



PROJECT MUSE®

Choreography as Apparatus of Capture

André Lepecki

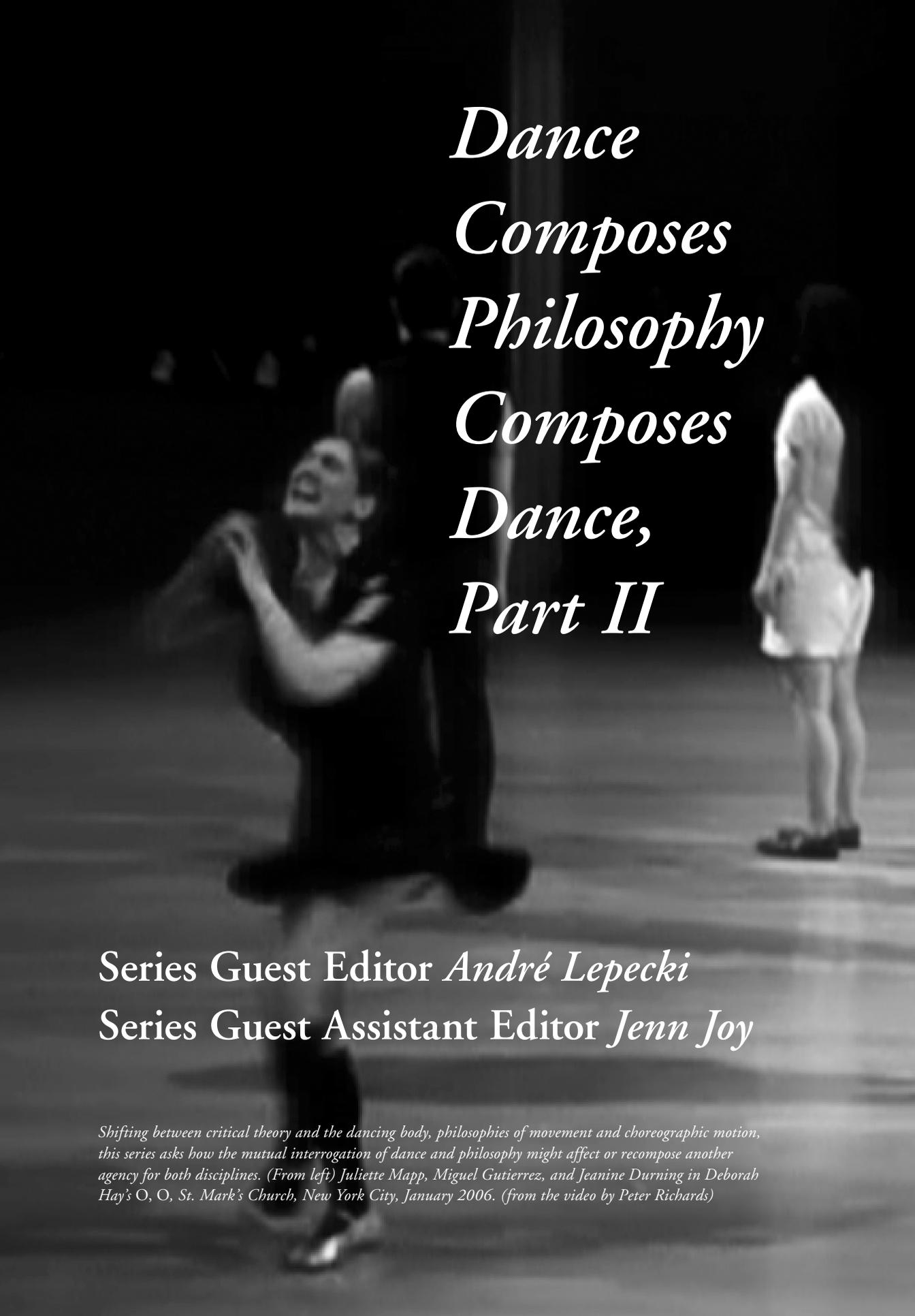
TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 51, Number 2 (T 194), Summer 2007, pp. 119-123 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/216111>



*Dance
Composes
Philosophy
Composes
Dance,
Part II*

Series Guest Editor *André Lepecki*

Series Guest Assistant Editor *Jenn Joy*

Shifting between critical theory and the dancing body, philosophies of movement and choreographic motion, this series asks how the mutual interrogation of dance and philosophy might affect or recompose another agency for both disciplines. (From left) Juliette Mapp, Miguel Gutierrez, and Jeanine Durning in Deborah Hay's O, O, St. Mark's Church, New York City, January 2006. (from the video by Peter Richards)

Choreography as Apparatus of Capture

André Lepecki

The first two essays published in this second installment of *TDR*'s "Dance and Philosophy" series have in common the philosophical probing of the deep relationship between dance and time. This relationship could be said to be constitutive of Western theatrical dance—that is to say, of a dance that, by the end of the 16th century, starts moving increasingly within the mechanisms of something called the *choreographic*. Indeed, as dance falls prey to that true "apparatus of capture" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:424-73) known as choreography, its questions become: How does one create a body that may answer adequately—both kinetically and perceptively—to movement, if movement is, in itself, *the* imperceptible? If movement-as-the-imperceptible is what leads the dancing body into becoming an endless series of *formal* dissolutions, how can one account for that which endures in dance? How does one make dance stay around, or create an economy of perception aimed specifically at its passing away?

The choreographic is already the field defined by all of these questions. And this field makes choreography not only a discipline or technology of the body, not only a mode of composition, not only a register, or archive—but an apparatus. To conceive choreography as an apparatus is to see it as a mechanism that simultaneously distributes and organizes dance's relationship to perception and signification. For it is precisely this kind of organization of the perceptive-linguistic field that apparatuses perform. As Gilles Deleuze explains Michel Foucault's major contribution to a political theory of signification, the concept of apparatus is one that foregrounds perception as always tied to modes of power that distribute and assign to things visibility or invisibility, significance or insignificance. According to Deleuze, Foucault's discovery is that "each apparatus has its regimen of light, the way it falls, softens and spreads, distributing the visible and the invisible, generating or eliminating an object, which cannot exist without it" (2006:339).

To see choreography as an apparatus—moreover, to see it as an apparatus that captures dance only to distribute its significations and mobilizations, its gestures and affects, within fields of light and fields of words that are strictly codified—is to delimit those hegemonic modes of aesthetically perceiving and theoretically accounting for dance's evolutions in time. The casting of dance as ephemeral, and the casting of that ephemerality as problematic, is already the temporal enframing of dance by the choreographic.

*André Lepecki is Associate Professor in the Department of Performance Studies at Tisch School of the Arts/NYU. Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s he worked as dramaturge for choreographers Vera Mantero, Francisco Camacho, João Fiadeiro, and Meg Stuart. He is the editor of *Of the Presence of the Body* (Wesleyan University Press, 2004) and, with Sally Banes, of *The Senses in Performance* (Routledge, 2006). He is the author of *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (Routledge, 2006).*

Two vectors open up at this point. We could think of dance's relationship to temporality on an immanent level—and thus our research would take us to an exploration “from within” of what would be the “time of the dance.” Or, we could think of how dance relates to an experience of time that is extrinsic to it—and thus, our research would take us toward an investigation of how dance enters into relation with other modes of temporality with which it is also contemporaneous.

In a way, the following essays by Frédéric Pouillaude and Paula Caspão each follow one of these vectors. Caspão's “Stroboscopic Stutter: on the not-yet-captured ontological condition of limit-attractions” probes dance's relationship to temporality by engaging in a deep critique of “the trope of dance and its performance as vanishing present bodies” (142). As for Pouillaude's “*Scène and Contemporaneity*,” the interrogation is about knowing how the term “contemporary,” understood as a trope, already sets up a “scène” (perceptual, linguistic, theoretical, even choreographic) where dance rehearses and performs particular modes of appearing-to-belong to “our” time. Thus, in very different ways, both essays propose the need to create, or at least map out, escape routes from deeply embedded modes of perceiving, evaluating, expressing, and theorizing dance's relationship to its own time as well as to other, cotermporal times. In Pouillaude's essay, the whole question of escape is formulated as a clear theoretical program, in which the main driving force comes precisely from certain dance practices in the current French dance scene. Pouillaude sees dance as an art that challenges us to invent theoretical modes that may give us an account of those forms (or fashions) that seem to define an epoch without falling prey to any preexisting definition of what an epoch might be:

Indeed, it is not that easy to escape from the logic of epochality. Again, it is in the form of an epoch, even though empty, that the incapacity of our time to take hold of itself is presented, and it is again under the form of a temporal figure, homogeneous and unified, though undoubtedly negative, that our inability to constitute “one” time that is “ours” is apprehended. (125)

As for Caspão, what needs to be escaped from is a series of habits (perceptual, theoretical, and also choreographic) of ontologically aligning the presence of a moving body with a (pre-conditioned) view of its disappearance—as dance's ontological exception. Thus, she posits:

The persistence of the assumption that dance and performance are best defined by the formal disappearance of present moving bodies, calls for a reframing of ongoing temporal and spatial perceptions, along with a reframing of subsequent perceptions of perception itself. (137)

When following these authors through their respective theoretical escape routes, it becomes apparent that language itself needs to be pushed into a more dynamic entanglement with movement. Movement-language is what takes both theory and choreography out of their stifling habits. Both essays surprise with their language effects, their leaps and jumps, detours and arrests, their productive waste of time, similar to a still dance that nevertheless rushes through perception and thought like a lucid hallucination. Both texts make words and movement and references enter into new planes of composition and interaction. In these planes, movement and words exchange affects and powers, thus producing specific resonances that invent a theoretical-perceptive body apt to explore and restore to view those dancing subjects that had been otherwise eliminated, or made obscure, by the choreo-theoretical-perceptive apparatus.

The casting of dance as ephemeral, and the casting of that ephemerality as problematic, is already the temporal enframing of dance by the choreographic.

One of those obscure dancing subjects is carefully explored in the third article in this section, Danielle Goldman's critical review essay on Deborah Hay's *O, O*. In Goldman's text, what becomes apparent is how Hay's work is informed precisely by a desire to find escape routes that may lead the dancer away from that prison called habit. Here, improvisation displays both practical and theoretical relevance in Goldman's critical project and in Hay's dance. Only by daily reinventing for oneself a body-for-living—a reinvention that is about activating memory (cellular memory, affective memory, muscular memory) for the present and not about repeating information for the already archived future—can the dancer create for him- or herself other modes of dancing and thus foster other modes of understanding dance perceptively and theoretically. Such reinventions impact not only the choreographic but also the ontological. For instance, and according to Hay as quoted by Goldman, one can reinvent for oneself a body that can shed “the *tyranny* of the myth of the dancer as a *single coherent being*—a basic element in dance training in the West” (164, emphasis added).

Hay's project for a noncoherent being prompts a question: Why is it that the habits of tyranny, the identification of a tyrannical machine operating at the core of Western dance, appears in so much writing and in so many dance-related practices derived from the tradition of Western theatrical dance? Indeed, at least since the great feminist revolution endured by Western theatrical dance at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century—a revolution that took theatrical dance away from its arrest within the confines of classical training and of ballet—the question of freeing the dancing body so that it might truly dance within, or despite, the choreographic is a sort of programmatic refrain, a driving force. This refrain, in Hay's formulation, prompts an important political question: How does the theme of tyranny relate to the problem of the dancer's being—of the “myth” of singularity versus the desire for multiplicity of the dancer's being?

What the texts published so far in this series suggest (I am referring also to the essays by Peter Sloterdijk, José Gil, and Jenn Joy published in the first installment of this *TDR* series [50:4, T192]) in their mapping of the choreographic within the generalized kinesthetic system constitutive of Western subjectivity (along with its habits, its modes of desiring, its

At a certain point in the history of Western subjectivity, a certain social (and socializing) activity called dance fell prey to a Stately (and theological) apparatus of capture called choreography.

modes of perceiving, its modes of entrapping dance ontologically, kinetically, linguistically, physiologically, and theoretically) is this: dance, once it falls prey to a powerful apparatus of capture called “choreography,” loses many of its possibilities of becoming. Which is to say that dance loses its powers (*pouissance*) as it is submitted to the power (*pouvoir*) of the choreographic.¹

Let us not forget that choreographic power is genealogically majoritarian in the sense that “choreography” names a very specific masculinist, fatherly, Stately, judicial, theological, and disciplinary project—a project that, moreover, removed dance from its social terrain (the communal yard) and placed it in a private (courtly) chamber, thus subordinating dance to signification, to full presence, and to archiving.² In other words: at a certain point in the history of Western subjectivity, a certain social (and socializing) activity called dance fell prey to a Stately (and theological) apparatus of capture called choreography. As I have written

-
1. Consider the distinction that Deleuze makes (after Foucault and Nietzsche) between *pouissance* and *pouvoir*—terms that have been usually translated into English with the same word: power. As Deleuze put it simply to Claire Parnet: “les *pouissances* sont un *affaire de devenir*; le *pouvoir* c'est un *affaire de l'État*” (*pouissances* are a matter of becoming; power is a matter of the State) (in Boutang 2004).
 2. For a short history of such a movement see my *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*, chapters 1, 2, and 7.

elsewhere (2006), this falling prey took place under the auspices of two fathers: a Jesuit priest who happened to be an ecclesiastical judge and a lawyer who happened to be a mathematician. These two characters of majoritarian masculinity—Thoinot Arbeau and his alter ego, the student Capriol—join forces under the power of State, Justice, Science, and God to create the new art of moving rigorously and privately, which Arbeau named *orchesography*. That the first exercise of Arbeau’s homonymous dance manual published in 1589 is a martial march to the rhythms of a military drum only reinforces the utilitarian possibilities that the choreographic brings to dance and movement for use by the State. Under the Stately apparatus of capture, dance can be mobilized to the Stately war machine. Moreover, under the Judgment of God, choreographic power turns the body into a subordinate, a subjugated subject, to that entity Jacques Derrida once identified, in his essay on Artaud, as a god-robber-of-bodies.³

No wonder the question of tyranny is so prevalent in the history of Western dance. And no wonder the liberation of dance from the choreographic apparatus of capture had to be initiated and carried through not only by women, but by women who advocated for choreography a *becoming-minoritarian*—becoming woman, becoming black, becoming Indian, becoming child, becoming animal, molecular, imperceptible. In this sense, there could be a whole new way of understanding Isadora Duncan’s attachment to children, Loie Fuller’s attachment to electricity, Martha Graham’s writings on the powers (*pouissance*) contained in the “Indian” and the “Negro” dances—as each choreographer developed her own version of the choreographic, her own project of extracting dance from its participation with the choreographic apparatus of capture.

Inevitably, each of these strategies fell back into the strata of the choreographic—but this falling is already a redoing of the choreographic itself, moving it away from its majoritarian origins and imperatives; this falling is already the work of dance. And the project of finding becomings in dance remains—as in Hay’s proposition for a becoming-molecular of the dancer as a way out of the tyranny of kinetic-ontological habit. To re-listen to the body daily as it unfolds multiple modes of being is also a project for dance theory—to listen attentively to its words and fashions, and find in them its escape routes.

3. “As we know, Artaud lived the morrow of a dispossession: his proper body, the property and propriety of his body, *had been stolen from him at birth by the thieving god* who was born in order to ‘pass himself off / as me’” (1978:232, emphasis added).

References

- Arbeau, Thoinot
1967 [1589] *Orchesography*. Translated by Mary Stewart Evans, edited by Julia Sutton. Mineola: Dover Publications.
- Boutang, Pierre André
2004 *L’Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*. France: Editions Montparnasse.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari
1987 *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. London: Athlone Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles
2006 *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–1995*. Edited by David Lapoujade. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Derrida, Jacques
1978 “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation.” In *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, 232–50. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lepecki, André
2006 *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*. New York: Routledge.