Towards a Differential Dramaturgy: Opening Up the Writing Dimension of Dance

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore in depth the critique of the prevailing paradigm in 20th-century dance — especially in terms of its relation with the notion of identity — based on what we will call "dramaturgy of difference". This type of dramaturgy, as we will argue, goes further into the ontological revision of dance and strengthens the writing status of choreography. Finally, in order to illustrate the development of this dramaturgical strategy, we will analyse the case of the dancer and creator Loïe Fuller.

Keywords: modern dance, dramaturgy, difference, Loïe Fuller, writing, Jacques Derrida

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Difference will actually be regarded as the only paradoxical form of identity of dance. And dance will, in its turn, be regarded as the breathtaking version of a "thought of difference».

(Roberto Fratini, 2018a: 26)

Strategies that underpin other languages [...] that twist the body to suggest unseen ways of appearing. Aesthetic strategies that alter the modes of looking in order to reshape the field of visuality. Strategies of acceptance of the given order that become tactics of resistance to power. Strategies that enable us to go beyond the evidence and the prevailing representational apparatus.

(Maite Garbayo Maetzu, 2016: 236)

Some Reflections on the Use of the Term "Choreography" and its Ontology

In her study, the dramaturge and dance theoretician Bojana Cvejić (2015) undertakes a revision of the ontological debates in recent decades, while analysing how practice and theory defined dance creation. In her view, in the first decades of the 21st century it has become clear that many in the sector saw themselves more under the label "choreography" than the denomination "contemporary dance". The reason, Cvejić argues, is that the latter could imply adherence to the modernist and essentialist ontology that considered that "the medium of dance [is] an ongoing movement of the body, intentionally regulated, by rhythmic, gestural, or other kinds of patterns" (Cvejić, 2015: 9). This conception, already deconstructed by Lepecki (2006), was unable to assume the aesthetic and subjective radicality, among others, of projects by the so-called "conceptual" artists. The debates about *the conceptual* during the 2000s contributed to critque of the modernist ontology of dance, reluctant to base it on the movement of bodies. Cvejić concludes that this debate not only revealed the ineffectiveness of a label such as "conceptual dance" but "it symptomatically evidences a problem of qualifying as choreographies those performances that contest the foundational characteristics of dance as a historical art discipline" (Cvejić, 2015: 6).

Although this critique highlighted that it was problematic to qualify these pieces from the 2000s as "choreographies", why did they see themselves under the label "choreograph" or call their pieces "choreographies"? According to Cvejić, this denomination "suggests an insistence on the authorial position of the choreographer whereby the choreographer distinguishes her

work from a traditional notion of craftmanship in composing bodily movement" (Cvejić, 2015: 7). Understood in this way, we could say that some saw themselves as part of "choreography", not so much for the semantic value of the term but precisely because it was not understood in terms of "dance". Hence Cvejić points out that these artists often embraced the label of "performance" (or "choreographic performance"), thereby linking themselves to the tradition of the visual arts rather than to conventional dance legacy (Cvejić, 2015: 7). In my opinion, this tendency, along with the aesthetic and nominative approach to performance, has been gradually expanded when from creation, theory and the institutions labels such as "live arts", "living arts" or "new formats" have circulated.

This reality, which is reflected in the technical credits of Spanish and Catalan festivals and theatres, cannot be fully guaranteed. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify the following tendencies in many cases: on the one hand, and as Cvejić formulated, in recent years the term "dance" has gradually been dismissed. This mistrust, however, *has also swept along* the choreographic — which in many cases is no longer used as a marker of those artists who do not work on the wrongly called dancy dance, as Cvejić (2015: 6) mentions. In fact, I agree with the dance theorist Roberto Fratini when he says that "the last forty years [have] been tough times for choreography — challenged as a concept, dismissed as a praxis, unauthorised with all kinds of anthropological, religious, political and moral arguments" (2018a: 30). The rejection of the choreographic would actually take place from diverse sides, as Fratini notes. Those practices that wish to distance themselves from the dance legacy reject it while from the *other* side, i.e. from stances that are more committed to the signifiers around dance, the notion of choreography would often be rejected.

The Generalised Mistrust of Choreography and Writing

The starting point of this article is based on the fact that the notion of choreography has, to say the least, been undertheorised not to mention the opposition or reticence towards choreography. Rather, it has been led, according to Fratini's reading, by a "highly ideological tendency" which has consisted of establishing a scale of values "that goes from the body to movement to dance to 'Western choreography' as the epitome of all the abuses and errors of civilisation" (Fratini, 2018a: 30). This scale, in my view, follows a broader tendency in our culture that involves rejecting the notion of writing, as endorsed by Catherine Malabou (2009). In the following pages I would like to argue that, although this statement is true and writing does not belong to our *air du temps*, its rejection is due to an excessively narrow understanding of the notion of writing, which continues to be valuable in the field of dance, among others. And to specify this *narrow* conception of writing I would like to cite *Exhausting Dance,* in which André Lepecki calls in a veiled manner for the rejection of choreography.

From the outset, Lepecki makes clear his conception of choreography — a disciplinary, if not directly phallocentric, conception: "choreography as a

peculiar invention of early modernity, as a technology that creates a body disciplined to move according to the commands of writing" (Lepecki, 2006: 6). Lepecki refers to the predecessor of Noverre (who coined the term "choreography"), Thoinot Arbeau, who created the notion of *"orchesographie"*, i.e., the writing of the *orchesis*, dance. Based on the description of Arbeau's purposes when conceiving the treatise *Orchesographie* (1589), Lepecki justifies (and fixates) the "ontohistorical relationship" of choreography "to the force of law" (Lepecki, 2006: 26) and therefore he argues that: "Choreography demands a yielding to commanding voices of masters (living and dead), it demands submitting body and desire to disciplinary regimes (anatomical, dietary, gender, racial), all for the perfect fulfilment of a transcendental and preordained set of steps, postures and gestures" (Lepecki, 2006: 9).

This way of conceiving choreo*graphy* could be characterised, in Fratini's words (2018a: 30), "as a textual form of coercion"; a writing coercion that would occur mainly in two modes: prescription or transcription (Fratini, 2018a: 30). It would seem that for Lepecki dance or creation would be coerced by a preceding writing (an extremely rare case that dates back to the beginnings of dance modernity), or by a transcription subsequent to creation in some kind of notation format or *castrating* fixation. Fratini rightly qualifies this conception of a "re-dimension of the role" (Fratini, 2018a: 30) of choreography; a re-dimension that focuses on one of the uses of writing while reducing its potential to its *programmatic* dimension. It is precisely the programme, in its most machinal and restricted conception, that would appear at the core of the idea of writing which Lepecki associates with choreography; a writing that would operate based on the programme of identical repetition, reproduction and closure of the future.

The Current Ontological Status of Dance and Derridian Writing

Thus, in 2006 André Lepecki seemed to utilise the ideological and ontological origins of choreography to wholly encapsulate it in a restricted meaning of writing — almost rejecting it. However, there are other ways of conceiving writing and of linking it to choreography; among others, based on Jacques Derrida's work. In fact, in 2004 the Brazilian theorist related differently with writing and, curiously, opened up this possibility — which he would forget two years later —, when he argued that: "dance cannot be imagined without writing, it does not exist outside writing's space (...) With Derrida, dance finally finds a form of writing that is in harmony with dance's current ontological status" (Lepecki, 2004: 125, 133).

As for the current ontological status of dance, the essay from 2004 and the text *Exhausting Dance* suggest what it is and what it is set against. The modern ontology of dance, according to Lepecki, is closely linked to the "melancholic project of modernity" (2006: 124). Modern Western culture — of which dance theory and praxis form part — establishes a relation with the past, the archive and memory, which is incompatible with the ephemerality and irrecoverable character of the dance event. For this reason, for Lepecki, "the birth of choreography is ontohistorically associated with

melancholic complaints about dance's inability to stick around" (Lepecky: 2006: 125). Choreography, in fact, would be a *countermelancholic* invention which would attempt to "respond" to that project, with the drive to "fixate absence in presence" (Lepecky: 2006: 124). In contrast, the current ontology of dance challenges "the perception of ephemerality as a lack, in need of a supplement of documentation" (Lepecki, 2004: 130), as well as the centrality of the presence and of the present of the danced event — which, at the same time, did not cease to want to reproduce and reemerge forms of the past. And thanks to the Derridian deconstruction, the theorist Mark Franko recalls (Lepecki, 2004: 131), dance has been able to defend itself from the accusation of losability and evanescence, taking hold of them again, precisely because the Derridian work critiques the metaphysics of the present through a powerful theoretical devising of the notion of writing.

It is well known that, from 1967, the philosopher Jacques Derrida undertook a profound critique of metaphysics, while targeting the issue of presence. From *Of Grammatologie*, Derrida would place writing as a condition not only of the remaining sciences but "of all" in general (Goldgaber, 2021, x). The deconstructive project critiques Western culture prioritising the voice (closer to and guarantor of the being and its presence) above writing (understood solely as phonetic writing), which remains in a status of secondarity and of representation of the voice. Derrida argues that, prior to the voice, generalised writing (arche-writing) must exist. In a key paragraph in *Of Grammatologie*, he states that "writing in general covers the entire field of linguistic signs" and that in the world "as the space of inscription" all signifiers are "written even if they are 'phonic'" (Derrida: 1976: 44). The secondarity of writing was adduced for its supposed relational nature, derived from and linked to another — for instance, to the word as a signifier. The voice, in contrast, "*is heard* (understood) — that undoubtedly is what is called conscience — closest to the self as the absolute effacement of the signifier" (Derrida: 1976: 63). Bearing this in mind, Derrida argues that "[...] it is a question of producing another concept of writing. This concept can be called *gram* or *différance*" (Derrida, 1982: 26). This new concept would understand no "simple element to be *present* in and of itself, referring only to itself [...] No element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each 'element' — phoneme or grapheme — present being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system" (Derrida, 1982: 26).

Thus seen, secondarity would no longer be exclusive to writing but to any signifying element. Any presence is crossed by an arche-writing, by the very possibility of differentiating itself, of entering into the "play of differences". In the origin of any presence, therefore, there would not be anything present and identical to itself, but the *trace* and the movement of *différance* that goes hand in hand with it – the difference and the deferment of what it *marks*. The theorist Deborah Goldgaber explains in this way the operation of the *différance* and the mark: "The mark is never identical with itself because it always hosts another mark that structures it" (Goldgaber, 2021: 57). Hence,

we are always immersed in a complex system of presences and absences: the pure presence is erased as soon as it comes into being in order to link itself, in the *play of differences*, to the absences that allow it to *exist*. Any presence carries in itself its others that enable it to appear and signify. There are no full and absolute presences insofar as the "play of differences" needs both what is considered present and what is considered absent. Any presence, we could argue, is spilt in an unutterable manner between what is present and what is not present — hence the philosopher later coins the term hauntology that deconstructs the metaphysical and presentist notion of ontology.

In his conception of choreography, dance does not escape this cultural tendency that we call presentist or "secondarist" — an attribute that Fratini puts down to the fact that dance is considered a "derived phenomenon" (2018a: 30). However, redefining the role of writing in dance can lead us to powerful artistic gestures and to innovative manners of relating to it, although this approach is not "obvious", as Goldgaber (2021: 145) points out.

Linking this new way of understanding writing — and the ontology it entails — to choreography is not an original gesture of Lepecki or of Franko, but Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology* (1976: 9) that: "Now we tend to say 'writing' [...] to designate not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible [...] for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography [...]."

Derrida makes clear that his *extended* conception of writing includes choreography, not as notation (which would be secondary), but that the very essence and content of choreography would be a writing activity (Derrida, 1976: 9). The Derrida specialist, Anne E. Berger, goes one step further, while commenting on Derrida's interview "Chorégraphies" (1992), and argues that "[d]ance, therefore, would be a way of performing steps differently, of 'deferment' and of différ*ance*" (Derrida, 2008, 175).

Choreography as a Differential Writing

To show why it is important and powerful to reconsider choreography as a differential writing, I would like to take as a starting point, again, Roberto Fratini's statement about William Forsythe in *El cuerpo incalculable* (2018a: 30), where he says that the choreographer has the merit of having "[misled] a pertinacious ontology of dance and the body: by entrusting to choreography the role of 'structuring differential' it demonstrates that, if there is something illusory, derived and phantasmal, it is precisely the *holy* link between body, dance and identity."

In this text, Fratini seems to agree with Berger insofar as he would set out, on the one hand, the role of choreography (of Forsythe, at least) as a "structuring differential" and, a few pages later, "*differentiality* as dance" (Fratini: 2018a: 40). Moreover, the theorist points out that this role is involved in the demystification of the link between body, dance and identity that Bauer had called the prevailing paradigm of the 20th century. In fact, the

aforementioned text by Bauer anticipates a way of understating choreography in these terms. The author cites Petra Sabisch's study which argues that choreography would be "something", that "choreographs [the] bodies while being something else than these bodies" (Bauer, 2018: 84). This "something else" would be relational, a kind of exchange. It is worth stressing that both Bauer and Derrida approach writing (for the former choreographic, and for the latter *in general*) in terms of a "chain", of remission or of exchange. Thus, in dance a kind of "process" or "operation" of generation and organisation of "abstract spatial and temporal figurations (signifiers) and concrete (stage) figurations" (Bauer, 2018: 86) takes place, sustained among others by the bodies on stage.

Let's continue to maintain some distance — a Dis*tanz*[1] as Derrida would say — between bodies and choreography. In her essay Bauer insists on rejecting the conception of choreography as the "exterior expression of the carnal and affective kinaesthesia" of a "self" or of the "subjective experience of the dancer," as well as "the form of actualisation of the dancing subject" (Bauer, 2018: 83, 81, 87). Bauer's text rather leads us to argue that choreography is a writing process of/about bodies, bodies that are not the choreography, as Sabisch recalled, but are affected by it constitutively, substantially.

This choreography, which we could call "differential", would not consider, or not completely, the absolute contrary of a fixated and identity body; in other words, a *blank*, neutral body about to receive all the figuration upon it. It is rather understood that bodies, when they go on stage (as well as when they get on a bus or walk on the street), are previously *written*, that they carry in themselves the writing of a complex relational network that is the world — in its most historical and situated conception. The artists, the audience and their framework cover the bodies on stage with endless texts that constellate them (and sometimes besiege them) and with which they inevitably have to dance. Thus, although the arche-writing *presents* them before our eyes, it also opens the door to be able to transform and *rewrite* them on stage. This hypothesis would endorse the consideration that Fratini conditioned on a "perhaps" (Fratini: 2012: 424-25): "Choreography is this same subjection and dangerous implication between body and diagram, the incoercible tendency of writing to densify and complicate itself [...] It can be organically suggestive to continue believing that choreography is gestated and illuminated by the body, although perhaps the truth is the contrary: the body is gestated and illuminated by the choreography."

Conceived from this perspective, the body would not dance its identity but would choreograph its difference — or rather would choreograph by

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1.   In his essay from 2004, André Lepecki introduces a Derridian conceptual figure that he takes from *Éperons : les styles de Nietzsche*: the *Distanz* – which should imply both distance and dance [*Tanz* in German]. Following the text on Nietzsche, Lepecki links the distance with the woman and with femininity, while suggesting that "woman's dance at a distance is precisely the deferment, the differentiation, with which woman 'engulfs and distorts all vestige of essentiality, of identity, of property'" (2004: 135).

I would like to maintain this concept at a distance from the main body of the article because, although I think that differential writing incorporates and differs any essentiality, identity or attribute, I consider it questionable to link it exclusively (or make it "proper of") women and femininity. I borrow this critique of Derrida (and indirectly Lepecki) from the essays "Praxis de la différence : Notes sur le tragique du sujet" (1992) and "Le philosophe travesti ou le féminin sans les femmes" (1993) by the Belgian philosopher Françoise Collin.

differentiating itself. Reapproaching dance with Derrida, therefore, suggests that no body can relate to an original, identical and immutable identity but rather the "play of differences" or the *différance* allows us to imagine choreography as a subversive gesture of deferment and differentiation of any prior writing that is sought to be imposed on the bodies on stage. It should not be understood that this gesture — as we will insist later — draws on a blank body but, rather on loaded, historically "marked" bodies, as Peggy Phelan would say (1993).

The Dramaturgy of Difference

Throughout the preceding pages I have wanted to focus on those approaches to choreography — minority in the current panorama — which would regard it a differential operation. However, in any case we cannot deny the relation of dance with the notion of identity, as well as the political power of an identity dance. Thus, although *haunto*logically speaking, there has been and will aways be a reference to difference (which comes from arche-writing), it is possible to outline in a *practical* way a division between those choreographic pieces that promote a differential praxis and those proposals of an identity nature. We should acknowledge that in some contexts it is absolutely necessary and politically subversive to hold onto an identity position and use its force to break dynamics of exclusion or violence. And resuming Françoise Collin's arguments (1992), I would say that we need to be careful and strategic when relating with certain forms of alternation, of difference and of critique of the subject because it can be politically counterproductive for those people that are not *subjects of law* to give up organising themselves and acting from identity positions, when they do not have room to speak or their rights guaranteed, even in the political arena.

Having made this clarification, I would define *differential dramaturgy* as that creative project that extracts specific choreographic strategies and procedures by exploiting the previously outlined ontology of dance. This dramaturgy would have sought to strengthen the differential dimension of choreography, instead of trying to counter it either from the "supplement" of documentation or notation (Lepecki, 2004: 130) or from a strategy that would like to reorganise dance towards the definition and the identity. This type of dramaturgy, among other aspects, would seek to explore in depth the tools that considering choreography as a differential writing of the bodies would offer us.

In my opinion, although Roberto Fratini formulates it from other places, I consider that the differential dramaturgy I am trying to outline here has many points of contact with the "silent dramaturgy" that the theorist has developed in recent years (2008, 2010, 2018b). These points of contact particularly concern the way of conceiving the body and the dance-writing relation. Thus, at the beginning of his essay, Fratini (2018b) criticises a "false equation" between "choreography-writing and dance-life" (2018b: 189). He also criticises that "any disturbing suspicion that "there is a similarity between the arbitrary gesture of dancing and the arbitrary gesture of writing"

is censored (Fratini, 2028b: 189). On the contrary, silent dramaturgy formulates that there is a link between dance and writing, although it is necessary to carefully revise this link, so that writing does not eventually end up being the fixating and identity agent of dance. Thus, faced with the apparent *enigmatic silence* of dance and its ephemerality, the dramaturgy proposed by Fratini would not seek to enclose or lumber dance with a sovereign "word" that dominates the meaning and undermines the richness of the sensitive. Rather, the relation between dance and writing pursued by such dramaturgy would "eclipse" the prevalence of the word as well as "the potential sections of the written word that has to sink so that the scenic word can appear" (Fratini, 2018b: 194). Faced with the *theological* word of a writing understood in terms of castration, Fratini sets out a dynamic between a poetic word and a scenic word whose objective is to elevate the figurality[2] of the choreography. This dynamic, however, is based on an absolute insolubility: "[e]ach of them, dance and dramaturgy, strives to detect in the other a meaning on which to lean and, as it does not, it stumbles, staggers, loses its balance: it continues *dancing* its signs" (Fratini, 2018b 199). It is no surprise that Fratini genetically links the idea of poetic writing (or of word) pursued by silent dramaturgy to Stéphane Mallarmé. In "Ballets", within *Divagations,* the poet stated that the dancer is not "a woman who dances" (Mallarmé, 1993 [1897]: 107) but "a Sign" Mallarmé, (1993 [1897]: 110), a "poem" (Mallarmé, 1993 [1897]: 107), "a poem that is being written, even if it looks like a subject," Lacan (2001: 572) would add. Mallarmé's dancer is both half poem and half poet given that, when going on stage, "before a step she invites, with two fingers, a trembling fold of her skirt and simulates an impatience of feathers toward idea" (Mallarmé, 1993 [1897]: 108). She invites and simulates an impatience of feathers — feathers of poet and feathers of *Signe/Cigne* (Sign/Swam) —, which would just be another way of saying the dancer sets in motion "a corporal writing" (Mallarmé, 1993 [1897]: 107). However, what does Mallarmé's dancer write? What her step will write (and sustain corporally) will be, according to Mallarmé, "your vision" (Mallarmé, 1993 [1897]: 110), the vision of the spectator/reader that, as Philipe Sollers recommends, must understand *"ce qu'il lit, c'est lui"* (in Barko, 1977: 187) — an idea that the differentialist position will criticise, as we will see later. Mallarmé's and Fratini's formulations concerning body writing should help us to specify how the differential dramaturgy understands the link between dance and writing, relaunches the ontological status of dance and strengthens its figural power. Choreographic writing, if we take these references, would be a poetic and differential form of writing, and its meeting with dance would take place "at the point in

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2. Differential dramaturgy and silent dramaturgy do not seek to enclose dance around a word or a definitive figure. Resorting to writing would be, actually, a way of practising what since Lyotard has been called "le figural" and which would differ from a figurative, illustrative or representational work. The *figural*, which incorporates a tension, operates the disfiguration, understood not as a "pure and simple annihilation of the figure," but as an inscription of the figure "in the endless movement of a negation which at the same time dissolves the form and opens it, displaces it, puts it in suspense, animates it... in a word, makes it live" (Grossman, 2017 [2004]: 17). Thus, if as Rancière (2013: 94) argues "the figure is the power that isolates a place and builds this site as a proper place for supporting apparitions, their metamorphoses, and their evaporation," the task of the figural and differential dramaturgy will consist of making the "figural density" (Fratini, 2018: 199) surface in any choreography. The figure opens the space of apparition and the arche-writing, the *différance*, makes it live, metamorphose and, eventually, evaporate.

which something of the writing withdraws from the performance towards a zone of luminal vagueness which, without constituting an absence, is found beyond any presence" (Fratini, 2018b: 194).

As this is the *phenomenology* of the choreographic writing and what it seeks to promote the differential dramaturgy, we should stop to look at a critique of the Mallarmeian and (hyper) differentialist position by feminist criticism and the theory of dance, in relation to its political and historical power. This must be taken into account in order to propose the dramaturgy of difference as a tool of choreographic creation for contemporary times.

In her insightful study on *Divagations*, Mary L. Shaw argues that, for Mallarmé, dance, "like poetry, produces semiosis": however, it is a semiotic system based on the most *ideal* of the signs as "only the signifier is given; the reader is free to choose the meaning" (1988: 4). Shaw makes it clear that Mallarmé differentiates poetry — the words of a poem — from dance, insofar as in the latter "it is owing to her concrete, *physical presence* [of the dancer] that the spectator can 'perform the theatrical 'operation' of illusion" (Shaw, 1988: 6). In other words, Mallarmé argues that the bodies of the dancers "in fact, materially incorporate what they mean" (Shaw, 1988: 4). For this reason, ultimately, this enables the spectator to read their writings — their *body poems*. However, "l'être dansant" — *lettre dansant*? —, for Mallarmé, is "only ever an emblem, never anyone" (Mallarmé, 1993 [1897]: 197); the dancer is not no one, it is a sign which, like the whiteness of the swans, should be understood as a pure, neutral sign and to write. Thus, on the one hand, Mallarmé acknowledges the importance of the presence and physicality of the dancer, but he refuses her radical historicity — as well as the historicity of the choreographic event and ways of *reading* bodies. This is a critique jointly made by Nancy K. Miller (1991), Mark Franko (1995) and Ann Cooper (1997).[3] Miller suggests that the Mallarmeian-Derridian conception would run the risk of erasing "the bodies of differentiated social subjects" (1991: 83). Ann Cooper would argue that insisting excessively on effacement (Derrida) or veiling (Mallarmé) of the historic and contextual body of the dancer would reduce power to "this process of making (presence) in the midst of unmaking (absence) [that] allows for an intricate layering of visual, kinaesthetic, and cultural meanings can begin to restage the terms of their alliance" (Cooper, 1997: 98). Consequently, differential dramaturgy must ensure that the mark of the historicity of the body is not completely erased and eclipsed but is rewritten and renegotiated.

The Dramaturgy of Difference in Loïe Fuller

As a case study to exemplify differential dramaturgy I would like to relaunch the dance practice of the American dancer Loïe Fuller (1862-1928). In the dawn of what would become modern dance, Loïe Fuller's artistic project disrupted the ontology of dance, as well as the regime of visibility in

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3.   These critiques are aimed at the conception of dance that Derrida seems to embrace in "Chorégraphies" (1992) and which would radicalise Mallarmé's postulates.

turn-of-the-century spectacularity. Although it would be possible to analyse the dramaturgical strategies in more recent artists (such as Xavier Le Roy, Phia Ménard or Volmir Cordeiro), the case of Loïe Fuller is particularly eloquent and shows an *alternative* genealogy to the history of dance linked to more identity tendencies, from the 19th century to the present.

Throughout modern dance (particularly in its beginnings) an "aesthetic ideology" developed around "self-expression", which, as Bojana Cvejić states, "proclaims emancipation through the body's experience of its own truth as its nature" (2015: 19). The example par excellence is the artistic-vital proposal of Isadora Duncan (1878-1927), the American dancer who worked with Fuller for a short period of time. Duncan's project embodies perfectly the will for self-expression that, according to Cvejić, responds to the "subjectivation process in early modern dance, linking the body and movement by subjective experience" (Cvejić, 2015: 19). This process of subjectivation, of expression of the truth and nature itself, was reinforced by the centrality of the solo as the predilected form of early modern dance.[4] In modern solos, according to Alessandro Pontremoli, the "choreic creation coincides, in most cases, with the bodily dynamic of its own creator" (Pontremoli, 2004: 92); in other words, for Duncan (and for other creators of the time), the solo was a mainly autobiographical space. The Duncanian stage apparatus and its dramaturgy, be it outdoors or in a more theatrical space, used to be combined to express the intimate truth of the dancer, which lived in her solar plexus, as Duncan used to point out. The nudity of scenographic elements, the translucence of her clothes or the impetuosity of the music that moved her (often Chopin or a romantic composer) sought to reveal her will for "the flesh to become luminous and transparent, the mirror of the divinity that crosses it" (Pontremoli, 2004: 28). Isadora Duncan chose to implement a more identity-based dramaturgy that would go *against* (or simply tried to counter) the ontology of dance that we have outlined with Lepecki and Derrida, in which the origin of any presence would always relate to the "play of differences", to an anarchic origin. Duncan and her artistic gesture intended her presence ultimately to be related to a single origin: her original truth, her "inner ego". In *The Art of the Dance* Isadora Duncan confesses: "And I always put into my movements a little of that divine continuity which gives to all of Nature its beauty and life" (Pontremoli, 2004: 28). And, certainly, for Duncan there was a "divine continuity" between the original truth that dance enabled her to express with a transcendental idea of nature and female beauty, which she also embodied. In a complex system of references, correspondences and representations, Duncanian dramaturgy would take its artistic apparatuses towards the following reading: through dance, Duncan *was* not only what she danced but,

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4.   This statement, albeit true, cannot overlook the fact that the solo was both a preference and a condition, insofar as, in the early times of modern dance (until the 1980s), women creators did not have the necessary support and funds to lead major stage projects. Later, dancers such as Fuller or Duncan had this support, but in many cases they continued to prefer the form of the solo — in the case of Duncan, that of the recital or concert, which, as Pouillaude (2009: 149) points out, insisted on the dance experience as an expression of truth characteristic of art faced with artifice and fiction. On the solo in early modern dance, I recommend the co-authored book, edited by Rousier (2002), as well as Roberto Fratini's lecture from 2009.

based on her dance specificity, she managed to express the universality of Beauty, Nature and, even, "the metaphorical essence of the woman, the woman-as-nature" (Franko, 2019: 30).

In a notably different way, Loïe Fuller approached her dance project from a dramaturgy of difference which exploited to the last consequences what the ontology of dance offers at the material and phenomenological level.

Fig. 1. Loïe Fuller moving the dress of the *Danse serpentine* in 1902.

Fig. 2. The so-called "effet de coquillage" created by Fuller when spinning round.

Around November 1892, Loïe Fuller presented the *Danse serpentine* at Les Follies Bergère in Paris — her personal version of the skirt dance, a variety number that became popular in the United States and Europe in the late 19th century. This piece, the seed of many of Fuller's other stage creations, consisting of moving a skirt with long veils — often tied to sticks — that the dancer turned in the air. Enhanced by the lighting it produced the effect of *disappearance* of the dancer's body and gave way to an aorgic form of veils in motion that swallowed her and evoked a myriad of figures. As recorded in period documents and the writing of important authors, in Fuller's dancing body a dynamic multitude of figures and of appearances emerged: human or almost human bodies (fairies, *nymphae*) but also non-human bodies (butterflies, shells, storm, electricity, etc.).

In contrast to Isadora Duncan, Fuller's dances drew on a dramaturgy, an arrangement of the stage apparatus and the spectator's gaze, which in no case sought to refer to that single origin, to Loïe Fuller's *intimate truth*. Rather the presence and the body of Fuller were snatched away within an eddy of veils, or were diffracted until it was not known *who* exactly Loïe Fuller was — this is the case of the many theatre technology apparatuses, patented by Fuller, which duplicated her figure with mirrors (fig. 3 and 4).
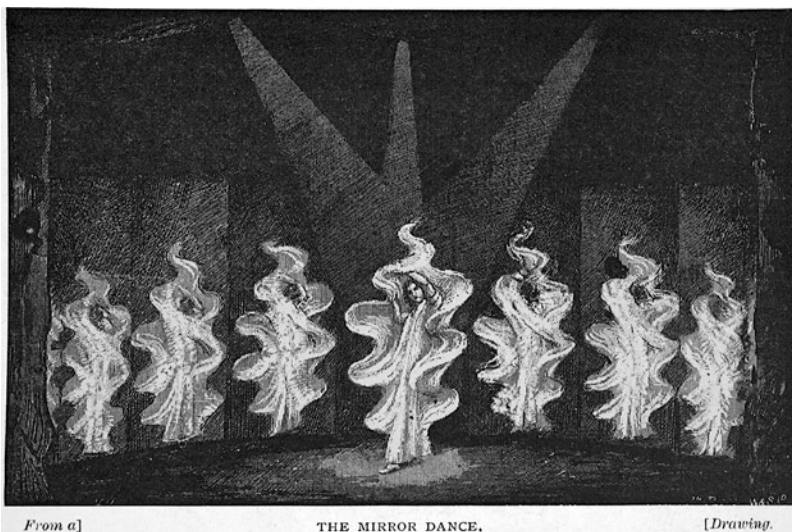

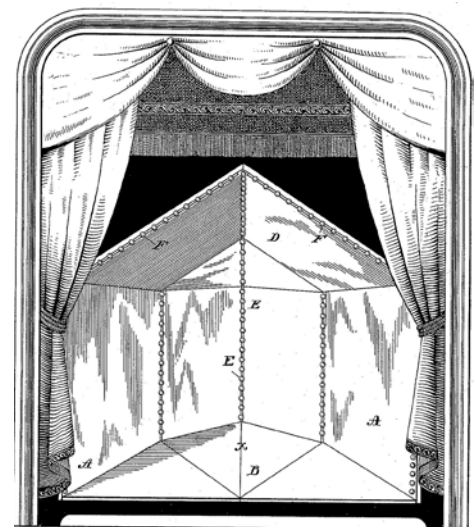**Fig. 3.** Approximate illustration of Loïe Fuller's split experiments.

Fig. 4. Mirror mechanism patented in the USA in 1895 by Loïe Fuller.

All the elements suggested that in the centre of the eddy of the *Danse serpentine* there was a void, or rather phantasmagory and difference; there was an always differed, always different, body, secretly promised. In fact, for the dancer the body would not be the seat of the identity or the immutable female body but precisely this differed promise: "What is the body of the dancer," wonders Fuller, "but an instrument by which he throws into the space vibrations, waves of music that will allow him to express all human emotions" (Baril 1977: 37). The body of the dancer launches — and, we could say, pounces on the space — a multitude of figures of others, who *are (not)* him. It is a body that projects figures, as well as becoming a screen to project

the figures of the other; and, in this way, in a dynamic towards "no place of reference", as Paul Adam (1893: 136) stated, until the end of his dance. This differential dynamic is what Jacques Rancière seems to stress when speaking of Fuller: rather than the concrete and defined figures, Rancière sees in the *Danse serpentine* that "the body abstracts from itself, dissimulated its own form in the displays of veils sketching flight rather than the bird, the swirling rather than the wave, the bloom rather than the flower. What is imitated, in each thing, is the event of its apparition" (Rancière, 2013: 100). Conceived as such, the body would no longer have a "proper form", would no longer be *a* proper body; or, it if were, it would be as Anne E. Berger recently pointed out: "the 'corps propre' as a body lived-in/live is again a singular body, which does not mean a unique body, closed in itself" (2019: 132).

However, in my view, Fuller's choreographic project goes beyond the will — which Fratini relates to Forsythe, but also suits Fuller — to "invalidate any project of finding faces, bodies and original truths under the mask that dance *is (not)* in itself, and devote oneself to *reveal it* in the true meaning of the word (replacing its traditional veils with other veils; releasing its power as mask" (2018a: 25). The importance of Fuller's project goes further precisely because in the invalidation of finding original truths and in the deferment of her body promised to the other, there is a very powerful political gesture, which, as noted earlier, Ann Cooper defined as a restaging of the visual, kinaesthetic and cultural meanings of bodies, textualities and identities.

Loïe Fuller's body was read in a very specific way in *fin-du-siècle* Paris: as a foreign, fat, little attractive woman and, from the turn-of-the-century, openly lesbian. This consideration is not a supposition but can be inferred from the fact that, in contrast to other artists of the period, Loïe Fuller was almost never the model of the posters or the merchandising (lamps, figurines...) of her pieces. In fact, in her memoirs, Fuller describes an episode of a girl who, after a performance, went to meet her with her mother. Fuller explains that, when seeing her, the child was in shock, and in disbelief said to her mother: "No, no that isn't her. I don't want to see her. This one here is a fat lady, and it is a fairy I saw dancing." The dancer confirmed this: "Yes, my dear, you are right. I am not Loïe Fuller" (Cooper, 2013: 118). This anecdote is just the tip of the iceberg of a regime of misogynistic and heteropatriarchal visibility that the dancer had to face and that through alteration, phantasmagory and stage illusion she managed to distort. Although Fuller certainly created a scene of fascination and enchantment among the adult and child audience,[5] we cannot forget that, when on stage, the patriarchal reading was set in motion. In the end, Fuller's body, like any text, "never completely breaths alone (however much affliction this produces), is never given unspoilt, without something *writing,* to an unspoilt gaze; its reading is always cajoler, subject to recognition programmes, to force reversals (control, expropriation, reappropriation, discrimination, capital gains, etc.)" (Derrida, 2021: 42-43). The body — written or *pre/written,* we could say — is subject

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5.   Julie Townsend (2010: 83, 87) recalls that it was Loïe Fuller, because of her type of artistic approach, who opened the door and normalised the presence of women and children in Les Folies Bergère, at a time when it was very unusual. She also reinforced the idea that women could present artistically bold pieces beyond the *anses nues*.

to the programme of recognition, of control and of patriarchal expropriation of end-of-the-century Paris, which established which bodies could be seen, what they could do in the public space, how they could move, etc. Fuller's body carried with it a radical historicity and contextuality, it formed part of the prose of the world, of the text now always present in each body. But this was *one* of the writings inscribed in the body of Fuller that her differential dramaturgy subverted and rewrote.

We must make clear that Fuller's rewriting gesture is first of all an *exscrit*, as Jean-Luc Nancy (1992) would say. Nancy argues that "it is first necessary" to go through "the *exscription* of our body"; in other words, "its inscription-outside, placing its *outside-text* as the most *proper* movement of its text" (1992: 14). Based on this gesture it is possible to see the political dimension of the arche-writing; of an ex/writing which, upon the prewritten text, does not stop saying, "This is (not) my body" — as both Françoise Collin and Olga Mesa would repeat.

Loïe Fuller's body writing, impossible to summarise in such a short space,[6] disrupts the texts and the ways of reading differently — it overturns what we expect of a dancer in Les Folies Bergère. Fuller's differential dramaturgy arranges the scene so that we realise that the body of the dancer is always more than one, as Berger formulated. In the *Danse serpentine* some of the *others*, of the other figures that inhabit the dancing body of the dancer appear. Some of these others, or these other bodies, contradict the ways of understanding the female body. On the one hand because, in contrast to Isadora Duncan, Loïe Fuller does not relate (or not exclusively) to a conception of femininity that would be linked to nature and what is natural. Although the dancer related to some natural elements (for instance, the butterfly, the lily or the sea; titles of her pieces by the way) she also related to non-natural and technological elements (such as electricity[7]). The static and charismatic version of nature (and of femininity) that Isadora Duncan intends to represent contrasts with how Fuller incorporates nature, no longer:

> as a decor, as a form or a represented image, but rather in its quality of force that generates pristine and moving forms [...] The effacement of natured nature to the benefit of naturing nature leads to the production of a new truth [...] For Loie Fuller this issue is paradoxically posed in relation to her own body. The more she disappeared as a form, the more she effaced herself behind and inside the veil, the more her dance gets closer to the truth she seeks: the spiritual energy which has become visible (Lista, 1994: 258-59).

Similarly, the nature that emerges from the *Danse serpentine* does not consist only of figures that relate to femininity and passivity — for instance, the uterus, the flower, the shell. Fuller's body writing also takes the form of a flame, lighting or guisarme — elements that would be related to masculinity.

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6.   I recommend the works of Townsend (2010) and Garelick (2007), and the chapters on the creator in Rancière (2011) and in McCarren (1998).

7.   Because of her inventiveness in theatre technology and the rapidity of her movement, she was nicknamed *fée éléctricité* and was linked to new technologies such as the cinematograph or the *fin-du-siècle* mechanical revolution.

Also related would be the fact that Fuller's choreography oscillates between all these figures at will: she would not be passive towards the event but rather, actively, she would subject it to all kinds of deformations, incinerations and dismemberments. To all this we should add another consideration: thus far we have seen that the dancer's body writing made a multitude of bodies and figures of all kinds emerge *upon* her — which decentred the typical representation of femininity, as noted. But Fuller again goes further and asks us to rethink our own realistic and human limits and contours of the body. Beyond the fact that the dance sets in motion a mimesis that we could barely call figurative, the Fullerian choreography is not reduced to the conventional limits of the human body but, as Paul Adam described, "her body [...] the supreme cycle of the shaken mousselines [...] rises in the space, interferes in the space, fuses in it" (1897: 158). In the *Danse serpentine,* as well as in *Le Lys* or *La Mer* (fig. 6), the peaks of her development of lighting design and costumes, the body of the dancer undecided itself with the space, she herself became the space. Fuller's body writing was no longer limited to *her* human body, but she choreographed all the space that she was being. In "L'action restreinte" Mallarmé seems to describe precisely this aspect of Fuller's spectacle:

> Floor, lamp, clouding of clothes and melting of mirrors, real even down to the exaggerated jerking of our gauzy form around the virile stature stopped upon one foot; a Place comes forth, a stage, the public enhancement of the spectacle of Self [du spectacle de Soi]; there, through the meditation of light, flesh, and laughter, the sacrifice of personality made by the inspirer is complete; or else in some foreign resurrection, he is finished (1897: 257-258).

Fig. 5. Loïe Fuller in *La danse blanche* (c. 1898).

Fig. 6. One of Loïe Fuller's dancers emerging from the silk waves in *La mer* (1925).

The flame, the claw or the storm emerged beyond the torso, arms or legs of Fuller, because all of her was "floor, lamp, clouding of clothes and melting of mirrors, real." This passage, on the one hand, confirms Adam's view that, in the Fullerian show, "a Place" is presented rather than a body. It also makes the differentialist dramaturgy explicit — that is, not identity-based — that we could relate to Fuller. It is possible, in fact, to analyse the *Danse serpentine* in the matching terms of "L'action restreinte": the *Danse serpentine* would just be a quite particular form of "spectacle de Soi", insofar as in it only the "sacrifice of personality made by the inspirer is complete"; this sacrifice "is complete" or "or else in some foreign resurrection, he is finished." Fuller's dramaturgy instead orchestrates a veiling of an identical, unique and transparent self [*Soi*]. Rather Fuller's show is a show of silk (*soie*), in which the limits between masculine and feminine, between body and space, between human and non-human, between inspirer and reader, blur. In this way, to free oneself of an imposed identity, instead of embracing another, the dancer tries the idea of identity *in toto* again. Hence we allow ourselves to agree with Cixous and Derrida, who, for Fuller, "finishing with the veil is finishing with self" (1998: 40); it means setting out the differential dramaturgy that sacrifices the idea of the *soi* to embrace the power of the *soie*.

Through the silk and the light, Fuller's poetic operation shows that choreography clearly gives light to the body rather than the reverse. A dancing body that has shown us that it *is* more than one body, as well as more than a body, as we commonly conceive it. It is from these coordinates that we can interpret what Mallarmé formulated in "Ballets" (1993 [1897]: 173):

> the dancer is not a woman who dances, because of the following juxtaposed motifs that she is not a woman, but a metaphor summarizing one of the elementary aspects of our form, knife, chalice, flower, etc., and that she does not dance, suggesting, [...] with a corporal writing that would necessitate paragraphs of dramatic dialogue as well as prosaic description, to be expressed, in the rewriting: poem disengaged from all of the scribe's apparatus.

The differential dramaturgy that the dancer proposes leads her to shatter the forms of appearing and being looked at as a woman. Certainly, some see in Fuller's pieces a kind of desexualisation and, like Mallarmé, they would say that Fuller is no longer a woman but a metaphor. I am more inclined to understand that the *danseuse* is much more than a woman or is very different from what she has been prescribed as a woman. Thus, as Townsend rightly argues, "what appears as an effacement of genre also exposes moving, changing female sex" (2010: 87). What the audience and the patriarchal gaze expected to see is denied. Surprised, Paul Adam (1893: 136) noted that seeing Loïe Fuller dance was "seeing the human being decorporifying itself [sic], stretching out." However, we could say that this stretching out not as much *decorporification* or a desexualisation but a rewriting of the conception of body and sexuality held at that time. A rewriting of the body that only differed from the one expected (and often wanted) but that, on the contrary, made it "unavailable to the male heterosexual" (Townsend, 2010: 87).

Finally — and in conclusion — it is precisely because the dramaturgy in the *Danse serpentine* and in the pieces by Fuller *enhances* the writing element of dance that we can adopt Mallarmé's formula and conceive that Loïe Fuller's creative operation *is no* longer dance but literally a choreo*graphy*. It is a body writing that exploits its poematic power — of a poem without the "apparatus of the scriber"; in other words, without a fixated, castrating and sovereign word upon the flesh.

I hope I have adequately illustrated how the dramaturgy of difference allies with choreography to rewrite the ordinary conception of what bodies, sexuality and dance are and can be. The paradigmatic case of Loïe Fuller — paradigmatic as it cannot be exactly repeated in another context — shows us that the differential strategy operates precisely in a radically unique context and that it has the capacity of subverting historical ways of perceiving and reading bodies. Fuller's body writing does not deny but rather is grafted onto a constellation of writings (and of pre-writings) and takes them through the operation of the *différance*, which radically transforms the presence of the dancer on stage (and of the stage of history). In fact, it is in this way that the theorist Peggy Phelan interprets the letter that Gab Sorère, Fuller's partner, sent to her lover, in which he confesses that "I never see you as you are" (Desmond, 2001: 418). Instead of understanding the phrase as a lament, Phelan shows the political power of Fuller's differential strategy and how this involves a radical invitation to an ethics of re*spect*; in other words, to "keep looking—historically, erotically, imaginatively, spiritually" (Desmond, 2001: 419). Conceiving choreography, even today, as a writing, from the thought of the difference, would only be this insistence on continuing to imagine possible bodies and dances, and to centrifugate the ways of conceiving dance and the dancing body towards the future.

Sources of the photographs

Figure 1. Photograph by Frederick W. Glasier (c. 1902), retrieved from the Library of Congress ‹https://www.loc.gov/item/96514367/›

Figure 2. Photograph by Samuel Joshua Beckett (1900), retrieved from Wikimedia Commons ‹https://bit.ly/49rpTAJ›

Figure 3. Drawing taken from the article by M. Griffith in *The Strand Magazine*, retrieved from ‹https://bit.ly/3FPUj27›

Figure 4. Patent of Loïe Fuller retrieved from Google Patents ‹https://patents.google.com/patent/US533167A/en›

Figure 5. Photograph (c. 1898) by an unknown photographer (accredited to Taber Prang Art Company), retrieved from New York Public Library Digital Collection ‹https://bit.ly/3QzDlKk›

Figure 6. Photograph (1925) by an unknown photographer, retrieved from the California Digital Library. ‹http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf9b69p49t›

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