

María Antonieta Mendivil\*

# THE PERFORMATIVE BODY'S REPRESENTATION IN DANCE AND THE PANDEMIC

**D**ance once inhabited a space that explored mediation through technology, questioned the meaning of the body and the instrument/device, and extended its tentacles toward the transdisciplinary and “expanded dance,” interrupted continual movement as a way of politically questioning the raging consumerism in the capitalist system, and shifted from the body of execution to the body of feeling and expression.

The arrival of the pandemic and the abrupt confinement that ensued dislodged all of these thoughts about the body from the field of reason, criticism, and research and pushed them toward a space of confinement and forced stasis, with technological mediation becoming a last resort for expression through dance.

Well before dance became a discipline regulated by the Royal Academy of Dance’s standard of beauty in 1661, it had taken a myriad of paths: it was used in funeral rites, sacred and profane, and later, after classical antiquity, it forged a seemingly unbreakable alliance with theater and thus did not focus on movement *per se*.

However, the neoclassical, Apollonian model drew from Plato, who defined one of the three kinds of dance as destined to procure health, levity, and proper grace in the body.<sup>1</sup> Bodily representation in dance was conjured through the ideals of proportionality, in which young beauty, contemplative and immutable like a Greek statue, was supposed to hide any and all agitation, disturbance, effort. And this unattainable ideal demanded that constant flowing, upward movement seem to defy gravity. This exacting physical work would sublimate the body toward an ethereal ideal, unchained from the corporal, animal realm as it reached a spiritual state.

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In her essay “Danza o el imperio sobre el cuerpo” (Dance or the Empire over the Body), Susana Tambutti, who speaks critically of ballet’s domestication of the body, training, and discipline, and who alludes to the “dancer of equestrian dances” who needs constant training, delves deep into the discipline’s representation of the body. She states, “The body would increase its technical perfecting while reducing its symbolic function at the same time. . . . Through a conception lacking internal perception, the body was still considered an externality. My body was external to Me. The dancer recognized himself through his reflection in the mirror, and this image would exact all the technical demands needed to reap the maximum benefit from that alien body.”<sup>2</sup>

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\* Writer; mm.marianmendivil@gmail.com. Translation by Cristina Fernández Hall. Photo by Gerardo Castillo.



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In *Agotar la danza* (Exhausting Dance), André Lepecki notes, “The project of Western dance becomes more and more aligned with the production and display of a body and a subjectivity fit to perform this unstoppable motility,”<sup>3</sup> until the time comes for this movement in constant flux to succumb to a spasm, a kinesthetic stutter, a wound of critical anxiety, as Lepecki calls it. The advent of change in dance, as a critical and political movement, interrupts this constant, continual, upward flow.

Susana Tambutti clearly outlines the body’s new representation as of the mid-twentieth century, in which the body abandons a kind of execution that is devoid of emotion and symbolism and becomes the place “of production of the subject’s imaginary”;<sup>4</sup> the body, no longer an immaterial idealization, becomes the perceived body.

The executing body shifts to become a feeling body, with senses, energy, and a relationship to space; as such, it is an unstable, vulnerable, subjective body, at risk in the face of gravity, pauses, decadence, materiality, and sensuality. Instead of having bodies standing miraculously *en pointe*, we see bodies together, dragging themselves on the earth and its elements, on the floor, in organic and imperfect movement. Tambutti quotes Paul Ardenne explaining this lucidly: “I inhabit my body, but at the same time, I represent myself inhabiting this body that is mine.” In Pina Bausch’s words, “I am not interested in how people move, but in what moves them.”<sup>5</sup>

André Lepecki, in speaking of Jacques Derrida, says he “understands the body not as a self-contained and closed entity but as an open and dynamic system of exchange, constantly producing modes of subjection and control, as well as resistance and becomings.”<sup>6</sup>

Though Randy Martin would argue, in Lepecki’s words, that “politics goes nowhere without movement.”<sup>7</sup> Nadia Sere-metakis counters that the still-act is political, as it interrupts the historic flow. As Lepecki writes, “The still acts because it interrogates the economies of time, because it reveals the possibility of one’s own agency within controlling regimes of capital, subjectivity, labor, and mobility.”<sup>8</sup>

While at one time, at the dawn of dance’s formality, the art was considered a scenic pause, with closer ties to theater, in more recent times our explorations of bodily representation have harkened back to non-movement as political and critical discourse. And while training before a mirror once alienated the body as an instrument outside the subject, now, the mediation of technologies, screens, and devices push the subject toward fragmentation, toward the meta-subject, with a body overflowing past its boundaries and corporality.

Technological mediation has brought dance explorations to divest themselves of corporality and re-appropriate a once-empty space that is now occupied by the expansion of the technological body—projected and refracted in other forms of virtual corporality. We are seeing a transmutation of incorporeal subjects becoming virtual bodies. Scenic elements also blur their boundaries and play with the optical illusion of melting the body in space with the theater’s lights, floors, and walls—a virtual magma in constant interaction, fusion, play, appropriation, and renunciation through movement, stillness, the body, and the virtual.

Just as technologies began to take on anthropomorphic features, “this tie between technology and art would come to characterize the avant-gardes of the twentieth century. Dance has embodied live performance since its first media images, but, in parallel, modern dance has also influenced the cinematographic experience,” recalls Nuria Carton de Grammont in her essay “Louise Lecavallier y el simulacro del cuerpo virtual” (Louise Lecavallier and the Simulation of the Virtual Body).<sup>9</sup> In this sense, Maya Deren comes to mind.

“Dance appropriated these media to boost the stage’s capabilities, increasing choreographic possibilities of movement with the converging of organic dexterity and artificial illusion flow,”<sup>10</sup> writes Carton de Grammont. “As such, the presence of electronic media in dance yields real, visual, and virtual synchronic dimensions in which the body becomes a fluidity that transits between these atmospheres.”<sup>11</sup>

Carton de Grammont calls this stage in dance “meta-modernity” because “in it, the body goes beyond the mechanical, the informational, the digital. This choreographic phase would acquire meaning by transcending the physical state—not the human body *per se*, but the technological body that has characterized the history of modernity.”<sup>12</sup>

Dance was progressing in this exploration of new technologies and bodily resignification when the pandemic struck and confined our sentient, expressive, moving bodies in permanent virtuality—the sole performative space left.

Our optimism and horizons of exploration, imagination, and creation thus became an imposition. As such, rather than continuing to reflect upon performative theory, Jean Baudrillard resonates more to me, given his sense of urgency and criticism from a place of pessimism, which we should keep in mind when reflecting upon the virtual from a space of criticism, rather than tossing the exercise of dance into its inertial flux.

Baudrillard's words are still relevant today: "Just like we might speak of a fractal subject today, diffracting in a multitude of miniature egos that are all like the next, the subject "un-multiplies" according to an embryonic model, like a biological culture, infinitely saturating its medium through asexual reproduction."<sup>13</sup>

Baudrillard strives to clarify that this is not about narcissism, but about "desolate self-reference,"<sup>14</sup> an insertion of the identical overlapping the identical, equally emphasizing intensity and meaninglessness.

In our pandemic and virtual-performance conditions, it is worth asking ourselves how the public, or the spectator, perceives this new way of consuming what we have experienced as the living arts, now that we lack stage conventions. Baudrillard states that what the spectator sees through the screen is not an act of dance, but his own brain: "Today it's not about reading in the liver or the viscera, nor even in the heart or the gaze, but simply in the brain, and one would wish to make visible its millions of connections, helping its activity along like in a videogame."<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, I believe that the lack of limits and boundaries that the virtual stage has yielded takes up the entire act of the creator and viewer today. The question Baudrillard posed in terms of the performer (Am I a man; am I a machine?) now extends to the spectator. The viewer, constantly connected to a virtual reality where news, educational, work-related, artistic, and cultural contents coexist and are consumed, is no longer clearly defined: Am I a person or am I a machine?

Baudrillard warned us long ago, "The communicative being, the interactive being, no longer takes vacations. It completely contradicts its activity, because it can no longer draw back, not even mentally, from the operational network in which it performs."<sup>16</sup> This is our pandemic reality today. It is within this reality that the performative body's representation in current dance has shifted toward another dimension. By losing the space between the stage and the spectator, by sharing the virtual space, with the viewer representing him/herself as a person-machine, the mediatization of technologies has lost its former meaning of scenic or performative intent.

Instead of having bodies standing miraculously *en pointe*, we see bodies together, dragging themselves on the earth and its elements, on the floor, in organic and imperfect movement.

I also ask myself whether this constant virtual interconnection doesn't harken us back to the perpetual movement that dance had sought to bring to a pause as a way of criticizing our capitalist consumption of images, stimuli, and movement.

Most paradoxically, we have striven to boldly criticize the system and its control strategies from a space of performative expression, but today, this expression of movement constantly finds itself within the system: it is transmitted and consumed on social media, where creators and spectators are repeatedly hyper-codified, mapped, and geo-referenced according to identity, taste, interaction, and consumption habits.

In the post-pandemic era, after this forced virtuality, there will be much to learn from the representation of the performative body. The post-pandemic might also prove the right time to stop movement, to take a pause—a historic spasm, or a convulsion of the times—and reflect upon other representations, with their deepest meanings surging as acts of rebellion and criticism against the backdrop of virtual control. ■■■

## Notes

1 See *Danziclopedia*, <https://sites.google.com/site/danziclopedia/home>, accessed November 25, 2020.

2 Susana Tambutti, "Danza o el imperio sobre el cuerpo," <http://movimiento.org/profiles/blogs/2358986:BlogPost:3762>, accessed November 28, 2020.

3 André Lepecki, *Agotar la danza*, Antonio Fernández Lera, trans. (Alcalá de Henares, Spain: Universidad de Alcalá de Henares-Centro Coreográfico Galego-Mercat de les Flors-Aula de Danza Estrella Casero, 2009), pp. 17.

4 Tambutti, op. cit.

5 Ibid.

6 Lepecki, op.cit., p. 21.

7 Ibid., p. 30.

8 Ibid., p. 36.

9 Nuria Carton de Grammont, "Louise Lecavallier y el simulacro del cuerpo virtual," *Fractal*, year xiii, vol. xii, no. 50 (July-September 2008), p. 103.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., p. 105.

12 Ibid., p. 107.

13 Jean Baudrillard, "Videoesfera y sujeto," in *Videoculturas de fin de siglo* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1990), p. 27.

14 Ibid., p. 31.

15 Ibid., p. 30.

16 Ibid., p. 35.