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Arianna Fabbriatore

► To cite this version:

| Arianna Fabbriatore. Semiotic elements of the grotesque “Italian” practice. 2016. hal-01552341

HAL Id: hal-01552341

<https://hal.science/hal-01552341>

Preprint submitted on 2 Jul 2017

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Arianna Fabbriatore « Semiotic elements of the grotesque “Italian” practice » in *Tanz in Italien : italienischer Tanz in Europa 1400-1900 : 4. Symposium für Historischen Tanz, Burg Rothenfels am Main, 25.-29. Mai 2016 : Tagungsband*, ed. Uwe W Schlottermüller; Howard Weiner; Marie Richter, Freiburg, Fa-gisis, Musik-und Tanzedition, 2016, p. 57-74.

Semiotic elements of the grotesque “Italian” practice

Arianna Fabbriatore (Paris-Sorbonne)

The practice of grotesque dancing occupied an important place in the panorama of theatrical dance during the 18th century; its undeniable success served to make it the object of critical attacks and polemics in the European cultural world. Very few studies, however, exist about this practice¹. The only work entirely dedicated to grotesque dancing, which remains an essential reference, is *The Grotesque Dancer on the Eighteenth-Century Stage: Gennaro Magri and His World*, published in 2004². In this volume, enriched by important appendices, Rebecca Harris-Warrick and Bruce Alan Brown bring together studies that explore the trans-European world of the *grotteschi*, with a particular focus on Gennaro Magri and his *Trattato teorico pratico del ballo* (1779)³.

The Neapolitan grotesque dancer published his *Trattato* at the very moment at which his rival Charles Lepicq, a “serious” dancer and pupil of Jean-Georges Noverre, definitively replaced him at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. Among descriptions of the dance steps contained in Magri’s work - which is of immense value for what it tells us about dance practice at the time - we also find various references to polemics that highlight the contrast between two styles of dance, Italian and French, and between two genres considered to occupy two different levels of the theatrical hierarchy: serious dance and grotesque dance. Such oppositions played a significant role in the cultural competition of the day, which opposed Italy and France: the noble style, identified with the French, was regarded as higher, while the practices of grotesque dancing and pantomime were stigmatized as “Italian”. But what in fact was a grotesque dancer? What techniques did he or she employ? And why were such dancers always called “Italian”?

Using the writings of the ballet masters and surviving testimonies regarding the reception of different styles of dancing, I aim to shed light on this practice in order to better understand the complex dimensions of the “grotesque” in dance. This study is provisional, because, thanks to the support of the Centre National de la Danse (France), I am in the process of conducting applied research that encompasses both a systematic study of the *Trattato* and the development of an audio-visual glossary of the steps described by Magri⁴. The results of this research will be made available at the time of the international symposium devoted to Magri and grotesque dancing, which will take place in Naples in October 2016.

¹ See Bongiovanni 1990-1991a; Bongiovanni: In Morelli 1996, p. 239-245.

² Harris-Warrick / Brown 2004.

³ Magri 1779. (Original text is consultable on the site of the Library of Congress of Washington, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/dihtml/dicatlg.html>). English translation by Skeaping Mary / Ivanova Anna. Italian edition by Lombardi Carmela (2001). French translation is in progress.

⁴ Research program led by Arianna Fabbriatore and supported by the CND (Centre national de la danse) “Comic and grotesque dance in the 18th century: study and kinetic interpretation of Gennaro Magri’s *Trattato teorico-prattico sul ballo* (1779)”. The project brings together theory and practice, and is carried out by a research team and professional dancers. It includes a regular doctoral research seminar on dance within the framework of Paris-Sorbonne’s OBVIL project, and it will lead to two international symposiums (Naples, June 2016, Paris, June 2017) See <http://www.cnd.fr/professionnels>.

“*Ces Bouffons venus d’Italie*” : Virtuosity and mime

In the eighteenth century the category of “grotesque” dancing was included within the comic, which was conceived of as opposed to the serious genre. It was thus initially defined by a negative, by what it was not: noble dance. The first particularly striking elements in descriptions and testimonies about these two genres of dance relate to their hierarchy and their connotations. The style known as “noble” or “serious”, characterized by the elegance and grace of its movements, was recognized and recognizable, forged in Paris by the Royal Academy of Dance and diffused across Europe. It was acknowledged as a French style, and its supremacy was viewed as a fact. The comic and grotesque genre, however, was seen as lacking in discipline and vague in definition: its technique was not codified and often varied according to the performance of each dancer; it was identified as “Italian”.

Two elements seem to characterize this practice: virtuosity and gestuality. In the writings of the time, these two elements undergo a progressive degradation and (albeit for different reasons) they are both connoted ever more negatively until they come to be regarded as worthy of condemnation.

1. 1 Virtuosity

Evitons ces excès; laissons à l’Italie / De ces sauts étonnans la bizarre folie⁵.
Déspréaux, *L’art de la Danse*, 1806.

In his famous comparison of the three styles of dance known at the time—French, Spanish, and Italian—Jacopo Martello presented the French and Italian styles as diametrically opposed⁶. The element linked to the former is water: the French dancer is compared to a swimmer who fights against the waves. The lexical fabric that nourishes the metaphor of the “dancer-swimmer” builds the image of a style of dance concentrated on the upper body. There appears to be a break at the dancer’s waist; the rest of the body disappears below the surface, where the French dancer seems to move with the effect of slow motion that water always confers upon movements, while the attention of the spectator is focused on the movements of his arms, which “always high and flexible, cut the waves very delicately”⁷. The characteristics of this dancer are grace, elegance, the “*moelleux*”.

In describing the Italian style, Martello uses a value-laden metaphor that binds the Italian dancer to the image of a nimble and brilliant bird⁸. It is in the air, the element in which the whole body can move, that the dancer shows all his qualities, these being the acrobatic practices of the Italian style, namely lightness, skill, and especially agility.

The Italian neatly carries out his witty dance both in the middle and at the sides: he vibrates in the air, and having cut through it with his agile somersaults, he returns to the ground, touching down lightly on tiptoe, before rising again like a partridge, which, holding itself upright, takes off in its short flight from the earth to which it had briefly surrendered, and thus disappoints the dog who approaches it by rising again. This third kind of dance, which mainly takes place in the air, resembles flying.⁹

⁵ [Let us avoid these excesses; we leave to Italy the bizarre folly of these extravagant leaps].

⁶ Martello 1715.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 229-230 [sempre elevate e pieghevoli, rompono l’onde leggiadramente].

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 230-231.

⁹ *Ibid* [L’Italiano in mezzo, ed a’ lati dispone ordinatamente la spiritosa sua danza : si vibra nell’aria, e trinciate in essa agilissime capriole, si restituisce in punta di piè leggerissimamente sul piano, e appena toccatolo, risale come

In his attack on Italian opera, *Reflections of a patriot on French and Italian opera*, de Rochemont constructs a comparison between a foreign dancer and the famous Dupré, who represents, by antonomasia, French dancing. The foreign artist, “half dancer, half acrobat”, displays qualities such as “lightness” and “flexibility” or “extraordinary fire” in his movements. Yet the foreigner is strongly devalued, touted as a “tightrope walker” or a “juggler”, his acrobatic qualities are depreciated, he is defined as a “workman” and his function is restricted to entertainment.

A foreigner who is half dancer and half acrobat – light, supple, imbuing all of his movements with an extraordinary fire – may often give us more pleasure than Dupré himself, whose simple and apparently easy style of dance is far less surprising. However, despite this possibility for greater pleasure, we have a strong sense that the latter artist is far superior to the former. The foreigner displays in an affected manner something that comes from him alone, and can thus never belong to us, something that we are not even tempted to try and acquire, for we see clearly that should we manage to acquire it, we would be none the better for it. The true dancer uncovers for us our own riches; he allows us to enjoy – at least through thought alone – all that we have which is good; he ennobles the image of feeling, and by extension feeling itself. This is truly an artist: he identifies the object of his art and know how to fill it with meaning; the other type is no more than a worker, whose work, like that of the tightrope walker, the marionette, and the juggler, gives us a moment of recreation: even his greatest efforts result in an amusement that can never make us better than we are¹⁰.

We can observe in this passage by de Rochemont the emergence of certain conceptual paradigms, namely the superiority of the expressive dimensions of the dance over the more mechanical aspects of the body, which is implicit in the hierarchization of the arts according to their capacity to cause useful or high passions.

An opposition between the Italian and French styles was becoming a commonplace. In his 1769 parody, *L'Opera seria*, Ranieri Calzabigi satirizes the theatrical milieu of Vienna in his own time. When the ballet master, Passagallo, explains to the impresario the qualities of his dancers, he is offering a double criticism of the dominant styles: to the slowness and the affectations of the French style he opposes the speed and elevation of the Italian style.

You will see with what jumps, they fling themselves
So that it seems that in the air they fly and spin:
How they breathe in the midst of such violence
I confess, I cannot understand.
Then you might say that in the theatre

Pernice che, tutta ritta, si spicca nel breve suo volo di terra, a cui agilmente rendutasi, delude il cane, che se le accosta, col rialzarsi. Questa terza sorta di ballo, che fa la maggior comparsa nell'aria, somigliansi al volo] This quotation and the following ones from Goudar, de Rochemont, Dubos, Angiolini, Calzabigi, Magri and Riccoboni have been translated from Italian or French into English by Jessica Goodman.

¹⁰ de Rochemont 1754, p. 66-68 [Un Etranger moitié danseur et moitié voltigeur, par sa légereté, sa souplesse, et par le feu prodigieux qu'il met dans tous ses mouvemens, nous fait peut-être quelquefois plus de plaisir que Dupré lui-même, dont la danse simple et facile en apparence, est beaucoup moins surprenante. Cependant, malgré ce plus grand plaisir possible, nous sentons à merveille que le dernier Artiste est fort supérieur au premier. L'Etranger nous étale avec affectation un bien qui n'est que lui, et qui ne peut jamais nous appartenir, un bien dont nous ne sommes pas même tentés de faire l'acquisition ; parce que nous voyons clairement que quand nous parviendrions à le posséder, nous n'en vaudrions guere mieux. Le vrai Danseur nous découvre nos propres richesses ; il nous met à portée de jouir, au moins par la pensée, de ce que nous avons réellement de bon ; il annoblit l'image du sentiment, et par conséquent le sentiment même. Ce dernier est un Artiste, il démêle l'objet de son Art et sçait le remplir : l'autre est un ouvrier, dont le travail se réduit à partager avec les Danseurs de corde, les Marionnettes, et les Joueurs de gobelets, l'honneur de nous donner un moment de récréation : ses plus grands efforts aboutissent à nous procurer un amusement qui ne peut jamais nous rendre meilleurs].

Compared to these tightrope walkers,
 Those French [dancers] appear
 Tense, tense;
 In order to execute a fourth, or a brizé
 They make so many grimaces and so much effort
 That to watch them is painful, and may make you faint (exit)¹¹

The virtuosity of the dancer was more and more frequently targeted by critics who defended the expressive capacities of dance and readily disparaged technical exploits. Furthermore, the virtuosity that de Rochement attributed generically to foreign dancers was especially regarded as “Italian” and employed as an argument against Italy in the context of Italian-French polemics surrounding the cultural superiority of one nation or the other.

Ange Goudar, who displayed a clearly anti-Italian position, affirmed the absolute superiority of the French style over the Italian one. Linking the degeneration of Italian dance to the corruption of Italian music, he vigorously attacked the energy of the Italian dancers, which he called “agitation”, as well as their technical capabilities, identified by the acrobatic and virtuosic character of their steps and the verticality of their jumps.

The French, who did not give up on their sustained melodies, continued to dance in a serious manner. They employed what is called ‘la belle danse’. Carmagot had tried to ruin it by the addition of somersaults and tambourines; but just as in their music they did not want to lose this serious air, so their dance also retained its earlier character. [...]

During this period, the dances of the Italians seemed to chase after notes that had escaped from the music, requiring much larger movements in order to follow them. Most of them distorted themselves out of agitation. They gambolled about about like their music, and matched their movements to the ariettes, which proceeded by leaps and jumps¹².

Another text offers an ironic representation of the dangerous side of the Italian exploits in the new *ballet-pantomime*. In this passage, it is interesting to notice the use of the adjective “*cabriolans*” which, by metonymy, synthesizes all the virtuosity of the dancers in only one technical element: the *cabriole*:

Agitation in these ballets-pantomimes seems to happen by degrees; just as a hurricane forms from light breezes, and only explodes at its climax. A dance for two characters has to be technically brilliant; for three, it must be sparkling, but for four it must be postiviely turbulent. This is the rule of proportion, from which the second-order great masters never strayed. In the latter type of dance, then, the men must jump higher than head height, and the women display their stockings to well above the waist: if the audience sees only their knee, the quartet has failed.

Since this form of art is developing further every day, and the great masters constantly attempt to distinguish themselves, a new unique step has just been discovered, which had never before been attempted, even in the age of the most prodigious somersaulters [*cabriolans*]. Rising smoothly from the ground, the dancer must make three turns in the air, and return to his feet in the same place and in the same position from which he left; just about the perfect move for

¹¹ Calzabigi 1769 [Vedrete che salti, che slanciano / Par, che in aria volando s’aggirino : / Come in tal violenza respirino / Vi confesso, nol posso capir. / Dite poi, che in teatro si mostrino, / In confronto di questi funamboli, / Que’ Francesi / Tesi, tesi ; / Che per fare una quarta, un brizè / Tante smorfie, e moine ci mettono, / Che vi fanno penare, e svenir (parte)].

¹² Goudar 1773, p. 50-51 [Les François, qui ne se défirent pas de leurs airs soutenus, continuèrent à danser gravement. Ils s’attachèrent à ce qu’on appelle la belle danse. La Camargot avoit essayé de la gatèr par des cabrioles et des tambourins ; mais comme dans la musique ils ne voulurent point se défaire de cet air sérieux, la danse conserva son premier caractère. [...] Pendant ce tems là, les Italiens en dansant couroient après les notes qui s’étoient échappées de la musique, et se donnoient de grands mouvemens pour les suivre. La plupart s’estropierent à force d’agitation. Ils gambarderent comme leur chant, et assortirent leur activité aux Ariettes qui alloient par *sauts* et par *bonds*].

breaking your neck. The creation of this dangerous jump has already left more than one hundred dancers relying on crutches¹³.

These passages from Martello, de Rochemont, and Goudar help us sketch an initial portrait of the “Italian” dancer: he is regarded as “half dancer and half acrobat”; he is characterized by “his lightness, his flexibility, and by the extraordinary fire that he puts in all his movements”; he resembles a “bird” that flies in the air and whose qualities are promptness, agility, and speed. However, all these qualities were devalued little by little by criticisms related to an aesthetics of feeling or by moralizing intentions. Antonio Planelli considered that “*la danse haute*” – namely the style that employed jumps and technical exploits – did not belong to the realm of true art, because it was incapable of arousing the passions.¹⁴ Francesco Algarotti invoked the moral category of honesty to negatively connote the acrobatic side of dancing which “to face the facts, is nothing other than cabrioles done to a state of exhaustion and indecent jumping that should not earn applause from honest people.”¹⁵

However, the link between virtuosity and the “Italian” style seems to result from a stereotype, since it was true that acrobatic elements were the prerogative of Italian dancers and that dancing was part of the common practice of the Italian actors in Paris¹⁶. It was also true that the practice of the Italian artists was based on their mastery of a large and expressive range of gestures, put to the service of a comico-parodic or burlesque repertoire, and associated with a virtuosity related to the emblematic names of Camargo and Barbarina, whose famous “Italian somersault” serves as an eloquent example. But virtuosity was not exclusive to the Italians; French dancers, too, exploited the verticality of “*la danse haute*”, which was performed at the Opera with the aim of astonishing the spectators.

1.2 “*Ces Bouffons venus d’Italie*”

The stigmatization of the mechanical aspects of dance – virtuoso movements, acrobatics, and somersaults – was part of a strategy aimed at repudiating the modern and at recuperating Antiquity, which ballet masters employed within the reformist framework of *ballet-pantomime*¹⁷. By criticizing contemporary dance, which he considered empty virtuosity, Jean-Georges Noverre attributed dance’s “corruption” to Italian dancers, whom he called “buffoons”:

The ambition to perform cabrioles is a mad one which leads nowhere. A buffoon arrives from Italy; immediately the dancers wish to imitate the ease of his leaps; the weakest are always those who put forth the greatest efforts to equal and even surpass him. One might say, on seeing our dancers jiggling, that they were stricken by some malady which needed great leaps and

¹³ Goudar 1774, p. 88-89 [L’agitation dans ces ballets pantomimes se fait par gradation; ainsi qu’un oragan se forme dans les airs, et éclate à la fin. Le pas de deux, doit être brillant, celui de trois sautillant, mais il faut que le pas de quatre soit turbulent. C’est la règle de proportion dont les grands maîtres du second ordre ne s’écartent jamais. Dans ce dernier les hommes doivent sauter au dessus de leur tête, et les femmes montrer leur calsons jusques au dessus de la ceinture. Si on ne leur voit que le genou, le pas de quatre est manqué. Comme cet art s’élève tous les jours, et que les grands professeurs cherchent continuellement à s’y distinguer, on vient de faire la découverte d’un pas unique, qui avoit échappé aux âges les plus cabriolans. Le danseur en s’élevant périodiquement fait trois tours dans l’air, et il est obligé de retomber sur ses pieds à la même place, et dans la même attitude dont il est parti ; ce qui est tout juste la mesure qu’il faut pour se casser le col. L’établissement de ce saut périlleux a déjà réduit en bequille plus de cent danseurs].

¹⁴ Planelli 1772, p. 212.

¹⁵ Algarotti 1755, p. 21.

¹⁶ Elena Balletti, for example, was an excellent dancer who had trained her son François Riccoboni, Silvia Benozzi, Tommaso Antonio Vicentini (known as Thomassin) and his daughter Caterina Antonietta Vicentini, who entered the company in 1726 and married Dehesse.

¹⁷ On the reform of dramatic ballet, see Vallejos 2012, and Fabbriatore 2015a. On the relation between dance and Antiquity see Fabbriatore 2014.

enormous gambols to cure it. I liken them, Sir, to the frog in the fable, who burst while making efforts to blow herself out, and dancers break and strain their limbs in their endeavours to emulate the strong and muscular Italian¹⁸.

If, once again, the technical term “cabriole” condenses the virtuoso aspect of the dance, the term “buffoon” employed to identify the Italians is symptomatic of the stereotype which binds the Italian to the comic genre. The allusion to “buffoons” come from Italy, to “jumpers” able to perform enormous leaps, forges a barely veiled link to the performers “dell’arte”.

Definitions from the period of the term “buffoon” reveal that it existed in a synonymic circularity with the terms “baladin”, “mime”, and the adjective “italien”. In Furetière’s dictionary (1690), the mime was a “Buffoon who appeared in Ancient theater [...] approximately the same thing as the *baladin* of today”¹⁹; the buffoon is an “actor, a clown who diverts the public by his jokes”. Within the same entry, Furetière significantly compared the term buffoon to the Italian actors and to the characters of the *commedia dell’arte*: “The Italian actors Italiens are the best buffoons. They are also called Harlequins, or Trivelins, or Pantalons, or Jean Farine, etc”²⁰.

We can find this perspective in Noverre as well. When he criticizes modern pantomimes in order to make his own reforms stand out, the ballet master distances himself from Italian pantomime, recommending that “Students of dancing should not confuse the noble *pantomime* of which I speak with that low and trivial from of expression that buffoons from Italy brought to France and which bad taste seems to have adopted”²¹. Noverre refers to Fossan (Antonio Rinaldi Fossano)²², an Italian actor who had arrived in Paris in 1739, as the representative of a particular genre responsible for a degeneration of the dance:

Fossan, the most pleasing and most witty of all comic dancers, has turned the heads of the votaries of *Terpsichore*; everyone wished to copy him, some even without having seen him. The noble style was sacrificed to the trivial, the principles of the art were set aside, all rules were disdained and rejected, high jumps and feats of strength became the order of day. Dancers ceased to dance and believed themselves capable of pantomime; as if such a thing were possible when the power of expression was completely lacking, when nothing could be represented, when dancing was disfigured by *coarse* caricatures, subjected to hideous contortions, when the mask grimaced beyond all reason; finally, when action, which should be accompanied and sustained by grace, was a continual repetition of a series of effects, rendered the more disagreeable to the spectator in that he himself suffered from witnessing the painful labours and strained efforts of the dancer²³.

We can recognize in this description the two characteristics of grotesque dancing: the acrobatic aspect and mime, both pertaining to the comic genre and related to the “buffoons from Italy”.

¹⁸ Noverre 1760, p. 331-332.

¹⁹ Furetière 1690 [Bouffon qui paroisoit sur le théâtre des Anciens [...] à peu près la même chose que le Baladin d’aujourd’hui].

²⁰ *Ibid* [Comédien, Farceur, qui divertit le public par ses plaisanteries. Les Comédiens Italiens sont les meilleurs *Bouffons*. On les appelle aussi *Harlequins*, ou *Trivelins*, ou *Pantalons*, ou *Jean Farine*, etc].

²¹ Noverre 1760, p. 263.

²² The Neapolitan Antonio Rinaldi, known as Fossano, appeared in Paris, on July 14th, 1739, with Barbara Campanini, called Barbarina, who was 16 years old, for whom Rameau, in the *Fêtes d’Hébé*, added a dance in the entry “La Musique”. They obtained great success thanks to their extraordinary technical skills. In *Zaïde*, they danced as “buffoons of the court” in an added ballet entitled “*Momus amoureux*” and, in the *Fêtes Venitiennes* de Campira, Fossano danced in wooden shoes. Cf. Harris-Warrick / Brown 2004, p. 184.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 109-113.

1. 3 Mime

Indeed, the other element that characterizes the practice of the *grotteschi* as “Italian” is miming, namely the expressivity of the body and the gestures. One of the main reasons for this characterization derives from research into the origins of dance in Antiquity and its link with the *saltatio*.

The notion that what remains of the mime of the Ancients was preserved in Italian dances was commonly held. In Italy, Giovan Battista Doni, in his *Trattato della musica scenica* (1638), invoked the ancient dances that included mimed gestures; Andrea Perrucci, in *Dell'arte rappresentativa premeditata e all'improvviso* (1699) mentioned the “*gesticolazione istrionica*” and drew a direct link between dance and *saltatio*. For men of letters such as Gravina, Martello, or Planelli, the question of the dance and mime of the Ancients was mentioned within the framework of discussions on sung and danced tragedy.

In England, the ballet master John Weaver proposed in his *Essay Towards an History of Dancing* a division of theatrical dance into three types: serious, grotesque and “scenical”. He defined “scenical” dance as a pale copy of the mimes of Rome, whose ruins still remained in Italy:

Scenical Dancing, is a faint Imitation of the *Roma Pantomimes*, and differs from the *Grotesque*, in that the last only represents *Persons, Passions* and *Manners*; and the former explains whole *Stories* by *Action*; and this was that surprising Performance of the *Pantomimes*, the Ruins of which remain still in *Italy*; but sunk and degenerated into *Pleasantry*, and merry conceited Representations of *Harlequin, Scaramouch, Mezzelin, Pasquariel, &c.*²⁴

In France, Dubos made reference to a set of gestures specific to mimes that “Pylade had named the italic” and identified in the practices of the Italian actors a possible heritage from the mime of the Ancients:

We are as little able to pronounce upon the merit of the art of pantomime as on the merit of dividing speeches between two actors. We have seen none performed. It nonetheless appears to me that those persons who enjoy watching Italian comedy, in particular those who have seen the old Octave, the old Scaramouche, and their comrades Harlequin and Trivelin, are in agreement that it is perfectly possible to convey many scenes without speaking²⁵.

Dubos’s attribution of pantomime to the Italians - a common enough proposition at the time - may be due to the simple fact that it was the only pantomime then on the stage, which had, through its combinations of varied gestures, allowed European audiences to see the narrative possibilities of dance. Moreover, it bound gestural expressiveness to technical exploits and had an anti-model reference: the repertoire of the *commedia dell’arte*. These performers had the contractual obligation “to play, sing, and dance”; the Lambranzi collection testifies to their mixture of dance, mime and acrobatic exploits²⁶. This kind of performance, which was successful

²⁴ Weaver 1712, p. 168.

²⁵ Dubos 1719, p. 565 [Nous sommes aussi peu capables de décider sur le mérite de l’art des pantomimes que sur le mérite du partage de la déclamation entre deux acteurs. Nous ne les avons pas vu représenter. Il me semble néanmoins que les personnes qui se plaisent à voir la comédie italienne, et principalement celles qui ont vu jouer le vieil Octave, le vieux Scaramouche, et leurs camarades Arlequin et Trivelin, sont persuadées que l’on peut bien exécuter plusieurs scènes sans parler].

²⁶ An invaluable iconographic work exclusively devoted theatrical dance, this collection shows representations of dances of character, of comic and grotesque dances inherited directly by the Italian actors. It includes the dances of Scaramouche, Harlequin, Scapin, Mezzetin, Punchinello, Pantalon, the Doctor and Narcisin. Lambranzi 1716. See: Mourey 2005.

across Europe, had been diffused quickly thanks to the itinerant companies of the actors *all'improvviso*, whose body language made knowledge of a foreign language superfluous²⁷.

In the *Dissertation*,²⁸ which gathered together the principles for reforming dance shared by the Italian ballet master Gasparo Angiolini and the poet Ranieri Calzabigi, a link between the characters of the commedia and grotesque dancers is explicit. Angiolini and Calzabigi proposed a hierarchy of genres wherein grotesque dance was regarded explicitly as Italian and inferior: grotesque dancers were nothing but “baladins”; their repertoire comprised of the adventures of peasants and shepherds or else of national dances; their speciality consisted of somersaults; they were comparable to actors at the fairs who interpreted the characters of the commedia dell’arte.

We have certain dances in Italy that we call ‘grotesques’; and the dancers that execute them are known as ‘grotesque dancers’. These street performers move in leaps and jumps, very often out of time, the latter being frequently sacrificed to the cause of their dangerous jumps. Their dances usually take as their subject the adventures of peasants, shepherds, and other individuals among the common people. In order to avoid simply repeating the same thing, they dress in the style of Germany, England, Spain and Turkey; and thus believe they represent the true character of the nation whose costume they have adopted; but their leaps and their poses remain more or less the same. I think that the composers of such ballets should be put into the same class as writers who compose parades, and the grotesque dancers should be considered alongside Pierrot, Polichinelle, Scaramouche: famous characters from similar spectacles that appear on the fairground stage [...] I believe this genre is the lowest of all. It can incite nothing in the spectator save astonishment mixed with fear, on seeing people like them threatening to kill themselves at every moment²⁹.

A few years later, when Angiolini proposed, in his *Lettere*, a description of the performances in Vienna, he acknowledged the co-existence of two kinds of dance: on the one hand a technically difficult but meaningless serious style, and, on the other, a comic style composed of steps that were “ridiculous, barbarian, and unnatural, with dances attributed to Polichinelle, Harlequin, Pierrot, the Doctor, Pantalon etc.”³⁰. Such dances “dishonoured the stage by the *lazzi*, gestures, jumps and indecent postures of these Dancers, who trampled underfoot good taste, honesty, and manners, and made their performances unsuitable to persons

²⁷ See Kuzmick Hansell: In Harris-Warrick / Brown 2004, p. 15-32. On the link between dramatic ballet and commedia dell’arte see the chapter “No place for Arlequin” in Nye 2011.

²⁸ Angiolini 1765. On the question of the paternity of the *Dissertation*, see the introduction of the quoted digital edition: “Le cas Angiolini-Calzabigi, ou la question d’une auctorialité partagée”. On the implication of Calzabigi in the reform of ballet, see Bellina: In Marri 1989; Fabbriatore 2015a, p. 221-230.

²⁹ Angiolini 1765, [35] [Nous avons des Danses en Italie que nous appelons *Grotesques*; et on appelle Danseurs *Grotesques* ceux qui les exécutent. Ces Baladins ne vont que par sauts et par bonds, et le plus souvent hors de cadence; il la sacrifient même volontiers à leurs sauts périlleux. Leurs Danses roulent communément sur des aventures entre des Paysans, des Pâtres, et d’autres gens de la lie du peuple. Pour ne pas faire toujours la même chose, ils s’habillent à l’Allemande, à l’Anglaise, à l’Espagnole, à la Turque; et ils s’imaginent représenter le véritable caractère de la Nation dont ils ont endossé le vêtement; mais leurs sauts et leurs attitudes sont presque toujours les mêmes. Je pense qu’on doit ranger les Compositeurs de tels Ballets dans la Classe des Poètes qui font des parades, et les Danseurs *Grotesques* dans celle des Pierrot des Polichinelle, des Scaramouche, personnages célèbres de pareils spectacles consacrés communément aux tréteaux. [...] je crois que ce genre est le dernier de tous. Il ne peut exciter dans les Spectateurs qu’un étonnement mêlé de crainte, en voyant leurs semblables exposés à se tuer à chaque instant].

³⁰ Angiolini, 1773: In Lombardi 1998, p. 52 [tutte quelle cose barbare, indecenti, fuori affatto del naturale, che prendevano il nome di danze da *Pulcinella*, da *Giangurgolo*, da *Arlecchino*, da *Pierò*, da *Dottore*, da *Pantalone* ec].

of any delicacy.”³¹ Beneath Angiolini’s definition of “the indecent comic,” which clearly reveals his aims³², one easily recognizes the comic practices of the commedia:

By indecent comic he [Hilverding] meant what we all understand by it nowadays; that is, the gestures and movements that modesty condemns, the imitations of corrupt nature, the actions that tend towards bad habits, the grimaces and mockeries imagined by those automatons who have never known either art or nature, finally all that clowning so typical of tumblers, and consequently unworthy of any truly civilized nation³³.

Indeed, during the entire 18th century, the grotesque technique, considered vulgar because of the excessive use of the body, and because of the licentious subjects it covered, became the target of those who regarded acrobatics and technical skill as worthy only of “*baladins*” and “buffoons”, incapable of provoking passions nobler than surprise and astonishment. A document dating from 1774 and preserved in the Farnese archives testifies to the necessity of protecting the public from the the grotesque dancers’ indecent ballets: it requires the dancers to present the plans of their ballets before their performance, “so that the grotesque dancers do not regard as permissible representing in their ballets any improper actions”³⁴. Notwithstanding their international success, grotesque, “Italian” dancers suffered from a morally condemnable reputation.

Angiolini thus aimed to set himself apart from this kind of dancer, in order to combat the stereotype weighing on the image of Italy: a “degraded” and “dishonoured” nation because of these “buffoons” and these “buffooneries” seen as “Italian”:

It is humiliating to a good Italian to see that the theatres of nations beyond the mountains should have adopted the utmost delicacy both in art and decency as regards to plays and dances, and that Italy, master of all knowledge in the 18th century, should present in its theatres compositions that dishonor it, and charlatans (*saltabuffoni* intraducibile) that debase it. It is these latter who, not content with debasing it [Italy] with their inane productions, doubly dishonor it beyond the mountains by insisting abroad that Italian taste only values such improbable jumps and antics, not realising that with such propositions, worthy only of their ignorance, they degrade the nation who is most deserving of the liberal arts³⁵.

We can clearly see that the link between the low comedy of the actors *all'improvviso* and the practice of the grotesque dancers was a stereotype that called into question the aesthetic taste of Italy and its image abroad: Angiolini’s voice seems to join Goldoni’s when it launches its

³¹ *Ibid* [danze che disonoravano la scena per i lazzi, i gesti, i salti e le svincolature di quegli indecenti ballerini che calpestavano il gusto, la delicatezza e il costume, e che rendevano disconvenienti per gli animi gentili le rappresentazioni].

³² On the moral reform of dance by Angiolini, see Fabbriatore 2015b.

³³ Angiolini 1773, p. 52 [Per comico indecente intendeva egli [Hilverding] questo che tutti oggi intendiamo, cioè i gesti e i movimenti che il pudore condanna, le imitazioni della natura corrotta, le azioni che tendono a’ cattivi costumi, le smorfie e le scimmiotterie immaginate da quegli automi che non hanno mai conosciuto né l’arte né la natura, infine tutte quelle pulcinellate proprie de’ saltimbanchi, e conseguentemente indegne d’ogni nazione veramente incivile].

³⁴ Naples, Theatrical Archives 1774-1778 [acciocché non si facciano lecito gli anziani Ballerini Grotteschi rappresentare né loro Balli azioni indecorose]. Online collection [cir.campaniabenculturali.it].

³⁵ Angiolini 1773, p. 52 [Egli è un oggetto umiliante per un buono italiano il vedere che i teatri delle nazioni oltremontane siano, relativamente alle commedie e a’ balli, passate alla massima delicatezza tanto nell’arte che nella decenza, e che l’Italia, maestra d’ogni sapere nel XVIII secolo, abbia tuttavia nelle sue scene delle composizioni che la disonorano e de’ *saltabuffoni* che l’avviliscono. Sono questi che, non contenti d’avvilirla colle loro insulse produzioni, doppiamente la disonorano fino di là da’ monti spargendo e assicurando essere il gusto dell’Italia solamente portato a’ salti ed alle inverosimili buffonate, né si avvedono questi tali che consimili proposizioni, degne solo della loro ignoranza, degradano la nazione più benemerita dell’arti liberali”. It is necessary to recall however that it is a strategy, because in practice, the ballets of Angiolini envisage the presence of the grotesque dancers, just as the booklets of his ballets testify it].

invectives against the Harlequins who soil the theatres of Europe and threaten the reputation of Italy³⁶.

The identification of grotesque dancing with Italy assumes significance in the cultural competition between nations. During the 18th century a consciousness developed that the aesthetic education of a people was closely related to the civic evolution of the nation: what was called the taste of a nation became the concrete demonstration of its ethical values. Grotesque dancing, with its brilliant yet empty virtuosity, with its expressive yet vulgar miming, with its “Italian” connotations, had become a major problem for the reputation of Italians abroad³⁷.

2. The practice of the *grotteschi*: leads and hypotheses³⁸

It is within the cultural context just outlined that we can try to understand Magri's intentions in writing his *Trattato*. Without repeating here the basic information about his life and career, his experiences as a dancer or the world of grotesque dancing³⁹, I would like to offer some observations about Magri's concept of the grotesque, starting from the applied research which I have undertaken on the *Trattato*, in order to formulate hypotheses about the practice of grotesque dancing in general.

The *Trattato* represents without doubt an affirmation of the grotesque dancer. Contrary to Angiolini or Carlo de Blasis, who, for different reasons, criticize the practices of grotesque dance, Magri asserts that the three kinds of dance - serious, *demi-caractère* and grotesque - enjoy an equal dignity:

True dancers, whether they be serious or comic, must all possess the general abilities that are inherent to dance; there can be no distinction made between one character and the other [...] any dancer who can well express his action and his character is successful⁴⁰.

In the context of its cultural moment, such a declaration was extraordinary. However, Magri did not restrict himself to affirming the equal value of serious dance and grotesque dance. In the first part of *Trattato*, which is devoted to describing steps, the Neapolitan dancer explains in a progressive way the elements which compose dance by connecting them to the specific use made of them, especially in France and Italy⁴¹. He indicates the specificity of the steps in relation to the dancers's roles, often referring to the characters of the commedia dell'arte that he himself played, detailing the uses and the variants of the steps, adding remarks on the expressivity of the dancer and his gestures.

The more familiar one becomes with Magri's lexicon, the more one notes that a desire to valorize the virtuosity of the dancer lies at the heart of his enterprise. That perspective appears early on, with his explanation of the first technical element, which relates to equilibrium (chapter 4). Magri marks a difference with Dufort by excluding what his predecessor had classified as the “fourth balance”, namely, the weight of the body on the point of a foot with the other one hardly touching the ground. Equilibrium is essential for jumps: Magri specifies that the dancer must be able to hold himself in perfect balance on the point of only one foot, “as practised by a true

³⁶ Goldoni 1750, p. 765.

³⁷ On the social challenges of this connotation, see Fabbricatore 2015, p. 179-237.

³⁸ These observations were presented on the study day « Etudier l'éphémère, la danse comique, grotesque et pantomime », Centre national de la danse, Pantin, (France) October 22nd, 2015.

³⁹ See Harris-Warrick / Brown 2004.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 116-117 [I veri ballerini, o sian seri o comici devono avere egualmente il possesso generale di tutto quello che si appartiene al ballo; né distinzione veruna può correre da un carattere all'altro [...] ognuno è bravo se bene esprime la sua Azione, il suo Carattere].

⁴¹ See Sandra Noll Hammond: In Harris-Warrick / Brown 2004.

dancer and virtuoso”⁴²; when he explains the defects generated by the lack of balance, giving specificities for each type of dancer, he associates the *aplomb* and *attitudes* with the serious dancer, the connections between steps to the *demi-caractère*, and the *cabriole* with the *grotesco*⁴³.

After having introduced the basic elements (the positions of the feet and the first three steps—*dégagé*, *pas marché* and *pas de Marcel*) Magri explains a type of beaten step that has four variants (chap. 14): it is fast and brilliant—used, he explains, “to decorate” the others ones, and necessary for preparing interwoven *cabrioles*. Indeed, starting from the *pistoletta*, many steps described in the *Trattato* can be “beaten”, which adds brilliance and allows the dancer to show off his address and his skill. The virtuosity of these steps seems to be related, one way or another, to the performances of the grotesque dancers who can make steps yet more brilliant, thanks to their dexterity. In the case of the *ballonné*, for example, Magri states that it is a step employed primarily by serious dancers, but that *groteschi* perform it skillfully by adding arm positions to it.

Reading between the lines, we understand that, for Magri, this virtuosity is the prerogative of the Italians. The most obvious example is his explanation of the *assemblé*: Magri declares that it is a step which resembles a *cabriole* that originated from “the laziness” of women dancers who, having to perform two *cabrioles* in a row, one forward and the other while turning, neglected one and replaced it by an *assemblée*. He presents this lack of virtuosity as normal for the French who, like the lazy and slow women, do not care about *cabrioles*:

This is more common among the French, more than for us Italians, for they do not care for the excessive use of cabrioles, rather preferring dance that is more grounded. Some of our women want to be more French than Italian: thus in order to avoid expending too much effort they more willingly perform an *assemblé* than a cabriole, and it is from just such laziness that the *assemblé* was born⁴⁴.

The entire *Trattato* converges towards the longest and final chapter, the one about *cabrioles*. These jumps, which require precise qualities and which can only be executed by professional dancers, thus seem to become, by metonymy, the symbol of this brilliant virtuosity that Magri defends, of the bravura of the grotesque dancer, of his technique, his style—in short, the emblem of the virtuosity of the Italians.

2.1 French trilogy of the grotesque “language”: *l’excès, l’exclus, l’envers*

It is not possible to know what grotesque dancing was really like. When we asked ourselves what a grotesque dancer was, what constituted his technique and his essence, we chose as our object of study the unrepeatable ephemeral that is the performative act of the grotesque dancer. Its ephemeral character represents without any doubt a limit to our understanding: namely the inevitable fact that the performative act which is described in the *Trattato* and that we attempt to understand and to interpret, can only be one hypothesis because of the unicity of its existence.

However, if we look to linguistics, we know that when Saussure insists on unicity and the non-repeatability of each linguistic act, he observes that, in spite of the phonetic or semantic

⁴² Magri 1779, p. 20 [Come si pratica da veri e virtuosi ballerini, e non da quelli che non vanno in questa ringa [As practised by a true dancer and virtuoso, and not by those who do not fit into this category].

⁴³ *Ibid*: In the serious dancer it causes all aplomb to be lost: attitudes fall down dead and lifeless; in the grotesque dancer, it causes them to wobble or even fall on descending from a cabriole; in those dancing in the middle style it prevents them from linking steps together in the desired manner [Nel Ballerino serio fa che le a-Plomb non riescano, le Attitudini cadono smorte; e snervate: nel Grottesco nel cader delle capriole traballa, ed alcune volte cade; in quel di mezzo carattere non fa far le dovute ligazioni de’ passi].

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 21 [Presso i francesi è più in costumanza che presso di noi italiani, perché quelli non si curano del troppo uso delle capriole, servendosi piuttosto del ballar terreno. Alcune delle nostre donne vogliono essere più tosto francesi che italiane: esser per risparmiare fatica fan più volentieri un’*assemblé* invece di una cabriole, e di questa loro melanzagine venne veramente origine quest’*assemblé*].

variations of the linguistic act, one can recognize the expressions of the same sign. Evidence from criticism written during the 18th century, which acknowledges the expression of the grotesque in order to better criticize it, leads us to believe that the semantic characteristics of grotesque dancing were distinct from those of comic dancing and that the distinction could be recognized by the public. Is it possible to speak about a semiotic code of the grotesque?

On the basis of the observation that the grotesque situates itself in direct confrontation to the established dance code known as “*noble*”, we can formulate the hypothesis of a system which functions by exploiting three categories: *l'excès*, *l'exclus* and *l'envers*.

By “*l'excès*” (excess), I mean the tendency of the grotesque dancers towards everything that exceeds normality, which is larger, higher, and more marked. It comprises the “large movements” of the Italians, their “agitation” or their hyperbolic somersault with three turns (about which Goudar spoke in the passage cited above), or the “enormous leaps” and the “*coarse caricatures*” which disfigure dance, that we find in Noverre’s description. For Magri this first category is apparent starting from his explanation of the “forced” positions of the feet and arms; they indicate excess when compared to the normal positions and are used by grotesque dancers for characters such as Furies (see his description of the *soubresaut*). The *tordichamb*, he explains, “is employed by all three categories of *Ballerini*, with the difference, that in the *ballo grave* ordinarily it is done with all composure, in the *mezzo carattere* it is done with great velocity, in the *grottesco* it is done on a grand scale”⁴⁵. Examples of excess may be found in the images published by Gregorio Lambranzi, in, for instance, the *attitude* of Scaramouche, or the typical jump of Harlequin.

As for *l'exclus* (the excluded) I refer to everything that was forbidden in serious dancing, but that could be permitted in the comic genre and that was particularly used by grotesque dancers in pantomime. Noverre mentions “hideous contortions”, Angiolini the “gestures” and the “movements which decency condemns”, of the “grimaces” and the “*singerie*” that must be banished⁴⁶. Such terms refer to the gestural lexicon employed in the repertoire of the *commedia dell'arte* and which was probably present in the comic ballets of Magri that bore evocative titles such as *Pantomimo con maschere*, *Pantalone e sua figlia*, *Truffaldino*, *Pulcinella*, *Flaminia* (San Carlo, 1774) or *Pantomimo tra Pulcinella*, *Arlecchino e Coviello* (San Carlo, 1767). One example of a gesture excluded from the “noble” lexicon is the closed fist. In the theatre, there was a distinction, within gestural language, between a comic register adequate for the comic genre and a serious register appropriate to the tragic genre. The gesture of the closed fist corresponded to a threatening gesture, as Bulwer explained⁴⁷. The education of the nobility prohibited it in the 18th century, partly because of its rustic character, and partly because it expressed a disproportionate, hot-tempered state. François Riccoboni, actor and dancer at the Comédie-Italienne in Paris, described it as a rude and insulting gesture; he categorically excluded it from the gestural lexicon of the actor:

It is important to avoid as much as possible having the fist completely closed, and in particular presenting this fist directly to the actors to whom one speaks, even in moments of the

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42 [Si adopera da tutte le tre specie de' Ballerini, con tal differenza, che per ordinario nel ballo grave si fa con ogni posatezza, nel mezzo carattere si fa velocissimo, nel Grottesco si fa grande].

⁴⁶ At this time there was a type of “noble” pantomime, which was codified and employed with much caution by the tragic actor, and a “low” pantomime relating to comic representations. In search of legitimation for dramatic ballet, of which they are promoters, Angiolini and Noverre operate a policy of selection of gestures of suitable decorum for their ballets, in order that dance can be considered an art of imitation able to incite the passions. On the question of the gestures, of their moral acceptability and relation between the mime of the Ancients, modern mime, the mime of the mute and dramatic ballet, see the chapter devoted to the *eloquentia corporis* in Fabbricatore 2015a, p.117-179.

⁴⁷ Bulwer 1644.

greatest anger. This gesture in itself is ignoble, before a woman it is impolite, and made towards a man it becomes insulting⁴⁸.

However, we can find this gesture in an engraving of the Comédie-Italienne preserved at the Museum of Louvre. It shows a scene added to *La Foire Saint Germain* (a comedy by Regnard and Dufresny from 1695), and entitled *La rencontre des Vinaigrettes*. Two women are arguing, and one holds her fist up aggressively, in the gesture that François Riccoboni condemns. In the Lambranzi collection, in a sequence involving Polichinelle that implies a fight on stage, one notices a closed fist used to threaten and strike. In both cases the legitimacy of the gesture probably derives from the comic and grotesque situation; we can infer that this gesture, excluded in other genres, represents one example of a gestuality specific to the comic.

Finally *l'envers*. Grotesque dance seems indeed to present itself as the reverse of noble dance. It often deliberately distorts the established standards of the *belle danse* in comic scenes, which parody the rigorous technique of this genre. Magri revalorizes the “false” positions of the feet, those that reverse the “good” or “true” positions, and says that they are used by *grotteschi* in steps such as the *tortiglié*.

The “distortion” adopted by the grotesque dancer resembles the parodic practices of the actors interpreting the characters of the commedia dell’arte. For example, in the engraving *Arlequin empereur de la lune*, which shows a scene from the Comedie-Italienne, the commedia characters distort the proper positions of the “*belle danse*”. The two characters in the foreground “reverse” the good positions: they have their feet in parallel and not in a “scenic cross”; their backs lean comically forward, causing an absurd position of the head. In the centre, Harlequin, whose back creates an “S” shape, demonstrates a use of the attitudes of “comic” bodies. In the background, on the left, a shy Pierrot, who holds a stick, incarnates a weak, laughable character: his feet are in first position, his balance is correct, and his arms well placed. His appearance, judged as if in a dance, reinforces in a caricatural way his role, by contrast with the other characters. The interpenetration between commedia and dance is obvious.

Even if we cannot be sure that the “grotesque” in dance represents a specific and autonomous code, we can affirm that it stood for a manipulation, or even a deliberate distortion, of the pre-established code of noble dance. The grotesque dancer drew from the specific lexicon of the commedia dell’arte, as a slang or “*verlan*” which reverses the institutional language of the body by renewing it and by enriching it with all that was most brilliant, surprising, and virtuoso in dance.

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⁴⁸ Riccoboni 1750, p. 12-13 [On doit éviter, autant qu’il est possible, d’avoir le poing totalement fermé, et sur tout de le présenter directement à l’Acteur auquel on parle, dans les instans même de la plus grande fureur. Ce geste par lui-même est ignoble, devant une femme il est impoli, et vis-à-vis d’un homme il devient insultant].

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