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## Les discours de la danse

mots-clefs pour  
une méthodologie  
de la recherche



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## Dance Discourses: Keywords In Dance Research

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The formation of what Randy Martin has called “critical dance studies” (1998) has gained increased momentum over the past decade. Martin’s notion of critical dance studies clarified how dance scholarship was being reshaped by the explicit inclusion of critical theory in its methodologies and epistemologies.<sup>1</sup> One of the major consequences for dance studies in embracing critical theory was the identification of dancing and choreographic practices *as being also theory*. Understanding dance as theory is not equivalent to seeing dance as the sole provider of the theoretical tools it needs for its own analysis (this would be intolerably solipsistic). Rather, it means that dance becomes a privileged practice ready to provide analytical tools for theorizing *other* areas of social performances: politics, culture, formations of disciplines and their bodies (docile or resistant). Dance is a mode of theorization that theory itself would need in order to address the social and political problematic brought by issues close to dance such as mobilization, embodiment, subjectivities, participation, representation, desire, discipline, control, etc.

*Dance Discourses: Keywords in Dance Research* is a continuation and expansion of these propositions regarding dance as theory. Editors Susanne Franco and Marina Nordera write in their Introduction to this excellent collection how their aim is to probe “the way in which dancing itself has been questioned in the production of knowledge and has become both a ‘subject’ and a ‘tool’ of reflection” (8). Gathering original contributions by prominent dance scholars from Europe and the U.S., *Dance Discourses* offers an important addition to current debates within dance and performance studies, while fulfilling the editors’ desire to “encourage the discussion of theories and methods through comparison and dialogue, by throwing into play the various perspectives, approaches, and guidelines applicable to research in general and the individual studies in particular” (1). A major challenge for anthologies is to articulate and sustain a coherent theoretical and critical line. Franco and Nordera found a solution to such a challenge in structural precision. *Dance Discourses* is divided into three sections, each defined by one “keyword”: “Politics,” “Feminine/Masculine,” “Identities.” Sections are composed of a short introduction written by a guest contributor. Mark Franko introduces the section/keyword “Politics,” Linda Tomko introduces “Feminine/Masculine,” and Andrée Grau “Identities.” Each introduction is followed by three essays (or “Case Studies”), and a closing chapter (“Perspectives”), responding to the three “Case Studies.” This pattern produces much more than one would expect by simply looking at the book’s table of contents. By keeping each section so clearly divided, and all sections repeating the same structure, the anthology invites meta-critical readings across the essays. This is already knowledge in motion.

Finding and proposing “keywords for research,” especially when these are reduced to only three, is always a risky exercise, open to accusations of arbitrariness. In their Introduction, Franco and Nordera clarify how their keywords were chosen “on the basis of the frequency with which they appear in recent studies both inside and outside of the discipline, on the basis of the quantity and quality of the studies that have been conducted in each of the fields of inquiry they suggest and circumscribe, and, last but not least, on the basis of their relevance to our research” (3–4). Rather than movement, kinetics, corporeality, rehearsal, repetition, training, choreography, or improvisation as keywords for dance research, the chosen three reveal the privileged interlocutor to this anthology: what the editors call critical theory. It should be noted, however, that critical

theory remains mostly undefined throughout the book, and never clearly linked to the Frankfurt school or to Marxism, except in Mark Franko's essay.

In "Politics," all the essays (by Laure Guilbert, Susan Manning, and Yvonne Hardt; response by Susanne Franco) address German *Ausdruckstanz*. In "Feminine/Masculine" (essays by Susan Leigh Foster, Nathalie Lecomte, and Inge Baxman; response by Marina Nordera), the topic is eighteenth century theatrical dance. In "Identities" (essays by Ramsay Burt, Thomas de Frantz, and H el ene Marqui e; response by Isabelle Ginot), the structural frame becomes looser. "The topic of the third section is the hardest to bring into focus," note the editors (5). What is this hard-to-focus topic addressed under the umbrella of "Identities"? The answer: contemporary dance. It is relevant that only in "Identities" is the contemporary taken as an object of analysis—given that it could belong perfectly well to "Politics" or to "Feminine/Masculine." It is also relevant that by taking the contemporary as a topic, the editors claim that focus becomes harder to achieve. This claim is certainly a symptom of a certain epistemological anxiety regarding the contemporary, deserving further probing. For it is at the crux between the contemporary and the historical that dance research's relation to critical theory reveals, if not the political, at least the "disciplinary unconscious" of dance studies. When facing dances produced in the present, dance scholars tend to perceive their discipline as fuzzy—even if the excellent critical-theoretical analyses of contemporary dances by Burt, de Frantz, Marqui e, and Ginot in "Identities" demonstrate such a perception as being a fallacy. Nevertheless, the epistemological anxieties brought to dance studies by the "contemporary" and its theoretical-political dynamics, demand further reflection. I will return to this issue at the end of this review.

It is gratifying to read an anthology where every essay achieves a high level of originality, rigor, and clarity in methodological exposition and relevance to current debates in the fields of dance and performance studies. In those instances when one may disagree with an author's position, or sometimes simply wish for clarification of certain points left open in an essay, most likely the "Perspectives" at the end of each section will pick up those same aporetic moments and address them in critically insightful and theoretically generative ways. For instance, I was a bit puzzled when I read in Susan Leigh Foster's multilayered essay on racial alterity in Jean Georges Noverre's lost ballet *Dido and Aeneas* the statement that "Noverre's treatment of Dido," documented in his book *Th eorie et Pratique* (1766), "prepares the way for the invasion" of Algeria by France in the nineteenth century (1830). It seemed to me difficult to attribute to a lost dance performed half a century before the invasion of Algeria any kind of role (preparatory or other) in the massive colonial effort undertaken by most Western European nations under the new geo-political re-alignments that took place after the French and American revolutions. At that time, the entire continent (and not only France) was being recast by the economic imperatives of a nascent industrialized capitalism, while still under the influence of national and international political turmoil brought about by the earlier Napoleonic expansionist policies.

Pencil-ing several exclamation points next to Foster's claim, I continued to be puzzled until the "Perspectives" essay at the end of that section. There, Marina Nordera offers an astute re-casting of Foster's statement, when she clarifies: "Foster's motivation for studying the launching of France's eighteenth century colonial project grew out of her subjective political implication in the current redefinition of the concept of Empire, in the United States in particular" (175). When such a thoughtful response is given to an essay just read, it both supplements and scrambles our responses. It also indicates a kind of critical thinking that owes its force to what I believe is a privileged theoretical capacity of dance scholars to understand what it means to be "subjectively implicated" in a permanent state of movement.

Technically, a dancer perfects movement by repeating and returning. Repeating and returning thus becomes also a methodology to clarify gestures, rearticulate positions, define even better the plane of composition. I believe those moments of methodical reflexivity, of returning, throughout this

anthology, reveal a particularly successful link between epistemology and a choreographic or dancing sensibility. They reveal a mode of making theory, deriving from the act of dancing and of making dances—proving how thinking choreographically already provides productive methodological models to scholarship.

Activating reflectivity is particularly helpful in opening up a few essays in the anthology that at first sight may seem of interest only to a highly specialized readership. Nathalie Lecomte's contribution, "Danseuses and Danseurs at the *Opéra de Paris* (1700–25) According to the Cast Lists in the Libretto-Program," is an excellent example of how historical specificity is expanded not only by the larger implications of her fascinating study, but by its critical resonance with other essays in *Dance Discourses*. By statistically establishing the deep relation among economics, gender, and dancing, Lecomte allows readers to take the implications of her essay across centuries of dance-making, and use them to clarify many recent works in contemporary choreography in which economy and the differential labor of male and female dancers have been taken explicitly as choreographic and dramaturgical themes. Trans-historical lines of analysis open up. For example, new light is shed on many points made by Ramsay Burt in his contribution, where he analyzes contemporary German choreographer Félix Ruckert's piece *Hautnah*. In this important work from 1998, Ruckert uses issues of gender and commerce, intrinsic to dance and its politics, as explicit choreographic material, since dancers and audience must negotiate a price for dances to take place.

Other examples of generative resonances between essays can be found in Thomas de Frantz's contribution on Donald Byrd's recent choreography. When De Frantz notes how beauty in African-American dances performs "an act of recognition that allows blackness to become visible" (224), an act moreover that activates collective identity through representational affinities, his essay not only creates a dialogue with Ramsay Burt's chapter on "Resistant Identities," but retrospectively asks for deeper probing of Susan Manning's affirmation in her essay earlier in the book that "eurhythmic and *Ausdruckstanz* influenced the development of African-American concert dance" (54). Critical and theoretical resonances between dance and theory, as well as between past and present, exemplify Susan Leigh Foster's search for "a feminist mandate to probe the political agenda underlying any historical investigation" (129). Investigating this political agenda in twentieth century dance, Susan Manning calls "for an intercultural historiography of twentieth-century theatrical dance" (58), which supplements Nordera's notion of how "studying dance means making history out of bodies that are phenomenologically lost" (169).

Theorizing how a history in motion complicates the notion of "lost bodies" and necessarily imbricates past and present (in inevitable phenomenological intertwinement, since phenomenology is always necessarily a historical project as well) is vividly accomplished in Laure Guilbert's essay on German dance critic Fritz Böhme (1881–1952). Guilbert clarifies how the history made "out of bodies" proposed by Nordera must include also the history of the historian's own body, as Guilbert offers a vivid narrative of her own nomadic search for the scattered discursive remains of her subject (Böhme). In this search, the historian not only moves along the winding path of her research, but is also being moved by the shifting political ground of Europe's history and the shifting epistemological grounds of dance studies in the early 1990s. As Guilbert travels across Europe's archives, it is the very tectonic movement of European history shifting under her feet that directs and shapes her trajectory and her research. A reunited Germany opens archives of the former GDR previously inaccessible to Western researchers, and consequently dance history must realign its position in this unexpectedly new geo-political ground. It is the task of the dance scholar to methodologically and epistemologically account for the parallax effect created by those simultaneously concurrent and divergent movements (social, historical, political, affective, disciplinary, archival) in order to build a renewed dance history.

These reverberations, theoretical and political, reveal how urgent it is to answer Mark Franko's pointed question in his introduction to the "Politics" section: "Does dance have a 'political

unconscious?” (12). In a way, this anthology seems to propose a kind of active, or material, unconscious of history similar to Avery Gordon’s definition of “ghostly matter”—that spectral epistemological element that allows for a sociology of “endings that are not over” (Avery 1997, 139). Indeed, Mark Franko brings in the question of the specter as central to the ethics of dance history: “What do we have to fear from confronting ghosts . . . ?” (19). Franko asks this question after exposing the tension between what he calls “formalist” approaches to dance and “contextualist” approaches, particularly strong, according to Franko’s assessment, at the conference *Dance et Politique* held in 2001 at Centre National de la Danse, Vincennes, France (18). According to Franko, contextualists would be dance historians (“even though not all are enamored of critical theory” [18]), while the “formalist model seeks descriptive and theoretical tools that account for dance experience in the most unmediated manner possible,” making “the formalist persuasion in dance studies . . . a brand of anti-historical impulse” (19). Not without surprise (I had not been at the conference in question), I found my own writing being given as an example of this formalist and anti-historical “persuasion,” and provoking Franko to advocate the ghostly in dance scholarship.

Franko quotes from an essay on dance criticism I published in 1994, where I wrote: “An art that needs living bodies to exist is projected, as a research project, to an intangible past. It is as if one needed the veil of death in order to face the essence of dance. (Or is this veil a symptom that something unbearable may lie at the core of dance?)” (Lepecki 1994, 23). Franko’s immediate comment is: “What do we have to fear from confronting ghosts?” Puzzled by the inclusion of this passage as exemplary of formalist dance scholarship, it was only when I reached the end of *Dance Discourses*, and with it, the question of the “contemporary,” that I started making sense of Franko’s use of it and his comment. To contextualize: My essay was written in 1993 after a seminar I had taught at the European Dance Development Center in Holland, where dance students and I were trying to address the blatant lack of theory and the anti-theoretical stance in dance writing and scholarship when addressing specifically contemporary work. Not only did descriptive press reviews seem to be the only permissible model for writing (even scholarly) on contemporary dance, but these invariably descriptive evaluations were tainted (at best!) with occasional references to how a dance might have been “influenced” by another. The only disciplines deemed capable of theorizing dance were either dance history or dance anthropology. In both, a literal distance (geographical, cultural, temporal) is placed between the writer and the dance being theorized. Thus, it seemed that all the dances being made by our contemporaries had to be first sent to an “intangible past,” or had to arrive from a distant space of alterity, in order to become a proper object for theory. The possibility of doing any kind of theoretical research on contemporary dance seemed otherwise totally foreclosed. Hence my parenthetical (and ironic) observation: the “something unbearable” lodged at the core of dance, that which was not to be tolerated in its present force, and had to be sent far away, was nothing other than dance’s very own, immanent *theoretical potency*—a theoretical force that is a fundamental part of dance’s political ontology.

That dance’s theoretical power has been repressed in dance scholarship (and even in dance training) is an incontrovertible fact—Franko describes this quite well in his essay. And he associates this anti-theoretical drive in dance studies with a parallel disavowal: that of the political force of dance. Thus, repressing the theoretical force in dance is to repress its political ontology. But perhaps this repression may still be a current fact (a fact that perhaps could be called “dance studies’ political unconscious”)—one that creates all sorts of disciplinary ambiguities when dance scholars wish to address contemporary works. It is telling that the editors describe the section on contemporary dance in *Dance Discourses* as “hard to focus”; more significantly it is telling that the contemporary is introduced through an anthropological lens—even though the seventy-five pages of excellent essays in the contemporary section are non-anthropological in scope and methodology. This is not a critique of Andrée Grau’s very clear essay introducing the section, nor is it an anti-anthropological stance.<sup>2</sup> But again, we find in *Dance Discourses* the same disciplinary context that I identified in 1994:<sup>3</sup> Dance can be theorized historically (186 pages of *Dance Discourses*), or its contemporaneity must be introduced anthropologically (seventy-five pages). The point I

would like to make is simply this: As long as dance scholars cannot face the theoretical-political exchange happening in the immediate (but always mediated) encounter between theorists and dancers who share the same social context; as long as scholars do not acknowledge theory and a critical impulse at the core of contemporary dance; then dance research will indeed continue to *veil* dance's political ontology. This political ontology is precisely dance's capacity to create critical moves and theoretical acts through its present movement.

As Randy Martin wrote in *Critical Moves*, "Dance displays, in the very ways that bodies are placed in motion, traces of the forces of contestation that can be found in society at large" (1998, 6). This is why to address the contemporary theoretically does not amount to an "anti-historical impulse," or to a form of spectrophobia, just as it is not necessarily always aligned with "formalist" approaches. It is rather an affirmative project—one invested in politicizing dance's contemporaneity by theorizing dances synchronous to our experience of them. Between formally describing dances and judging them within an aesthetic system, and methodologically reducing contemporaneity to cultural alterity, a third way must be pursued. If Franko advocates, and very rightly so, a "historico-critical practice of writing" (24), I believe critical theory also provides tools for a *synchronous-critical* practice of writing in dance studies that in no way represents a formalist project. It is a matter of developing epistemologies of proximity, mobilized theorizations of the contemporary, and *critical-kinetic theories* (and not formalist reviews) tuned to dancing practices taking place in the present. The blurring effect this proximity may generate does not need to be met with epistemological anxiety about "hard to focus" topics; after all, blur is the effect of all movement, of all dancing theory, to which this anthology gives a valuable and much needed contribution.

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## Notes

1. In his concept of critical dance studies, Martin directly acknowledges Susan Leigh Foster's groundbreaking *Reading Dancing* (1986).

2. I hold a degree in cultural anthropology, and the writings of James Clifford, Michael Taussig, the Brazilian Viveiros de Castro, as well as by my colleague Barbara Browning, remain influential as well as essential to my own work.

3. This was a year when, as an M.A. candidate in performance studies, I found myself studying with two formidable dance scholars, Marcia Siegel—a formalist, if anything—and Mark Franko—a dance historian with whom I learned how to do dance theory.

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