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Review by Sally Gardner

This is a challenging book both for the rigour and breadth of its erudition and for the nature of its broader argument concerning the politics of the (ontological) ‘bind between dance and movement’. The book comprises five chapters (not including an Introduction and Conclusion) in which Lepecki discusses in detail a number of performance works which deploy choreographic strategies where dance’s relation to movement is being exhausted (1). The works, some very recent, others dating from the 1960s, are by European and American artists Bruce Naumann, Juan Dominguez, Xavier Le Roy, Jérôme Bel, Trisha Brown, La Ribot, William Pope.L and Vera Mantero.

In his Introduction, Lepecki argues that modernity and modern subjectivisation have been invested in the kinetic and that dance supports this investment. A dance’s refusal of kinetics acts as a productive lever in the sense that it can reveal what is at stake in the requirement that ‘the modern body’ display itself in/as kinetic spectacle or as ‘being-toward-movement’ (43). Dance, Lepecki argues, entered modernity as ‘choreography’, that is, through an ‘alloying’ of dancing and writing. The concept of choreo-graphy which dates from Thoinot Arbeau’s 1589 dance manual Orchesographie is coincident with modernity; and it is through choreography, and in modernity, that subjects become ‘kinetically-disciplined’. Thus, to question dance’s being bound to movement is at the same time to question the stabilizing of modern subjectivity around an injunction that the body should obey or perform choreographic commands: in Althusserian terms it is to question the subject’s choreographic ‘interpellation’. Each of the artists discussed, Lepecki argues, test, complicate and politicize the grounds of choreography as they foreground questions of subjectivisation, representation, memory, presence and/or race and colonialism.

It might be argued that the project of dance modernism, the defining of an autonomous art in which dancers develop and investigate ‘movement’ in its sensuous-kinaesthetic-forceful dimensions in an anti-representational aesthetics, has remained an incomplete
project. Lepecki, however, argues eruditely and forcefully that it is time to recognize a body of work which has moved beyond this modernist pre-occupation with ‘movement itself’ in order to reconnect with arts of representation, but doing so now in politically and theoretically informed ways. Thus he describes Trisha Brown’s (2003) *It’s a draw/Live Feed* as a work/event in which no act (dancing, drawing) or artistic genre (dancing/drawing) is privileged in relation to the other. Instead there is a dizzying simultaneity of genres and acts (74). The work probes and complicate how it comes into presence, and where it establishes its ground of being (5). At the same time, while the works discussed, such as visual artist Bruce Naumann’s *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Round the Perimeter of a Square* (1967-8), might be ‘choreographic’ they are not necessarily ‘dance’. It is part of Lepecki’s argument that dance studies must consider perspectives and works that challenge narrowly defined or defended borders.

Lepecki also explicitly frames his analyses of the performances discussed here as a partnership between dance, dance studies and philosophy. For example, his discussion and deployment of the concept of the ‘melancholic’ in dance – a melancholic that can be heard in the common plaint that dance only exists in the instant of ‘now’ and thus is constitutively ‘lost’ or ‘vanishing’ - proceeds from Freud and from Bergson and Deleuze where, for the two latter, ‘the present is no longer equivalent to the now’ but spreads out in ‘activity, affects and effects, outside the moment of the now’ (129). Lepecki thus takes issue both with presumptions about dance’s identity as movement and its supposed ephemerality. He argues that the being or existence of dance has been confused with its ‘being-present’: the past and the presence of dance exists without it necessarily having to be present. Lepecki describes how in Vera Mantero’s *uma misteriosa Coisa disse e.e. cummings* (a mysterious Thing said e.e.cummings) the deceased African American dancer, Josephine Baker, still moves, spectral and haunting, because the artist (Mantero) is able to invoke and play upon a postcolonialist melancholia (Europe’s unassuaged sense of loss of the colonial past) that is tied to white European perceptions of and desire for blacks dancing.
But does Lepecki’s privileging of a conversation between philosophy and dance in *Exhausting Dance* involve a universalizing and neutralising of his key concepts, which include ‘the modern body’, ‘Western theatrical dance’, and ‘movement’? Questions of dance modernism aside, there are important historical articulations in the concept and practice of *choreography* that ought to complicate ‘Western theatrical dance’ and dance *modernity*. The modernity of *modern* dance, for example, cannot be subsumed within the modernity of *ballet*. They represent very different modern projects at social, philosophical and aesthetic levels. Louis XIV moved to secure the autonomy (and hence modernity) of the balletic dancing body and of ballet choreography (his shifting dance, as Mark Franko notes, from a potentially subversive theatrical scene to a disciplinary/pedagogical one) by instituting centralized control over dance training. For the so-called *modern* dancers, however, the autonomy of dance was a function of a rejection of centralization in order to safeguard individual artistic independence and personalized relationships with or between dancers. Throughout the twentieth century modern dance choreography was criticized or devalued for not being writerly enough: that is, it was regarded as too tied to the idiosyncratic ‘person’ of the choreographer and lacking the lawfulness of ballet’s ‘absolute’ lexicon. When ‘Western theatrical dance’ is complicated with respect to the different historical meanings of ‘choreography’ the politics of the relationship between dance, movement and subjectivisation also becomes more complex.

*Exhausting Dance*, and Lepecki’s aim to rethink a politics of movement (87), makes an important contribution to the field of dance studies by discussing performance works that raise profound challenges to thinking dance politics. The book also raised for me some questions about the relative effects and value of *writing* and *dancing* where these two might not actually be, to use Lepecki’s term ‘alloyed’. The ‘expert registers’ of writing, as Susan Melrose calls the basis of academic authority including in such fields as dance studies, that Lepecki deploys, tend towards a mastery of the (live) objects they define. Melrose discusses this issue in terms of what a piece of academic writing *says* as opposed to what it *does* within the ‘scriptural economy’ of academic authorization and publishing and more widely. Lepecki’s relation to the works he discusses cannot but be shaped by
that implicit mastery in the kind of academically expert writing in which he is engaged. The performers themselves, (those whose work he discusses) however, seem to have proposed an ethics of radical generosity and, by their acts, extended to their audience an invitation to mutual vulnerability. Similarly, while Lepecki critiques the stereotyping of dance as that which only exists in a ‘fleeting now’ he does so in a particular, institutionalized register of publishing/writing. This juxtaposition creates a gap in which it is possible to feel that there is (still) something in the kinetic, in the present moment of dancing, perhaps, that resists logocentric authority, mastery and intelligibility.

References:
Melrose, S. ‘The Eventful Articulation of Singulaties – or, “Chasing Angels”.