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Philosophical Pursuits in Dance Practice of the 21st Century: Body Concepts

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ABSTRACT

The art of performance dance in the 20th century is undergoing a transformation involving values, concepts, and styles that are quite distinct from the traditional principles of classical art dance. This turn, beginning around the middle of the 20th century, has found expression in a “radical shift” in terms of the form and content of dance, affecting its components, nature, and purpose; therefore, it is not surprising that the quest for new conceptual foundations acquired its own outlook not only, and not so much in art criticism as in philosophical terms. It can be said that the epicentre of these shifts was a new understanding of the dancing body itself. The diversity of practices—dance theatre, physical theatre, dance performance, non-dance movement, postmodern dance, contemporary dance—have in turn become ways of embodying these new bodily concepts. Of course, the primary results of this quest have had a non-verbal character; nevertheless, in general terms, the level of “conversation” allows us to perceive the philosophical concepts underlying the discoveries made.

The task of this article is to clarify these concepts through examining changes ideas about the body within dance culture over the course of the last century. The examination is carried out sequentially through the ages of the twentieth century: the development of new conceptual directions of the body in the dance practices of Western

countries are shown, referring each movement to precisely the process from which it respectively proceeded. Thus, the body seen as a means, an “instrument”, for the transmission of higher spiritual meanings, as was generally the case in classical dance, becomes in itself the goal and subject of special interest. Here it is as a space of freedom and a field for unravelling unconscious (psychosomatic) aspects, both in terms of the vehicle of sociality, and as its construct, that awareness of the normative practices of body as a repression of social control can be observed. It is clear that the basic “narratives” identified in the article also unfold in the philosophical studies of the 20th and 21st centuries. Thus, the parallel nature of these processes testifies to a cardinal revision by European society of its physicality.

KEYWORDS

body concept, dance body, freedom, unconscious, social criticism, illusion, deviant body

The art of performance dance in the 20th century is undergoing a transformation to encompass values, concepts, and styles that contrast with the traditional principles of classical art dance. This turn, beginning at the middle of the 20th century, was expressed in the “radical metamorphosis” (Bechkov, 2000, p. 63) of the form and content of the dance, affecting its components, its nature and purpose; therefore, it is not surprising that the search for new conceptual supports involved not only distinctions within art criticism but also its own philosophical horizons.

It can be said that the epicentre of these shifts was located in a new understanding of the dancing body itself. Dance practices—dance theatre, physical theatre, performance dance, non-dance movement, postmodern dance, contemporary dance—have become ways of embodying these new bodily concepts. The very word “concept”, often used as a synonym for “understanding”, is important here, since it is important for us to emphasise the process, creation, and in a sense even the extortion of new meanings of physicality. The distinction is precisely formulated in Comte-Sponville *Philosophical Dictionary*: “An understanding is something given, whereas a concept has to be specifically formulated. Understanding is the result of a certain experience or upbringing (what the ancient Greeks called prolepsis); concept is the result of a certain work. Understanding is a fact of reality; concept—product” (Comte-Sponville, 2012, p. 261).

The concept of the body underwent a radical metamorphosis during the 20th century, being rethought in the most significant way not only in the field of art dance proper, but also in philosophy. Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault are some of the most prominent thinkers who radically changed philosophical discourses concerning the nature of the body, conceiving it neither as an object limited exclusively by

spatial, anatomical boundaries, nor as a “sum of its organs”, but rather as a dynamic existential unit participating in a socio-cultural context, and subject to various influences and interactions. However, it is unlikely that the practitioners of dance specifically studied the works of philosophers in order to improve their works. These processes of a new comprehension of one’s own physicality – mental and practical (is there still an art where the body is so universally significant in the process of creation – and, as a result, the product, the fruit of creative endeavour?) – took place in parallel. Of course, the results of such pursuits in the field of dance have been mainly of a non-verbal character; nevertheless, the level of “conversation”, allows us to discuss the philosophical concepts underlying their discoveries in terms that are more general.

The aim of this article is to clarify these concepts through an examination of changing ideas of the body within dance culture over the course of the last century.

The Body as a Space of Freedom

Each era has its own dance culture, with its own content, form and ascribed meaning. Dance as an expression of spontaneous joy, dance as part of a cult and ritual, such as demonic spectacle and bacchanalia, court entertainment, secular law, fine art, etc. kept people spellbound for centuries. It was during the Age of Enlightenment that dance – and, consequently, the body of the dancer – was to become the subject of theoretical consideration. Consequently, it is at around this time that dance becomes an independent art genre, taking the form of ballet performance. Carlo Blasis, Jean-Georges Noverre, other early practitioners and theoreticians of court ballet explore the dancing body primarily as a *means or instrument* for the expression of ideas and concepts (Klassiki khoreografii, 1937). This consideration remained decisive up to the 20th century.

At around the very beginning of the 20th century, the situation began to change: the body began attracting attention not only in the capacity of a means of expression but also as an object of interest in its own right. Thus, in the modern theory of dance, a natural, free, expressive body contrasted sharply with the “ideal”, artificial body expressing abstract ideas within classical dance. It was found that ballet dance acts as a “power” upon the human body, reducing it to a “perfect instrument”.

In the early 20th century, partisans of the “new dance” stood against the “ballet” approach. Foremost amongst these were the futurist Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, the originator of so-called “free dance”. Dance, they argued, must describe modern man by new figurative means. In reflecting on the “new dance”, Duncan “recreated her physicality”, and “re-invented herself as an embodied spirit”. In her own way, the dancer (Sirotkina, 2015), referring to the ideas of antiquity, “returned” the particular culture of that era to dance, the idea of “trusting the body”, admiring its natural properties, freedom, graceful power, and health. Duncan’s dance carries the idea of a natural, free body harmonious with culture. The body of her dance does not need exhausting training as in ballet; rather, it is “liberated” from such laws. The feelings and experiences of the person dancing – the value embodied in the dancer’s

spiritual experience—are real and vivid at the moment of performance. Undoubtedly, Duncan’s art articulates humanistic ideas, with her dance expressing an optimistic view of the person and his future. Nevertheless, the body in the early modern dance continues to be seen as a means of expression. Duncan’s idea of dancing at a particular historical moment becomes both a protest against ballet dancing and a utopian dream of a new perfection and freedom of the body. The body of Duncan’s dance in an antique chiton and the idea of her dance turn out to be “extracted” from the historical context, relative to which period of dramatic context they appear as if “positioned above”.

Let us trace, as far as possible, and step-by-step, the processes of new conceptual directions of the dance body in the practices of western countries in the 20th century, each time addressing the place from which these processes proceeded most distinctly.

The Body as the Field of Real Psychosomatic Processes

Most typically, such a place turned out to be America (Souritz, 2004) where already in the 1920s the advocacy of “free dance [...] for the highest good”, for the “self-realisation of those believing in the victory of the eternal rational principle and the establishment of harmony”, was structuring the attitudes of the new dance generation. From the perspective of the first exponents of American modern dance, the art form was intended to touch upon poignant social themes that “reveal serious problems of the current interest of modern life” (Banes, 1978). Dance, then, should “speak about” modern man who, in an era of rapid changes, wars and crises is experiencing states of fear, confusion, and neuroses.

Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman—the American pioneers of modern dance—“blew up” traditions through their observations of the basic dance processes revealed in the body, in its physical reality and deep mental processes. As a consequence, of their theoretical and practical pursuits of dance through constant experimentation, they seemed to re-discover and “reinstate” the body in the field of gravity, i.e. as an objective fact of life (each in its own way). In dance, the body no longer struggles with gravity; rather, according to this new idea, the body openly acknowledges its weight: the body of the dancer—the body of a real, ordinary person far from the idealistic parameters of ballet. Martha Graham releases the body onto the surface of the floor, bringing it closer to the ground (her dance classes begin with the movements of the dancer sitting on the floor), stabilising the body by rooting it, demonstrating in dance the state of ultimate effort through two oppositional actions—ultimate compression and release—thereby allowing the body to feel its energy and strength. Doris Humphrey plays with the measure of exertion in the process of movement by dropping the body and restoring balance, choosing only the necessary tension in order for the body to rediscover the moment of balance. In modern dance, the traditional vertical aspiration of the body in ballet is supplemented by mastering and searching for expressiveness in horizontal space. During the first half of the 20th century, research into breathing

as a function of the living organism—having a direct connection with the states of human excitation manifested in the body—was carried out by the psychologists Wilhelm Reich, Alexander Lowen, et al. The acceptance of distortion in the natural breathing cycle also became a subject of interest and research in the practices of modern dance. Experiments in this area manifested themselves on the surface of the body, making it possible to use dance to express emotions and energies that are otherwise latent or “hidden” in the mysteries of consciousness and the human body. The dance lexicon and syntax of American modernists was based on the original expressive gesture using previously non-traditional approaches to movement in dance (e.g. fading, falling, running, rolling, and exalted movements). According to Sally Banes, “the kinetic danger of constant falling and rising in the balancing movement is analogous to states of social existence” (Banes, 1978); experimentally originated dance structures became metaphors of the uncertain and volatile state of modern reality. Thus, the search on the part of the “big four” (Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Hanya Holm) for an original language in dance (Banes, 1978) brought the objective reality of the body, its weight, interaction with the gravity, its feelings and the physical energy of expressive movement, not manifested in ballet, both into the awareness of the dancer and that of the viewer, thereby discovering new semantic possibilities of the body in the dance. In modern dance, the body becomes neither an ephemeral tool, nor an ideal image for the expression of abstract humanistic ideas, but rather that of a real person living in modern reality, trying to understand, define, and express itself within this reality. The strong body stands (barefoot) on the ground. Its movements are expressive, meaningful; its gestures full of significance—everything is aimed at conveying the emotional state of the dancer within the entire possible spectrum of experiences and feelings.

Herein lie the important attainments of American modern dance. Nevertheless, it is important to note that modern American dance, being comprised of four original methods, directs dancers to follow only these methods. And in this context new bodily limitations are discovered: modern dance means that production is performed according to the technique of a particular professional choreographer (one of the four mentioned above), which represents a rigid framework of bodily movements. Thus, as Sally Banes notes, far from “freeing the body and making dance accessible to all, bringing together different social strata, creating equality in the dance halls and in the ranks of spectators”, modern dance became an “exclusive form of art accessible only to the chosen ones” (Khlopova, 2015). In many ways, this was the reason why, by the 1940s and early 1950s, the political and artistic verve in American modern dance had died down. There was a growing sense of the necessity for a “new modernity”.

The Body as the “Location” of Social Criticism

By the 1930s, the most interesting developments in dance were taking place in Germany. Despite (or perhaps, conversely, as a consequence of) the harsh appeal to the body as a means of expressing the political interests of totalitarian regimes—

everyone is familiar with the body of the “parade”, “physical education”, “march” – expressionism became a vivid phenomenon. The central idea of Rudolf Laban, the German founder of expressionistic dance, is directly opposed to the idea of the mass Nazi marches; on the contrary, his interest lay in diversity and respect for the individuality of the person. It was he who – both in theory and in practice – laid the foundations of the system that is still relevant today, structured by the principle of the autonomous space of the dancer who independently creates, and – by means of his or her own movements – delivers his or her ideas into the world. Initially, in Laban’s system, the considerations were not only to search for a new language and new forms of expression (i. e. “how to move”), but also “the construction of a new dancer – universal, widely educated, open to all influences and able to analyse the motives of his or her own movements” (i. e. be the one “who moves”) (Gerdt, 2015).

Laban’s ideas were picked up by Kurt Joos, whose choreography became an arena of social critique. In his ballet “Big City”, Joos depicted social contrasts: the dances of different social strata were performed simultaneously in one performance space (a crude dance to bagpipe music juxtaposed with a fashionable Charleston). In this connection, Valeska Gert’s creativity is also interesting. The singer and dancer of the Berlin cabaret turned to “the lower classes and the riff-raff”, assimilating “everything unrefined and ugly” and that which “is uniformly unacceptable for all healthy regimes” (Mani, 1996). She brought onto the stage, “in herself and with herself”, the energy of the street: obscenity and aggression, conformism and intolerance. Thus, it can be said that already during the pre-war era the body within expressionistic dance, – grotesque, disgracefully parodic, conveying pain and confusion – was not only becoming a new expressive medium, but also conveying an impression of the characteristic modern social features symptomatic of belonging to a society fragmented and torn apart by crises and internal contradictions. The development of German Expressionist dance was interrupted by the interference of the political power of the Nazis, who realised to what extent an expressive movement could influence people. Since incapable and unwilling to cooperate with the new political regime, Laban and Joos promptly emigrated.

The Body as an Intrinsic Value

Returning to the dance processes that took place in America, we will see that in the middle of the last century the American Merce Cunningham continued to “shake” the foundations of now-traditional modern dance. The value of the ideas proposed by Cunningham lies in their proposal for a new way of seeing dance: not as a robust predefined structure with predefined meanings (as it was, if you recall, in modern dance), but instead as a volatile, fluid, ephemeral, living space. The novel idea was that dance could be about anything in terms of content and form; however, initially, at its core, it necessarily carries the idea of the human body and its movements, starting with the most elementary (walking). According to Cunningham, the expressive basis of human movement is inseparable from the body itself: even the gait of each person is different. The movement of the body is here regarded as significant in itself. In short,

it can be said that the body in dance has already won the right to its own physical reality, the ability to feel and express feelings through movement and gesture in an individual manner. The practices of German expressionist and American modern dance in “discovering the body” bring choreographers of the second half of the 20th century closer to a new understanding of the body as an autonomous subject. Here the body and dance begin to articulate “not sense, but energy”, to represent “not an illustration, but an action”. In other words, “everything here becomes a gesture; in this body, previously hidden energies are released” (Lehman, 2003, p. 269).

Thus, while the body is already seen as intrinsically valuable, new restrictions and new dependencies are again revealed. For example, theatrical, and—more generally—social conventions, including: the specific dimensions of the stage, the specific time period, the scope of the plot, psychologism, the accentuation of expressiveness of movement, the expectations and tastes of the public, and the “natural” desire of the dancer to please his or her audience. In this situation, the body becomes, on the one hand, its own message, finding ways to overcome itself as a value, to identify and express its state, and its individual nature. At the same time, it reveals itself as deeply foreign to itself, revealing and clearly senses its rootedness in the society and its total dependence on it. “What here can be considered “our own” remains unknown,” notes a researcher of dance theatre of the end of the last century (Leman, 2003, p. 269).

The Body as an Illusion

Given the discoveries of these new dependencies of dance, the Judson Dance Theater, which appeared in the USA in the early 1960s, instigated a new radical reform. Here for the first time the idea was voiced that all restrictions should be lifted from dance. Any (professional or non-professional) body available and suitable for dancing, any space, any music, any clothing, any time format or dance form was considered to be valid (Banes, 1978). In this sense, Judson Theater’s artistic experiments with the body under gravity are significant. For example, Tricia Brown used mountaineering equipment and the walls of urban buildings as surfaces for the study of movement and body effort. Playing with the parameters of space-time, Simone Forti, in the performance “Huddle”, presented six or seven performers, standing in a group, who coherently, one after another, began to climb over the mass formed by each other’s bodies, creating complex surfaces on the stage. The duration of this living changing sculpture was determined only by the choice and resolution of the artists, ranging from a few minutes to several hours. Trisha Brown’s Dance Company also carried out performances on rooftops. For better visibility, dancers wore red suits. In this form, Brown (or one of the participants) displayed a movement routine, which was then copied by dancers on neighbouring roofs. Typically, the rest of New York carried on with its daily life oblivious to these “performances”, which only the artists themselves knew about.

Such experiments bear witness to the advent of the epoch of the postmodern dance; here, there is a decisive rejection of showmanship, dance technique, dance

music, costumes, performance space, the separation of the role of author and performer. Choreographers and dancers are no longer oriented to the taste of spectators; indeed, any random movements or gestures were considered dance. Postmodernist dancers left behind the closed spaces of dance studios, instead placing their bodies in parks, forests, on roofs, in galleries. A new form of expression was defined – “performance”. The location, moment, and duration of its execution were determined now by the participants themselves, with the presence of spectators becoming less important.

At the same time, as postmodern reflections concerning the social mechanics of designing the “body” as a dancer are actively being established, so are those of an ordinary person. Here, the focus of attention is the phenomenon of socio-political mistrust of the body. It may seem surprising that the general philosophical and humanitarian thought in of the 70’s were marked (thanks in the first place to the works of Michel Foucault) by the realisation that the body, as existing in society according to its laws, is a product of history and culture. Appearance, clothing, behaviour, manners, lifestyle, ways of feeling, talking, moving, and interacting – everything in the bodily form of a person turns out to be “manufactured.” From this point of view, there is no sense of being “at home” in the body since it no longer belongs to the person. Henceforth, it makes no difference which body is designated by society and offered to the person for use – “normal”, “ideal”, “expressionistic”, “beautiful”, or “ugly” (Gerdt, 2015). Obviously, the body in the modern world is the performer of a social role, whose goal is to express a certain ideology.

Thus, in the dance practices of the twentieth century, it was the “social body” – the body as a historical and cultural phenomenon, as a temporary form, as an illusion – that was brought out onto the stage. To express this idea, dance began to search for expressive means, and, in so doing, explicitly repudiated the function of translating opinions and plots imposed on it; the dance body, as a traditional expressive means, must be symbolically “destroyed” so as not to be used as a tool for manipulation. In her May 1981 performance, the French choreographer Magee Marin offered dancers costumes that were fake bodies – “puppets, overweight, totally ruined, as if it they were not living people, but dead people who had risen from their graves before the spectators” (Gerdt, 2015). The play seemed to say that there is no body, there is no need for it to be alive and suffering, since it is too disturbing, but there are masks in which bodies can be hidden, masks in which these anxieties can be concealed. This idea of mistrust of the body also features in Marin’s “Singspiele” project.

The dance performer Benjamin Lebreton presents a body on the stage, which is, as eyewitness researchers remarked, “deeply alien to himself” (Leman, 2003, p. 269): it is not clear whether this body can be considered “its own”. His body in the performance is represented as a chameleon, a deceiver, which transmits hundreds of identifications of fashion, religion, sexual, and cultural affiliation. Lebreton’s portrayals involve many “faces”. These “faces” are photographs of people both famous and unknown, of different sexes, nationalities, and ages. The performer attaches photos to his own face like pages of a tear-off calendar. One by one, he

changes his facial masks and immediately changes clothes—to men’s, women’s, national, evening, and everyday clothes. “The person on stage is the same, but his faces and rags change so that it seems that he is first taller, then shorter; one moment older, the next younger; here thinner, there fatter; now a man, then a woman” (Gerdt, 2015).

The postmodern idea of distrust of the body was actively expressed in a completely different way by the German choreographer Pina Bausch, whose work unfolded over the last decades of the 20th century. The main idea of Bausch’s dance theatre is the attraction and the desire to express in dance the social body as a phenomenon, to convey the ways in which the body presents itself in everyday life. “In society, the body never appears the way it truly is, it is always the way it is made to be, or the way in which others want to see it”, Bausch says of her work. In her performances, the body demonstrates the states of fear, loneliness, insecurity, misunderstanding, but also amazing tenderness, and, although tormented by pain, fragile beauty of a person, passing these states by means of emotionally expressive, bold, at times grotesque. In Bausch’s performances, through action, gesture, and dance, people from all walks of life are seen on stage, not exclusively dancers. They look the way ordinary people often look in everyday life: sweaty shirts slipping off their shoulders and exposing their chests, straps of shirts, slips, heels, and women’s hairstyles. Movements in dance arise from moments of internal tension, when otherwise it would be impossible to express oneself. Movement develops from the ordinary—slapping, scratching, nose-picking, wiping away tears and other trivial bodily functions—to the utmost extreme—hugging, falling, jumping. Olga Gerdt remarks that Pina Bausch was looking for a means to express the source from which her dance grew: necessity and desire (Gerdt, 2015). The body can appear as an apparition, an illusion, hidden behind a mask, a role or a costume, but with Pina Bausch these illusions were destroyed in front of one’s eyes because the apparition, the costume, the manner, and the action of the character in her performances only act as expressive gestures, which usher in an even higher energy, whose desires and necessity to express these yearnings, the pain, and despair of the body, were bursting outward.

Not the “Norm”, the “Other”, the Deviant Body

For postmodern dance, another important point of criticism is the idea of the full body. Generally, the idea of “fullness” in the modern world is felt as dangerous, based on the world’s experience of genocide, Nazism, and segregation. Rejecting this totalitarian dictate of the “norm”, postmodern dance presented on stage a “different” body, a “deviant” body: “A person with illnesses, with a body having a little more fat and skin as well as less height than what is required for admission to the conservatory of modern dance. In this body there might be an insufficient number of organs or limbs, there may be some muscles” (Borisenko, 2015). So, the French self-taught choreographer Olivier Dubois, not having dance training (especially ballet), as his first choreographic experience, which was shocking for the spectator, directed

the attention of the ballet public to “Afternoon rest of the Faun”, where he himself performed the role of the Faun, dancing on stage with professional dancers. Despite having a rather bulky physique, Dubois performed the technically difficult role of Nijinsky—a role of the academic repertoire. Dubois’ task was to show how a non-ballet body can exist within the framework of the ballet’s movement parameters. The part was executed exactly according to the book. But due to the peculiarities of his non-ballet physique, his movements and gestures did not conform to the academic form expected by the viewer. According to the choreographer himself, the audience saw a “puffy man in a multi-coloured leotard, parodying the gestures of Nijinsky”, perceived the deed as a scandal, shouting: “Remove this piglet from the stage!” (Borisenko, 2015)

In the performance “The Cost of Living” by the English physical theatre company DV8 (deviate), the characters go on to take shocking physical risks, and brazenly create figural metaphors for extreme emotions. One of the characters has only half a body, he has no legs. We are presented a character in a dance class, who dances a duet with a dancer; the happiness of this moment gives way to dismay, when he is left alone looking after the departing dancer who has just danced with him. The play shows how his life consists of similar constant searches for ways to “integrate” into the lives of “normal” people.

In her project *BODY_reMIX*, the Canadian choreographer Marie Chouinard presented a set of tools that a contemporary person is using to try to “improve” his or her body with (pointes, crutches, etc.). It is interesting that pointes and crutches are presented as equivalent to prostheses. With such a staged “statement”, Chouinard dealt a heavy blow to the concept of a complete body. Chouinard shows that *any* body appears imperfect in modern culture, constantly seeking perfection, but not in itself, instead being fobbed off with illusions and prostheses.

Compared with traditional forms of dance, modern dance gives to any body the freedom and choice to express itself. In nullifying the traditional bodily hierarchy, as Evgeny Borisenko rightly observes: “The normative control mechanisms that shape the dancer’s body give way to new choreographic practices articulating the pluralism of physicality and the possibilities of bodily self-expression” (Borisenko, 2015). Thus, dance itself, through experiencing the “ultimate metamorphosis” in form, content, and meaning, in a certain sense becomes a non-dance. Or, conversely, the world around can be interpreted as a universal dance.

In this way, we can observe how in the dance practices of the 20th century new concepts of the body were “produced”. All of them are considered sequentially as they appear—from the body as an ideal instrument to the “non-normative” pluralism of physicality, which simultaneously continues to be part of 21st century dance. The body as a subject of special interest, as a space of freedom, as a field for the unfolding of the unconscious (psychosomatics), as a carrier of sociality, and as its construct, awareness of the normative practices of physicality as a repression of social control—all these “plots” are known, and also unfold in philosophical studies of the 20th and 21st centuries. The parallel nature of these processes testifies to a truly cardinal revision by European society of its physicality. As for the dance body itself,

first of all, it turns out to be the body of protest: with its energy, pain, and desperation breaking out, it expresses distrust of the actual social and political situation, exposing the masks and roles of man in modern society. Therefore, in the first place, the body in dance is gradually “absolutized”, “appropriates every discourse”, and “does not show anything but itself” (Leman, 2003, p. 156). However, this is a topic for a future conversation.

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