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Beyond Stasis: The Medium of Moving Bodies in the Work of Choreographer Ginette Laurin

The following paper proposes a model for considering the nature of embodiment through the lens of contemporary dance. The primary aim of this study is to examine the methods through which the medium of performance can offer insight into the specificities of the lived body. I pose the material body as site of intercorporeal exchange and as a locus of dialogue. Rather than accounting for the body as always already being in motion, scholarship on the body has a tendency to consider it as a static and concrete form. In order to develop a methodology for theorizing the lived experience of corporeality, I consider the work of Montreal choreographer Ginette Laurin's evening length work, *La Chambre Blanche*, by way of example. It is the aim of this paper to suggest that a collaborative engagement of Brian Massumi's post-Deleuzian body, alongside a reading of the traditional phenomenological model of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of "the flesh" (1968), may provide the tools necessary for a comprehensive reading of the body in motion.

To begin, it is important to briefly sketch out dominant scholarship on the body in order to bring to light the areas in which further thinking is necessary. As a great deal of thinking on and about the body has been done within the realm of feminist theory, it is this theoretical domain that provides points of both anchorage and departure. Although by no means a comprehensive view of the literature on embodiment, two dominant paradigms of scholarship on embodiment have emerged from the domain of feminist theory. Repeated tendencies within the field situate embodiment within one of two camps: the first would be composed of an issue-based approach, focusing on how the female body has been elided, exploited and oppressed within Western societies. I am thinking in particular here of the work of theorists such as Sandra Bartky, Susan Bordo, bell hooks and Catherine MacKinnon. Work of this genre has made important contributions to rethinking issues in and around normative gender and racial embodiment as it relates to socio-cultural schema on a broader scale, yet this approach remains unable to think beyond a stable, straightforward materiality. The second prevalent mode of scholarship unveils the physical body as a discursive construct, a generation of the complex mechanisms of power, language, institution. The body becomes an inscriptive surface, existing only as a product of discourse and power. It is useful to think of the work of prominent scholars Rose Braidotti, Judith Butler, Claire Colebrook and Donna Haraway. While this research too has been useful, particularly in rethinking constructions of the body as given, straightforward and immutable, it is difficult to account for the lived, fleshly materiality within this framework. As scholarship on

non-normative bodies—transsexual or disabled bodies for instance—increasingly comes to the forefront of academic enquiry, it is imperative that we develop a framework accountable for the enfleshed, real and very material obstacles that form constituent lived realities.

As trans-theorist Jay Prosser succinctly articulates, “The irony is that the focus on bodies as effects or products of discourse re-metaphysicalizes bodies, placing their fleshy materiality even further out of our conceptual reach” (1998: 12). Recognizing the important theoretical groundwork as well as the insufficiency of both these theoretical frames, I build my argument for a new lens of embodiment that is capable of accounting for both the body’s fluidity and its enfleshed reality. Thinking the intersection of the body in process without abandoning its material limitations is a necessarily complicated task. In this paper, I posit contemporary dance as an ideal site in which we can manifestly encounter two seemingly contradictory frames simultaneously and collaboratively at work.

Enter the scene of Ginette Laurin’s *La chambre blanche*: the lights come up to reveal a stage within a stage. White walls enclose three sides of the stage, leaving the fourth wall open as in a traditional proscenium theatre. The interior of the space reveals a shower faucet built into the upstage wall. The white brick walls impose and confine the stage space, creating a virtual petri dish inside which the bodies of the dancers multiply like cultured bacteria. Empty for a brief moment, the space soon fills with bodies. A singular female body, soon joined by a male body, begins the dance. The woman at first remains stoic as the male body begins a series of erratic, gestural phrases playing across and through the negative space around her body. Closing her fingers around the man’s forearm, she arrests the manic movement cycle. A duet begins.

There are many questions that arise on first encounter with Laurin’s *chambre*. In the interest of the brief length of this paper, we will focus on how the piece works at once to construct embodied identity while constantly questioning, destabilizing and reorienting its meaning. A useful tool here is Brian Massumi’s “sensing body in motion” (2001). In the introduction to *Parables for the Virtual*, Massumi writes:

When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It *moves*. It *feels*. In fact, it does both at the same time. It moves as it feels and it feels itself moving. Can we think a body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation whereby each immediately summons the other? (2002:1, italics in the original)

In contrast to theoretical models which deterministically settle the body in a static and given situation of being—for example that of race, class or gender—Massumi’s “sensing body in motion” represents the possibility of change and does not attempt to fix the body to a before or after location within a given frame. The goal of Massumi’s project is instead to escape rigidly deterministic visions that in turn leave the body to be situated relative to an idea of position. Again, according to Massumi, constructed systems of signification came to position the body-

subject in cultural theory on a grid which was itself “conceived as an oppositional framework of culturally constructed significations: male versus female, black versus white, gay versus straight, and so on” (2002: 2). Massumi argues that each of these binary oppositions becomes a fixed point of stasis, a derivative consequence of a relation between body and world in which world constructs body. The movement between points of freeze-frame is coagulated. We arrive at what Massumi would call a “grid of positionality”: bodies that have become one thing or another, situated as already passed through as if “the body simply leaps from one definition to the next” (2002: 3). This framework for thinking embodied subjectivity evacuates movement itself from the situation of bodies.

Further, Massumi speculates on the tendency to code and position. He states, “earlier phenomenological investigations into the sensing body were largely left behind because they were difficult to reconcile with the new understandings of the structuring capacities of culture and their inseparability from the exercise of power” (2002: 2). Precisely what these phenomenological investigations entail will be explicated presently. For the moment, what is important to note here is the way the bodies inside the opening sequence of Laurin’s *chambre* undeniably disrupt ontologically static structures of the body’s meaning. We shall now turn towards Ginette Laurin’s *La chambre blanche* as an example of how Massumi’s “sensing body” might function beyond a theoretical forum.

Upon first glance, the first image of a body, the female figure clothed in undergarments, appears vulnerable, submissive. Yet, as we watch Laurin’s choreographic phrasing unfold, it is *in the very relation of moving bodies* that identity forms and deforms: a snowglobe of whirling bodies and superimposed subjectivities, framed by the white-walled embrace of *la chambre*. With the action of closing her fingers around the male dancer’s wrist, bringing him into a powerful, athletic and physical duet, this gesture introduces a moving relation between two bodies that effectively deconstructs our first image of the helpless female body. The movement phrase that follows shows both bodies—male and female—as unstable: the torsion and force of their bodies coming together, splitting apart, a parody of balance as a preparation for falling. Their limbs and torsos bind together as tender, arresting moments of intimacy, each fragile instant relentlessly pulled apart almost as soon it crystallizes in our field of vision. The rapidly shifting effect of Laurin’s choreography is simply a magnification or intensification of how these corporeal dynamics operate off stage as well as on. It is a framed exploration of sensing bodies in motion. This may seem a most literal translation; however, I contend that it is a useful one. When the dancers of *la chambre* are still—as in the case of the fragile female dancer—their meaning is fixed. Yet, when they move in relation to one another, the rapidly shifting orientation of their bodies as gendered or racialized dissolves, leaving us with a picture of two moving bodies whose meaning is created and recreated out of the relation to each other that unfolds in their duet.

When we think about corporeal difference (race, gender, able vs. disabled), it is useful to conceptualize these notions as points on Massumi’s grid of positionality. As I have already noted

above, situating a body as a definite point on a grid robs it of its inherent disposition as a moving body, and yet there are perhaps useful tools here for thinking the material consequences of living out the experience of a racialized, gendered, disabled or differently “othered” body. Let us then consider how Massumi unpacks a crucial differentiation between what he calls possibility and its related but incongruent companion, potential. Massumi’s theoretical frame borrows and depends heavily on a post-Deleuzian conception of the body. In accordance with this lineage of thinking, Massumi asks how we might think the body with its real but abstract dimensions. Real but abstract is the theoretical dimension of the body in which we might find room for a framework of motion and instability so crucial to the central project of this paper, rearticulating material embodiment.

As Massumi writes on the concept of the real but abstract dimensions of the body, “in motion, a body is an immediate unfolding to its own nonpresent potential to vary” (2002: 4). In other words, the body as a stable site of difference does not exist as a pre-condition for variation and difference; instead the material body’s underlying capacity for variation (we might call this motion) holds this variation as always already implicated in any situation on the grid of positionality. Corporeal subjectivity must be figured as always already in motion to its “own indeterminacy (its openness to an elsewhere and otherwise than it is, in any here and now)” (2002: 5) or else we are stuck in the realm of bodily *possibility*. Massumi carefully distinguishes between possibility and potential: “Possibility is a variation *implicit in* what a thing can be said to be when it is on target. Potential is the *immanence of* a thing to its still indeterminate variation, under way” (2002: 9, italics in the original). Leaving aside the more complicated nuances of this argument, its simple implications again address potential as the basic condition for building a theory of embodiment based on the tenets of passage, indeterminacy, transition and change.

Thus far, using a logic routed in Massumi’s post-Deleuzian conception of the body, I have demonstrated operational definitions, via the opening sequence of Ginette Laurin’s *La chambre blanche*, for the sensing body in motion, the grid of positionality and potential. I have argued that a Massumian framework utilizing these notions allows us to understand how a body can become theoretically pigeonholed in a position on the grid while its potential for variation manages to undo that very positioning. However, this territory of the real but abstract treads dangerously close to committing the fatal error of “placing the fleshy materiality out of our conceptual reach” that Prosser cautions against. In order to defend Massumi’s framework, while at the same time pushing its limits, I will now turn towards French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “the flesh” and its doctrine of reversibility. I intentionally move this analysis forward by drawing parallels between Massumi’s post-Deleuzian framework and that of Merleau-Ponty. Although these two conceptual models are traditionally thought of as being at odds with one another, I contend that it is useful to draw out the parallels between Massumi’s work and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty so as to avoid the problem of thinking the body without the actual body.

To begin by briefly defining “the flesh” according to Merleau-Ponty:

The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term, “element”, in the sense that it was used for water, air, earth, and fire, that is in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense, an “element” of Being. (1968: 139, italics in the original)

What the flesh describes in practical terms is the intermingling of sensible and sentient, of perceiver and object perceived, of subject and object. Following Merleau-Ponty’s thought, it is the body itself, and only the body, that succeeds in negotiating the relations between subject and object. Indeed, contained within this very corporeality is an essential inextricability of subject and object, described by the ontological element of the flesh. Further, Merleau-Ponty writes of a kind of hollow within being, what he later goes on to describe as an *écart* or dehiscence. The perceiver and the perceived seep into each other but this does not mean a

fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping and encroachment, so that we must say that things pass into us as well as we into things. (1968: 123)

Although reversibility between the perceiver and the object perceived exists, the critical distinction remains that they do not merge or unify through this reversibility of perception.

Massumi writes of sensation:

it’s simply this: sensation is never simple. It is always doubled by the feeling of having a feeling. It is self-referential The doubling of sensation does not assume a subjective splitting and does not itself constitute a distancing. It is an immediate self-complication. (2002: 14)

This “self-complication”, he elucidates, is structured much the same way that an echo reveals to us the resonance of sound. Walls can dictate the magnitude of a soundwave’s potential vibration, and therefore constitute the conditions of the sound’s emergence. The resonation that propels the sound’s emergence does not precisely happen on the walls, but rather *in between them*. An echo can only occur when framed by walls dictating the sound wave’s dynamic properties of motion and rest, such that a time lag occurs between the initial audible sound perception and its bounce-back. Without a certain distance between the edge, wall or limit and the perceiver that allows a sound time lapse to occur, the bounce-back and the originary sound are heard as one and the same. This is called a reverberation. The key difference perceptually speaking between an echo and a reverberation is that with an echo, there are two distinctive sounds—a kind of call and answer—while a reverberation only produces one audible sound. In both cases, the originary sound wave remains as one unit—heard either as two different sounds or as one intact

sound—that precisely exists as a self-complication of the initial sensation. Massumi goes on to formulate this immediate self-complication as intensity and therefore as experience.

The resonance that occurs, as in a sound wave reverberating or echoing, performs the function of converting distance (i.e. the distance that the sound wave travels) into intensity. This transformation fills the space of in-betweenness, for instance between the original sound and its echo, as experience. The metamorphosis of “surface distance into intensity is also the conversion of the materiality of the body into an *event*. It is a relay between its corporeal and incorporeal dimensions” (2002: 14, italics in the original). These are the conditions under which a body-self can emerge, always-already in relation and *as relation*. In Massumi’s language the “walls” that effect an echo within corporeality are the sensory surfaces of the body. The self-reference of sensation must be therefore entirely within the domain of the body. The body also shares a relation with its surrounding life world, to the grid of positionality that we have earlier addressed. We do not quite have the tools here for thinking the body side of this relation other than through its inherence in the self-complication of sensation. Unfoldings—self into world, world into self—condition the field of emergence of the body’s becoming. In fact, Massumi’s “incorporeality of the concrete” thinks unfoldings as simultaneous to the body’s becoming such that the body in process is never ontologically prior to that which it senses. Passage, indeterminacy, transition and change have “ontological privilege in the sense that they constitute the field of the emergence, while positionings are what emerge” (2002: 10). I ask the following question, having taken this albeit brief tour of Massumi’s thought: How might we begin to develop a politics of embodiment when the materiality of the body is always emergent, and yet somehow a grid of positionality can and does fix its potential into possibility? Others have asked this question. For instance, Lisa Blackman asks what happens when bodies become “stuck” (2007). Perhaps a politics of embodiment based on an ontology of relation *is* a political action. However, I still echo Prosser’s original concern and thus carry this enquiry further.

As noted earlier, Massumi opens *Parables for the Virtual* by questioning whether we can think the body without simultaneously engendering the connection to both movement and sensation. Let us then make a turn towards movement by considering once more Laurin’s *La chambre blanche*. The white walls of the stage set perform the function of the walls in Massumi’s illustration of the resonance of sound as analogous to the self-reference of sensation. So too are they analogous to the sensory surfaces of the body. The dance then shows us an echoing of bodies in movement. The single “sound wave” is the whole unit of the dance echoing across itself in complex phrased patterns of movement that create the corporeal narrative. Here Massumi is still speaking about sound waves but his words can be applied superficially to the context of *La chambre*: “this complex self-continuity is a putting into relation of the movement to itself: self-relation” (2002: 14). I am more interested, however, in how the specific bodies inside the dance draw out the self-complication of sensation.

The dancing bodies in Laurin's work are never straightforwardly what they seem. The meaning, identity or selfhood of each body is never coincident with itself. That is to say, as time progresses in the piece, our relation as audience to the bodies within *La chambre* changes: shifting and reforming as Laurin develops her choreographic language. But despite this malleability of meaning, the body's inherent fluidity that fulfills a crucial function in its structure of meaning-making, the body has material-real and physical properties. During one section of the piece near the middle, the female dancers don pointe shoes. Immediately, their rather androgynous bodies—complete with shaved heads—take on the feminized, ethereal beauty of the ballerina, with her long canon of submissiveness and delicate beauty. But Laurin's choreography contradicts this image, the movement phrasing a powerful reclamation of instability that mimics this image of woman. And yet, we can simultaneously hold these two distinctly contradictory images in the understanding that they are one and the same body. More than sensation, I am arguing that this self-complication exists within the body as a whole, moving unit. Just like an echo, which makes audible the reverberation (sound's self-complication), contradictory embodiments make visible the body's self-complication. We might also think of an individual offstage who carries different but simultaneous embodiments in their public and private lives, for example the archetypal binary division between the bodies of domestic and professional life. Note that this is not an attempt to distinguish between the public and private spheres but rather an attempt to recognize that this non-coincidence of the body with itself is much like the way Merleau-Ponty describes the reversibility of the body, whose

double belongingness to the order of the “object” and to the order of the “subject” reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders. It cannot be by incomprehensible accident that the body has this double reference; it teaches us that each calls for the other. (1968: 137)

A folding of body into world and world into body can be thought in response to the relation between perceiver and perceived that Merleau-Ponty describes with the flesh and reversibility. Although Massumi is most certainly not developing this meaning of unfolding in the phenomenological sense, I contend that the hollow within Being of which Merleau-Ponty writes allows us to think locatedness and hence the *situation* of the body in ways that Massumi's post-Deleuzian ontology of process does not quite permit. Drawing Massumi's idea of self-reference or self-complication with regard to sensation as analogous to a phenomenological *écart* or dehiscence within Being can perhaps help to think the body back into the becoming body. Keeping in mind that this is most certainly not the goal of Massumi's project (and perhaps a goal he might not wish to pursue), there is a second achievement: thinking a process body alongside a phenomenological notion of perception can desolidify phenomenology's arguably rigid attachment to defined subject and object poles. The length of this current paper does not permit me to conduct an in-depth analysis in this direction; suffice to say, the preliminary questions raised in this paper will perhaps provide the stepping stones for such an analysis in the future.

References

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