

Staging the logocentric body: transcribing dance as utterance

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Abstract

This paper proposes a challenge to the status of dance in writing practices, where historical definitions of dance writing found within modern western dance traditions of the early twentieth century¹ might question dance's dependency on writing as that which serves to ensure its permanence through inscription. Significantly, John Martin's proposition of metakinesis will establish the grounds for an interpretative approach to viewing dance performance that offers a physiological rather than a verbal/written descriptive response. Drawing from debates surrounding ephemera and inscription put forward by Andre Lepecki (2006) and Susan Foster (1996), as also the author's own phenomenological approach to writing dance practices, the writing will consider how dance writing practices have evolved over the past three decades to embrace the often hidden processes found within their own production methods.

Key words: ephemera, feminism, inscription, phenomenology

This paper will discuss how the relationship between writing and dancing can vary from mutual or interdependent to symbiotic by outlining distinct categories that frame western theatrical dance's relationship to writing. Elisabeth Heard (2006) describes the distinctiveness of physical languages as opposed to verbal and written ones where, historically, language has evolved as a way to define a thing and, at the same time, to create distance between ourselves and 'it' in order to construct a separate identity between ourselves and the objects that surround us and make up the material world.

The body has languages of its own, based on movement, that are seemingly more powerful than verbal language because they necessarily retain physical connection to the mutable, material world. [...] a privileging of the body or the material as the destructive/creative aspect of language [...]. (2006, pp. 40-53.)

Historically, predominant writing forms used to serve dance can be said to subscribe to, respectively, the use of metaphoric description and inherent value systems surrounding the body in western theatrical dance. In particular, writing's conventional relation to dance can be traced within European classical traditions through published documents in the form of dance notation dating back to the late sixteenth century. According to Andre Lepecki (2004) a very early authorial position suggesting that dance writing must contend with the impermanence of the live event can be found in Jean George Noverre's (1760) *Letters on Dancing and Ballets* where the author identifies dance as 'an art in self erasure' (p.3). Lepecki further links Noverre's description with a melancholic disposition that surrounded artistic expression in the late Renaissance period:

For, in the melancholic's theatre, time can make its appearance only after it endures a metonymic displacement; only after finding in what it touches a proxy for its otherwise unseen presence. (Lepecki, 2004, p.124)

Vanishing, reclamation, loss and recovery, Lepecki indicates, are tropes which pertain to melancholic tendencies subscribed to during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries within dance and the arts in general. Elsewhere, writing on the difficulties of capturing dance on the page, Lepecki associates memory directly with movement, thus adding further to the notion of the dance archive as a metonymic preservation that reduces and refines the experiential to digestible memory bites, to be recalled in the moment of descriptive definition: '[D]ance always vanishes in front of our eyes in order to create a new past. The dance exists ultimately as a mnemonic imprint of what has just lived there' (Lepecki, 1999, p. 17). Written in response to his collaboration with choreographer and dancer Meg Stuart in 1999, Lepecki's statement compounds his observation by appearing to problematise the widely established relationship between dance, memory and experience, implying that the majority of written accounts of dance might allude to a fictional presence, through their re-presentation (thereby indicating replacement), of the dancer through writing. However, where such a proposition does not account for the mutual dependence of the dancer on memory as a tool for the recreation of movement, nor indeed within the process of acquiring new movement skills, I suggest that Lepecki's argument pertains to the position of writing, in specific contexts, rather than of dancing. Here dance critic John Martin's historic definitions of kinaesthetic empathy (Martin, 1933) as that which exists in discrete stages in viewing dance, indicates the role of textuality in registering live movement, offers an empathetic position to receptor processes that occur when viewing dance. His proposition has been further taken up in recent dance studies as related to cognitive theories and neuroscience developments.² In attempting to deconstruct the role of the spectator's gaze, Martin's initial approach offers a rich arena in which to locate a relational writing practice through establishing an affective register between the writer/viewer and the dancer/viewed. This *affective engagement* operates through a process of empathy whereby moving bodies might evoke a similar movement sensation from their audiences in registering the presence of speed, emotion, relationships, densities and pressures whilst viewing live dance.

If, as Noverre and, later, Lepecki suggest, the predicament of dance is to be found in its continuing disappearance, then the act of writing about dance can be said to provide an intervention in seeking to identify a means of preservation. Any form of writing about dance arguably contends with an inherent time lapse in transplanting the mobile dancing body to the horizontal (static) plane of writing—from the actively present physical dance body to its re-interpretation through descriptive account. In doing so, the vanishing or continuing disappearance that Foster (1998) aligns with dance's ephemeral condition can be argued to evade all scriptural measures:

How to write a history of this bodily writing, this body and regiment it, leave only we can only know through its writing. How to discover what it has done and then describe its actions in words. Impossible. Too wild, too chaotic, too insignificant. Vanished, disappeared, evaporated into thinnest

air, the body's habits and idiosyncrasies, even the practises that codify the most disparate and residual traces. (Foster, 1995, p. 4).

Foster's petition poses interesting questions for the writer in implicating, as such, the act of writing in relation to the event as a dualistic notion; either one of retrospect—by way of retrieval—or, in preceding the event of dance—as prescriptive. There is an implicit side effect of fictionalisation when dealing with dance across past, present and future time, in that narrativisation implies an automatic distancing from the event itself. Cixous (2004) problematises temporal processes within the material act of writing where the original thought, or 'truth', no sooner than it is alluded to on paper, becomes 'othered'—distanced from its source. Most dance writing can be said to deal primarily with the body image—the body as closed 'text'—as a fixed entity from which to draw a corresponding written body of evidence. Thus, the critical distance that occurs in the gap between watching, learning or making dance and writing about these experiences must contend with the notion of the dance body as image, memory and history.

Goellner and Shea Murphy (1994) suggest that 'through shifting registers from movement to literature, dance can benefit directly from other disciplines' interrogation [where] literary analysis has long been busy reflexively questioning its own rhetoric and critical strategies' (p.4). Certainly, within literature, the poststructuralist project in writing can be seen to deconstruct the role of writing as a project in which meaning, literature, language and speech all serve as independent entities. As Lepecki elsewhere asserts, the ability of the body to address multiple sites of critical inquiry raises problems for the role of writing:

If the body is a pack, a rhizome, a body-image, if it is semantic as much as it is somatic, if it extends across time and space, then in which ways can critical writing assess choreographic work built upon this splayed-out model of the body and of subjectivity? (Lepecki, 2006, p. 51).

This paper seeks to engage a coercive tactics in exploring language mechanisms that are located through the senses in order to support fluid and migrational codes when describing the dance body. The scene of writing proposed here seeks an affective engagement between writing and movement, as the confinement of one exists in order to allow for memory to replace the primary experience itself. Within my own site based practice³, writing and experience are formed often simultaneously: in particular, the ability of the body to write out of direct experience underscores much of the choreographic process, often arising in the direct process of translating sense derived stimuli from a chosen site into movement repertory. This act of writing dance through the body's conscious engagement with space, time and place thus occurs as an emergent phenomenological process mediating between corporeal memory, sense stimuli and future design, while will be explored further within Andre Lepecki's debate on temporality and dance.

I wish to propose at this stage that a consideration of the deconstructionist project might enable a further challenge to the conventionalised relationship of dance and writing, or rather the writing *of* dance. Within poststructuralist literature, philosopher Jacques Derrida's concept of *differance* (1973), and the strategies associated with it, together offer a further means to propose the possibility that bodies are duplicitous

as far as a consideration of past, present/ce and future notions of the live dance event is concerned. Derrida's definition of *differance* as that which is not identical but refers to '[...] the diverted and equivocal passage from one difference to another, one term of opposition to the other' (1973, p.148) provides a different locus in terms of which the presence of the dancer might be argued to avoid a dialectic stance between, on the one hand, her continuing disappearing presence through dancing and, on the other, her reappearance through writing. By being both present in the act of dancing, then further (re-) presented through the act of writing, it is the dancer's body itself, in that might provide a resistance to verbal representation. The dancer's own presence further problematises this bidirectional relationship where the dancing body obstructs any potentially fluid exchange between the disappearance—as implied by dance's ephemerality—and a (re)materialisation of the body through writing. As Lepecki suggests, this process indicates a wider relationship held between the dance body and temporality:

In the case of dance, the metonymic stand-in for reified time is the dancer. This complicates the dance and the dancer's relationship to lived time, and to historicity. (2004, p. 124).

My own movement training draws from philosophies and practices surrounding the Japanese movement expression of Butoh.⁴ Where bodily writing practices, associative text and imagistic or metaphoric language all tend to get assigned to dance, Butoh can be seen to hold a particular relationship to writing where the practice is centred around internal consciousness and relational aesthetics. Butoh views the body as a descriptive practice; where images and their movement associations form an integral part of forming dance, where words are both paradoxical and locational.

In order to investigate further the role of integrated writing and movement I propose here that we might consider the live gesture of dance as equivalent to speech, where speech is defined as that which emerges directly from the speaker's body, without mediation. Within such a distinction, the subject speaking (the dancer dancing) can be said to create a secondary presence, or, in the case of dance, a fictional body. In Derrida's words, in fact, the speaking subject, or dancing dancer,

is no longer the person himself, or the person alone, who speaks. The speaking subject discovers his irreducible secondarity, his origin that is always already eluded; for the origin is always already eluded on the basis of an organized field of speech in which the speaking subject vainly seeks a place that is always missing. (Derrida, 1978, p. 45).

In these terms, we should need to recognise the presence of an 'organized field of [dance] in which the [dancing] subject vainly seeks a place that is always missing' (Lepecki, 2006, p. 52). However, unlike speech, dance's 'mute rhetoric' (2006, p. 52) seems to require that a spectator might also 'read into' the body, or interpret its meaning according to his/her individual engagement with a given gesture or physical expression. Here Abrahms' definition of expressionism, cited in Franko,

‘as a phenomenon of overflow that ‘signifies the internal made external’ (Abrahms, cited in Franko, 1995, p.160) provides a useful means to identify the immediacy of the live, and therefore irretrievable nature of the ‘speech act’ of dance (Ong, 1982). Dance’s muteness, on this basis, might be regarded as an act of deference to the other, to bestow the meaning-potential of the physical movement or gesture upon the viewer. What is of interest here is the implication of a second or duplicate body created through the simultaneous occurrence of speaking dance and the materiality of the speech/dance, thus gaining a separate identity to that of the speaker/dancer. Roland Barthes, writing in 1977, points to a similar relation held between song and text, where he signals the autonomy of the speech act of song as found ‘by the very friction between the music and something else, which something else is the particular language (and no-wise the message). The song must speak—must write ...’ (Barthes, 1977, p. 85). Barthes’ suggestion that the materiality of the body might be expressed through the voice, thus gaining autonomy from both the body of the performer and the spoken (or, in this instance, sung) word, re-inscribes the materiality of language as distinct from meaning or signification processes. Again Lepecki points to the significance of dance’s im/material disposition:

Whereas ephemerality had glorified but also trivialized and marginalized dance as that profoundly apolitical activity (its deepest nature unplanned, its most essential sense irrecoverable), the “disappearance” trope recasts the body’s provisional interventions in space or theory as a textuality of its own making (2004, p.184).

Elsewhere, Franko asserts that the irretrievable and unpredictable nature of dance is paradoxical to the extent that ‘[dance’s] historicity derives from its divorce from immediacy: it is not wholly explicable in/as a present’ (1996, p. 4). However, where ‘it’ is not wholly explicable in/as present, the notion of the dancer’s perpetual agency in disappearing from within the stated present moment of a dance (self-erasure) reverberates with ‘its’ disappearance also from beyond the dance’s present, to be further re-presented through being viewed or written about retrospectively. Of particular concern here however, is the location of a written counterpart to dance that might function as both preservation document and, in applying itself to the body in motion, might also account for the present and non present states that occur in registering movement on paper. A phenomenological approach places the role of writing *through* the experiential and goes some way in challenging the suggested latency of writing acts in relation to their movement counterparts. Interrogating the relationship between the perceived (kinetically responsive) and the apprehended (visually tactile) space of dance writing (Lepecki, 1996) also serves to challenge widely-held assumptions regarding dance’s dependency on writing as that which serves to ensure its permanence through inscription.

The term ‘choreography’ might be said to imply an ontological equivalent to writing—a mediated language—where ‘graph’ indicates the symbolic representation of other visually dominant forms such as drawing, painting, engraving and etching. Film theorist Sergei Eisenstein considers initial writing distinctions between different language forms:

While the alphabet is phonetic in nature, this is not true of other written languages. Writing systems [...] may also be logographic, in which case

the written sign represents a single word, or ideographic, in which ideas or concepts are represented directly in the form of glyphs or characters. (Eisenstein, 1995, p. 36).

Japanese calligraphy, for example, operates within an ideographic system where, like dance, it communicates in images, unmediated by words. How, then, might the term choreograph be considered equivalent to writing (or equivalent to established writing forms) in terms of its intervention into dance? Again, Lepecki (2004) asserts:

If we equate particular expressive forms with acknowledged language or language systems we go some way towards equating choreographic intervention in dance with that of mediated language in writing. (p. 124–139).

Prior to Noverre, in 1589 the French dance critic Thoinot Arbeau argued that dance writing incurred an ‘archival commandment’. By committing the steps of a dance to writing, writing’s initial function can be seen to preserve the ‘ephemeral’ act of dance both for posterity and as a means for dissemination: it would be prescribed for future replication. Such a means of preservation can be said to be motivated both by the desire to further replicate the dance for future use in the form of prescription—a protracted account of practice through an acknowledged graphic means of presentation—and, furthermore, to relegate dance to the word in the form of description, be that critical commentary or academic discourse or both. Foster signals a later eighteenth century philosophical approach to the dance body as maintaining a distinct separation between its live presence and its re-presentation on paper:

Even construed as a language in Enlightenment thought, the body’s gestures begin to signify that which cannot be spoken. The unique role for gesture prepares the way for a complete separation between dance and text that occurs in the early decades of the nineteenth century. (Foster, cited in Goellner & Shea Murphy, 1995, p. 234).

Such a statement supports Heard’s earlier suggestion of physical language as maintaining a connection to the material world, while privileging the body’s materiality within both the destructive and creative aspects of language.

Dance writing is considered here under the term ‘archival commandment’, as equivalent to a choreographic tool which functions as a form of commandment, or a representational code, in order to be consumed, replicated and disseminated. Certainly, the role of technology can be regarded as creating further intervention where dance can be captured, recreated and manipulated, enabling a further narrativisation through the fostering of additional ‘fictional bodies’. However, where formal choreographic notation might function as both ‘archival commandment’ and reference tool, written manuals of dance can be argued to effect a certain distancing and generalising of their subject where the manual is indicative rather than directive; non-specific and depersonalised—all traits which seem to remove the immediacy or intimacy from the dance act itself. In such an instance, in order to comply with its scriptural counterpart, the choreographic act can be described as non-interventionist

where the dance body must adhere to certain syntax within which dance may be framed and interpreted accordingly.

Lepecki further offers an interesting tripartite model which binds writing, dance and the feminine:

[D]ance cannot be imagined without writing, it does not exist outside writing's space, just as dance cannot be perceived without the apparition (even if by a negative ghostliness, a reactionary disavowal) of the feminine. (2004, p.124).

In investigating further the parallels that Lepecki draws between dance, writing and the feminine, while the present argument does not focus on a feminist critique of dance, it is worth distinguishing at this point between Lepecki's treatment of the feminine as apparition and the feminist project of repositioning literature to address the phallogentricity in language forms found within *écriture féminine*. Lepecki's avowal of the feminine in dance raises questions regarding the different applications of dance writing as manual in adhering to a dominant male language discourse where the prescription of dance relies on such a form of commandment. To the above, then, might be added that speech and language *do* exist independently of writing just as dance languages exist independently of choreography, however choreography *must* substantiate its relation to dance via certain established language forms such as notation or archival command. Similarly, Foster points to the historic bind dominating nineteenth and twentieth century discourses surrounding dance and writing where dance, as a dynamic and unassailable force, must subsequently rely on text as instrumental in providing a stabilising written counterpart:

So powerful is this attribution of mutually exclusive functions for dance and writing throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century that its historical specificity has only recently been questioned. (cited in Goellner & O'Shea, 1995, p. 234).

However, Lepecki (2004) asserts that dance and text can and do operate independently of one another and, in doing so, allow for a continuous slippage between dance, writing and femininity.

The spaces of friction constituted by the restless tensions between body and text, movement and language, indicate precisely a limitless contiguity among dance, writing and femininity. (p.125).

In conclusion then, Foster offers a diverse proposition for a dance approach which manifests the interrelation of words and movement, body and theory enable just such a blurring of roles to take place:

(W)hat if we allow movement as well as words the power to interpret? What if we find in choreography a form of theorizing? What if learning to choreograph, the choreographer learns to theorize, and learning to dance, the dancer assimilates the body of facts and the structuring of discursive frameworks that enable theorization to occur? What if the body of the text

is a dancing body, a choreographed body? (Foster, cited in Goellner & O'Shea, 1995, p. 234).

Thus, not altogether differently from the poststructuralist project in literature, the instructed and cultivated body in contemporary theatrical dance might be seen to engage in a politics of dispersal, offering multiplicitous sites of resistance while engaging material language construction in its simultaneous moments of creation and destruction of the word. In such a way we can begin to articulate a sentient, available, multilingual communicant on stage, very much present, and re-emergent. The dancing/writing body thus is not passive matter, waiting to be shaped by logos' articulating form (Shavero, 1993, p. 257). Rather, it is invested with physical thoughts of its own making, where energy and image eclipse each other, transpiring towards meaning-production in those slippages that appear between flesh and paper. This act of writing dance through the body's conscious engagement with space, time and place thus occurs as an emergent phenomenological process mediating between corporeal memory, sense stimuli and future design. In this instance dance operates, ontologically, as an ecologically bound phenomenon that exists within its own conditions, while registering *affect* as directly transplanted onto physiology and future movement design.

1. I am referring to predominantly a US and later European dance theatre lineage as first expressed in early modern dancer Isadora Duncan.

2. See Heddon, D. & Reynolds, M., (eds) (2012). *Kinesthetic empathy in creative and cultural practices*. UK: Intellect Press.

3. For further guidance see Sweeney, R. (2012). Tracking entities: Choreography as a cartographic process. In J Bacon & V. Midelow (Eds.), *Choreographic Practices*, Vol 2. (pp. 69–75). Intellect Books: UK.

4. For further guidance see Sweeney, R. (2012). Distilling principles—an investigation into the role of consciousness in Butoh training. *Theatre Dance and Performance Training*, Vol 3(1), (pp 68–80).

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Biography

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