

The body, zero point of the world

# SUCH A <sup>t</sup>LITTLE THING

by Geisha Fontaine  
translated by Frida Komesaroff

**“My body is the opposite of a utopia, it is never underneath another sky, it is the absolute place, the little fragment of space with which, in the strictest sense, I am one. My body, merciless topia”**

— Michel Foucault

A choreographer generally creates with the bodies of the dancers, who, in turn, work with their own bodies<sup>1</sup>. For a long time in the humanities, especially in Europe, the dancer's body has been the object of numerous investments, fantasies and affects<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, the bodily dimension and physical practices of social life were studied diversely, in various separate specialties: medical, psychiatric, anthropomorphic, philosophical, biological, ergonomic, ethnological, etc<sup>3</sup>. In reality, little research has been dedicated to studying the body in its multiplicity.

Yet, to dance is to own this multiplicity. The dancer's body is plural and combines different dimensions: pedestrian, expert, organic, aesthetic, sensitive, perceptive, creative, thinking. It is strange amalgam of the social and the artistic body. It is also a “field of relation to the world”, in the beautiful words of Laurence Louppe<sup>4</sup>. This body arises from a society, from a time, and it reflects them. It is their product. And sometimes, it disturbs them. It is like the phenomenon of what the philosopher Gilles Deleuze describes as ‘minor literature’, where, for him, the fractures constitute the power of the work. This minor dimension is in no way a restriction; rather it is a means of exploration. Dance, with its poor body, is itself a minor art. It scorns distinctions between being and appearing, corporeal and intellectual, now and always, here and elsewhere. The body has more than one trump card. It troubles those thinkers who hold onto thought alone. But in the same way, thought disturbs dancers who are too tied to their bodies. Today, thinkers give into their bodies and dancers express their thoughts. It's a triangle linking thought, body and society. But an equilateral triangle?!

Without doubt, the dancing body participates in a socially preferred system of particular references and uses of the body. From the end of the 19th century, the cult of the body as healthy, and as such profitable, began to establish itself. Industrial societies developed, instituting an organisation of work, gesture and posture. The body was rationalised in order to render it more productive. This was also the moment when sports practices, cinema and modern dance emerged. Bodies were more highly valued. The reasons for this greater concern are diverse: the search for a less constrained life; new questioning of human interaction or of a close bond with nature. Ancient Greece became a reference point for attending to one's body. Yet, frequently what seemed to emerge with the liberation of the body came hand in hand with its subjection. This is a paradox that we can observe throughout the 20th century up until the present. At work, in war, in art and in leisure, the body is more

standardised and/or more autonomous. An extreme example is that of the Nazis who privileged the valiant body of the hero, opposing it to the pitiful body of the sickly intellectual. A healthy body is also obedient, readily becoming cannon-fodder during the two world wars that ravaged Europe.

Today, more than ever, the body sells. Advertising, the battle against ageing, organic food, clothing brands...the passage from a collective body to an individual body often favours a consumer's body. Let's occupy our bodies! But the question is: yes, but how? This is one of the challenges of the dancer and the choreographer.

We cannot change any of it: every human is a body. It is simultaneously the site of existence and the condition of all communities. In a radio lecture, Michel Foucault speaks, in a somewhat contradictory way, about what defines the body itself. He commences thus: “My body is the opposite of a utopia, it is never underneath another sky, it is the absolute place, the little fragment of space with which, in the strictest sense, I am one. My body, merciless topia.”<sup>5</sup> The body is thus an “absolute” place, according to the philosopher. But his vision of the body changes during the interview: the body becomes “the zero point of the world”, “it has no place, but from it emerge and spread all possible places, real or utopian”. The body thus seems to escape to a non-place that produces different possibilities. Foucault wonders if “the dancer's body isn't in fact a body expanded according to a space with both interior and exterior to it”.

But the philosopher then searches for what might allow us to better define the body. For him, it is the corpse<sup>6</sup> and the mirror: “It is the corpse and the mirror that teach us (at least which taught the Greeks and which now teaches children) that we have a body, that this body has a form, that this form has a contour, that this contour has a thickness, a weight; in short, that this body occupies a space.” The philosopher concludes by once again ‘spatialising’ the body.

The body can therefore be that which occupies a place and projects utopias. That which, destined to being a corpse, allows the joining of numerous spaces. It is a body that permits a multitude of more or less concrete human actions, such as advancing, imagining, perceiving the real, but also sometimes denying it. That would be the body of a dancer! As for Deleuze, he refers to Nietzsche and affirms that “astonishing – that's the body”. This comment in turn echoes Spinoza's famous remark,

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“we don’t know what a body is capable of”. Being astounded by the body, exploring its potential; these are necessary to the choreographer, just as they are to the dancer.

Yet the dancer’s body fulfills physical criteria; what’s more, the techniques it acquires are linked to a given society and to the history of the dance that has developed within it. An American dancer and a French dancer don’t have the same physicality, even if they do have numerous common aspects. A sixty year-old dancer dances differently to a twenty year-old dancer. Different markers affect the way in which the dancing body moves.

The body is the first and the most natural instrument of man. Or, more precisely, without speaking of instrument, the first and most natural technical object (and at the same time technical means) of man, is his body<sup>7</sup>.

The dancer’s body is a paradoxical body. It is the product of a culture and of social determinants, on the one hand; and on the other, it is the producer of new uses for the body. This dimension is little acknowledged by the artists themselves. However, from the techniques and practices he or she has chosen, the dancer has formed, forged and formatted his or her body. It’s a dancer’s body, an expert body, sometimes a sportsman’s body. Its savoir-faire arises from an ensemble of acquired knowledge. The work of the dancer consists of deepening his or her competencies and of challenging them. His or her body is certainly a means, but also possesses a potential for critique. The dancer can contribute, through his or her body, to a challenging of dominant models and their identifiers: physical criteria, genre, virtuosity. Nevertheless, the relations between the social body and the dancer’s body are complex. To what degree is the dancing body an agitator or a follower? Do nudity or sexual references really have the subversive force that they claim to have? In Europe, for example, one or ten nude bodies on a stage has become commonplace. Nudity has almost become a norm of all contemporary choreographic creations<sup>8</sup>. In other regions of the world nudity can lead to death. This shows to what point the dancer’s body is also a social body, whose audacity depends on the dominant values in a given place and time.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu was particularly interested in the ways the presence of the body arises from its social inscription:

“The relation to the body which is progressively incorporated, and which gives the body its truly social physiognomy, is an overall manner of holding one’s body, of presenting it to others. In this, among other things, is expressed a particular relationship of consonance or dissonance between the real body and the legitimate body (as it is defined by a particular class of patterns of perception) or, if we prefer, a subconscious anticipation of the chance of success.<sup>9</sup>

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**IMM.**

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The dancer is also someone who can afford the luxury of being an artist. Even if, as is characteristic of luxury, it earns him or her nothing (or little) in return! The dancer belongs to a milieu in which the necessity of earning a living seems not to be a determining factor. In any case, the dancer chooses first to become a dancer and then afterwards it becomes his or her profession<sup>10</sup>. S/he acquires a physical ease that constitutes a tool of his/her profession as a dancer (in this “anticipation of the chance of success” evoked by Bourdieu). To his/her symbolic capital, the dancer adds a corporeal capital that contributes to his/her status as an artist. The individual positioning of the dancer in his/her capacity as an artist is a social positioning. It is a relational vector between the dancer and the world. As for the choreographer, collaborating with the dancers, s/he creates a specific “between-bodies” and models a temporary organisation of human exchanges. How do the bodies pass each other, mix with each other, meet each other and touch each other? It is a provisional arrangement that signals an indefinable community, in movement, not able to be pinned down. At the same time, the choreographer organises a collective functioning that adheres to modes of production and wage-earning. The dancer with whom s/he works is a worker whose movements also arise from an economic system. The relation to the world then plays along different registers: relations established in artistic creation, work relations and the exchanges between choreographer, dancers, dance professionals and audience. This engenders a network of resonances among several facets of the body: what it exposes, what it feels, what it offers, what it exchanges, what it retains.

What does the body do to me? That is the question at play in dance. But also in love. In advertising. In pornography. In adolescence. To evoke the body as an entity involves the brain and its plasticity. The question might then become: How does the body move me? That is one of the beautiful questions that Spinoza asks. The speed and the slowness of the body relay the speed and the slowness of thought. Sometimes they resist thought. Sometimes they provoke it.

Dancers travel more and more<sup>11</sup>. This is the era of globalisation and they go from country to country. The body of the dancer is a socialised one that submits to certain rules and invents others. It is subject to jetlag, changes in the seasons and economic injunction. It invents its places, its autonomies and its porosities. It is ferocious and lively, conditioned but searching itself as rebel.

The dancer’s body is such a little thing, immense.

**Geisha Fontaine** is a choreographer, performer, writer and dance theorist. Together with partner and video artist Pierre Cottreau, she created several important works which toured the world, including *A Mechanical Piece* a choreography for sensor-activated robots. Her book *Les Danses du Temps* was recently translated into Spanish.

## Footnotes:

1 There are exceptions! In *100% polyester, objet dansant à définir n°*(1999) by the French choreographer Christian Rizzo, there are no dancers. In *Une pièce démontée* (2010), Geisha Fontaine and Pierre Cottreau set the stage with twenty-five moving sculptures by the artist Dominique Blais. In these works, movement is taken over by a ‘non-human’, shifting the limits of dance.

2 For example, the French philosopher Michel Serres, influenced without doubt by Stéphane Mallarmé (*Genèse*, Grasset, 1982), speaks of the dancing body as “a totally abstract body, with no existence and with no escape”. In the Anglo-Saxon field of “Cultural Studies”, the approach to the body is much less literary and is studied according to precise perspectives (gender, colonialism etc.); but it does not focus on the overall workings and dimensions of the body.

3 The sociologist Luc Boltanski questions the foundations of a sociology of the body: “Is it enough to insist on the geographical and historical diversity of the uses of the body (collecting sometimes in the name of “proof” the most heteroclitite data, taken from the diverse societies and disconnected from the cultural ensemble that alone can give them their meaning) in order to make possible their sociological analysis?” (Luc Boltanski, “Les usages sociaux du corps”, *Les Annales*, 1, 1971, p. 205-233).

4 Laurence Louppe, *Poétique de la danse contemporaine*, Contredanse, 1997.

5 Michel Foucault, *Le corps, lieu d’utopies*, radio lecture, 7<sup>th</sup> December 1966, France Culture.

6 Foucault reminds us: “The Greek word for body only appears in Homer in reference to a corpse.”

7 Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie*, PUF, 1950.

8 In *Histoire de la sexualité* (Gallimard, 1976 and 1984), Foucault analyses how different sexual practices are more induced from outside and internalised than determined from within.

9 Pierre Bourdieu, “Remarques provisoires sur la perception sociale du corps”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, volume 14, April 1977.

10 The opportunities for being a professional dancer vary from country to country. But the choice to dedicate a lot of time to dancing remains an investment, whether or not it earns a return.

11 When they can’t travel, they make use of the Internet in developing their dance. Globalised forms of dance appear where young dancers do the same movements in different parts of the world. The same movement vocabularies are found in Algiers, New York, Teheran and Peking.

## Read More:

Laurence Louppe, *Poetics of Contemporary Dance*, translated by Sally Gardner, Dance Books Ltd, 2010  
on sale now at Dancehouse

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