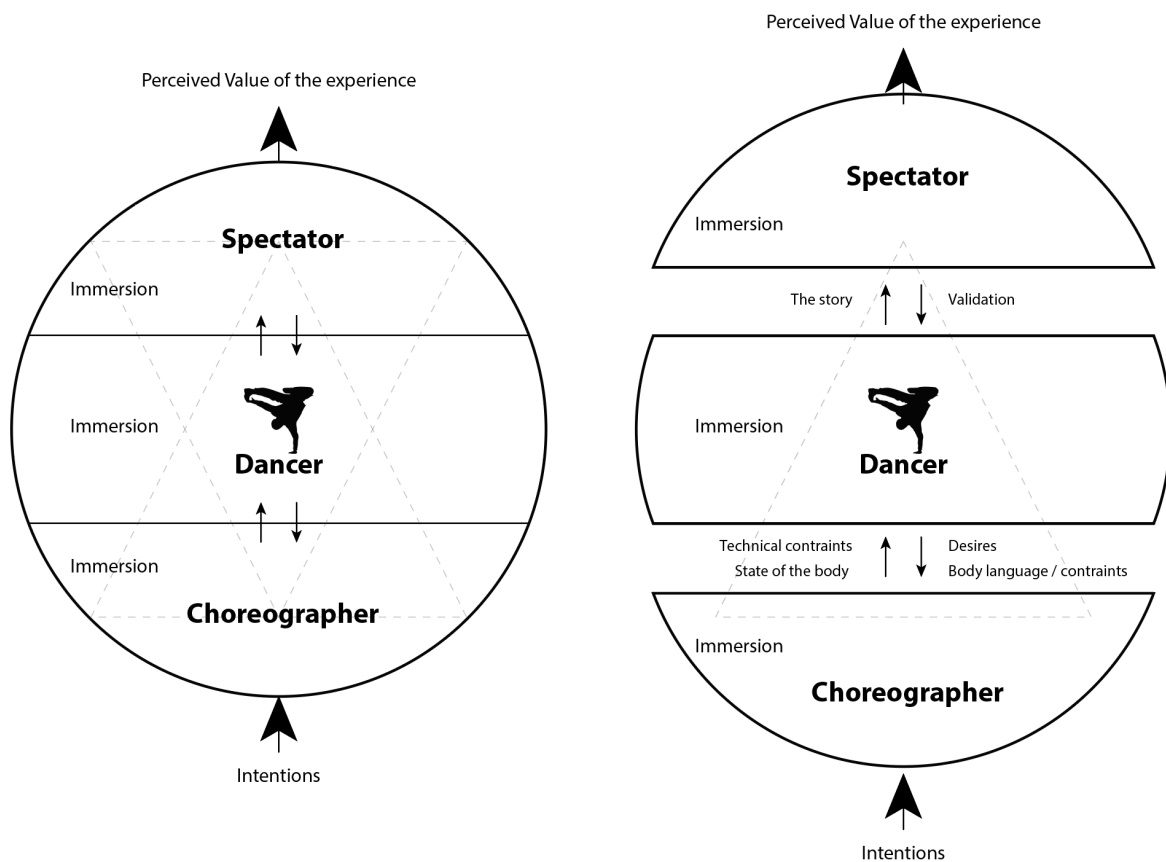


Fig. 2: Process from the choreographer's intentions to the perceived value of the audience's experience through immersion, before and after the analysis.

The main contribution of our study is to take into account the key actors who interact during a dance performance and who allow us to better understand the process from the choreographer's intentions to the spectator's experiential value. This value seems to depend essentially on the dancers, with the choreographer taking a certain distance from the audience. In the case of contemporary dance performances, it seems that we are more in an approach based on the cultural product and its creative process than in an approach based on consumers and their expectations (Botti, 2000). Responsibility for perceived value rests essentially with the dancers, who must transmit cognitive and affective elements and social links to the spectators. We also emphasise in this research that immersion is not systematically conducive to these elements and that it can also disrupt their transmission from one actor to another.

This work on understanding the process of the different actors in a live performance experience and the role of immersion should be continued by studying other contemporary dance performances, in particular to gain external validity.

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