

Lepecki, André. *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016. 276 pp. (Print ISBN: 978-1-138-90771-3; E-book ISBN: 978-1-315-69494-8).

The question of how performance, and particularly dance, might offer a means of resistance to our current neoliberal culture is frequently discussed in academic and artistic circles. Many dance artists and scholars believe that their practices can provide an antidote to the individualism, violence, and consumption of neoliberalism. However, in-depth interrogations of the potential of dance to undermine, undo, and provoke contemporary capitalism are relatively rare. André Lepecki's latest book, *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance*, offers a serious, detailed response to the topic. Lepecki's central premise is that dance's potential to produce "singularities" affords it a unique capacity to disrupt normative modes of perception and experience, which in turn can draw attention to and challenge the conditions of neoliberalism.

As demonstrated in the dense and thought-provoking introduction, the book covers a lot of ground. The introduction is particularly important for contextualizing and positioning the text and Lepecki clearly delineates the central argument. Quite from the outset, he explains that the term "singularities" is used not to mean unique, particular, individual, or singular. Instead, his understanding of the term is informed by art philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman, for whom singularity is "irreducible, and therefore a bearer of strangeness" (Didi-Huberman qtd. in Lepecki 6; author's translation). Rather than only bearing strangeness, singularities also have the potential to *produce* strangeness, therefore acting as a differing force that generates multiplicities. To see multiplicity in singularity indicates, as Lepecki points out, how Didi-Huberman bases his ideas on Gilles Deleuze's earlier theorization of singularities. These concepts, in turn, furnish Lepecki with the theoretical backbone of his argument: applied to the arts, the understanding of singularity as the ongoing "production of strangeness" undoes the typically modernist view of art as the unique expression of an individual artist, leading instead to what José Muñoz (following Judith Butler) has called "disidentifications" of works from their authors (Muñoz and Butler qtd. in Lepecki 6). This dynamic of disidentification is the common thread that weaves together the otherwise very distinct dance pieces Lepecki singles out: in one way or another, they all disidentify dance from conventional expectations, from, for instance, conventional expectations, its socio-political climate, its history, etc. – thereby disrupting governing aesthetic, cultural, and economical formations.

Throughout the book, Lepecki discusses the work of various contemporary artists, including Maria José Arjona (Colombia), Trajal Harrell (US), João Fiadeiro (Portugal), Aitana Cordero (Spain), Mette Edvardsen (Norway), Mette Ingvarsten (Denmark), Marcelo Evelin (Brazil), Manuel Pelmus (Romania), Marcela Levi and Lucía Russo (Brazil/Argentina), Xavier Le Roy (France), Antonia Baehr (Germany), Eiko & Koma (US), Julie Tolentino and Ron Athey (US), Martin Nachbar (Germany), Richard Move (US), Ralph Lemon and Walter Carter (US), and Jérôme Bel (France). The introduction includes forward referencing to the examples used, which is helpful for navigating the text. The work produced by many of these artists could easily be regarded as performance, theater, or live art. However, in this context, they are framed through the lens of dance, as Lepecki focuses particularly on the critical potential of choreography, even though his arguments have relevance for neighboring fields.

Lepecki explains his choice for the focus on dance by referring to recent tendencies in our socio-economical, artistic, and intellectual climate. He more specifically observes how the burgeoning grasp of neoliberalism across the globe over the past decade coincided with an increased presence of dance in museums, galleries, and biennials. Simultaneously, dance has been playing a more central role in various domains in the humanities, such as philosophy, critical studies, performance studies, cultural studies, art history, and others. Lepecki suggests that “the presence of dance across these different fields indicates how it has become one of the most relevant critical-aesthetic practices in live art today. My hypothesis in this book is that dance’s prominent presence in those different artistic and theoretical arenas is not mere coincidence” (7). The remarkable centrality of dance in these various contexts is said to stem from its unique capacity to address the conditions of neoliberalism. To support this claim, Lepecki identifies six constitutive elements of dance: “ephemerality, corporeality, precariousness, scoring, performativity, and the performance of affective labor” (14). These are the qualities that confer on dance the ability to critique and overturn “the set of problems imposed over corporealities and subjectivities by neoliberal rationality” (ibid.).

Each chapter includes extensive, rich descriptions of the artistic works under consideration. There are a small number of black and white images, but these are not particularly necessary, as Lepecki’s detailed accounts make the pieces vivid in the reader’s imagination. While focusing in on specific examples to make theoretical claims about dance could be seen as cherry-picking works to illustrate

concepts, Lepecki avoids this pitfall by drawing diverse practices into dialogue and by using two or three very distinct performances to show how they differently produce particular singularities. Referring to Deleuze, he uses the notion of “encounters,” which he describes as overlapping concepts that are not concerned with essentializations but stand in a relational interaction (19). In this manner, Lepecki aims to emphasize that he is theorizing the particular encounter with these works while operating “in the space between artistic-performative practices and critical-discursive ones” (18). These encounters, then, are used to construct a case for dance’s critical potentiality in the age of neoliberalism, with Lepecki continuously moving between the specific and the general, which echoes his central premise that particular encounters might have a wider political or theoretical resonance.

Lepecki singles out five particular singularities that the performances discussed in the book are said to activate: “*thingness, darkness, animality, persistence, and solidity*” (7). Exploring thingness and the autonomy of objects, “Moving as Some Thing” (Chapter 1) tells the story of an event that occurred at IN TRANSIT 09, a festival Lepecki curated around the theme “Resistance of the Object,” a phrase he borrowed from Fred Moten’s book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003). The event included a performance by Colombian visual and performance artist Maria José Arjona. Lepecki describes the extensive technical preparations undertaken to ensure that the performance, which involved blowing bubbles filled with red paint, did not stain the interior of the foyer where the event was to be staged. The building had to be protected, since it is a national monument. The detail with which Lepecki recounts the preparations perfectly sets up his description of arriving on the evening of the premiere to find house technicians chasing with fishing nets bubbles that were escaping. This humorous story draws the reader into an encounter with the work and highlights perfectly Lepecki’s argument about the autonomy of things. From here, Lepecki goes on to contextualize this moment in relation to the politics of thingness explored by Yvonne Rainer and her contemporaries in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but only to move on to yet again forty years later when the interest in the interaction between dancing bodies and material objects began to reemerge. It is not so much the mere presence of objects on stage, but rather the autonomous status granted to them that is crucial for Lepecki, since it is at this point that an object transitions into a thing that, by virtue of its thingness, troubles any clear-cut distinction between objecthood and subjecthood. By allowing a thing to be a thing in itself, instead of an object with an instrumentalized function,

contemporary choreographers (such as Trajal Harrell, João Fiadeiro, and Aitana Cordero) open up the political singularity of thingness, insofar as their work testifies to “the mutual movement of surrender towards the thing within the object and the giving of the self as thing by the subject” (41).

As its title suggests, “In the Dark” (Chapter 2) offers an examination of darkness in performance. According to Lepecki, the strategic use of darkness in dance acts as a critique of the neoliberal omnipresence of illumination, which he understands both literally (as light emitted by electronic devices) and figuratively (as the primacy of enlightened minds). As the downside of enlightenment, darkness is also related to blackness and the manner in which the twin forces of colonialism and capitalism have led to racial exclusion and enforced dispossession. Drawing on Deleuze to suggest that darkness offers potentiality and freedom, Lepecki further reasons that if the dancer is constructed as an image and made visible by light, then “choreographic re-imagining must take place, exactly, in the dark” (64). Instead of reading the use of darkness in dance as drawing attention to the other senses, he argues that a lack of light makes us see darkness and, therefore, blackness: “an important political aspect of these dances in the dark is (also) to activate political-aesthetic-critical power of blackness” (73-74). Drawing connections between dances in the dark by Mette Edvardsen and Mette Ingvartsen and the work of Marcel Evelin, which involves a mass of moving bodies covered in thick dark paint, Lepecki maintains that the disruption of light and the spread of darkness in Evelin’s work similarly reveal “how the semantic unconscious surrounding all things dark is tied to, and coterminous with, the political-racial unconscious surrounding all things black” (75).

Animality is the central theme in “Limitrophies of the Human” (Chapter 3). Lepecki uses Jacques Derrida’s notion of “limitrophy,” understood as the “continuous questioning of the never fixed boundaries between those who name themselves ‘humans’ and those that ‘humans’ name as ‘animals’” (88). Through examining a diverse range of works that have animality at their core (by artists such as Mercela Levi and Lucía Russo, Xavier Le Roy, Antonia Baehr, and Eiko & Komo), Lepecki foregrounds dance’s capacity to display the slippage between humanity, animality, machines, and inorganic matter. In this respect, dance exposes what he considers the most important dimension of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s notion of “becoming,” namely their theorization of becoming as “a particular ‘involution’ ... towards the animal” (98). Or, as Roberto Esposito puts

it, it is “a way of being human that is no longer defined in terms of alterity from our animal origins” (qtd. in Lepecki 99). Throughout the chapter, the phrase “monstrous nature” appears repeatedly, serving as a continuous reminder that “the monstrous is what approximates humans to the plane of Nature” (89). Several paragraphs open with the phrase and, each time, Lepecki offers a different way of defining it (“Or we could also say”), signaling to the reader how he intends to multiply the meanings of this “monstrous nature” and to overturn any hierarchical ordering of the human, the animal, the mineral, the machine, etc. In this sense, the stylistic trait also serves the larger purpose of opening up the human toward other dimensions of existence, which has a distinct critical potential as “it is the very condition of possibility for other modes of sociability” (99).

In “Body as Archive” (Chapter 4), Lepecki turns his attention to the singularity of persistence and discusses the recent trend towards reenactments in the USA and Europe, focusing on examples by Julie Tolentino, Martin Nachbar, Xavier Le Roy, and Richard Move. His assumption that there simply is no fixed “original” in performance leads him to an understanding of reenactment as ongoing instances, rather than as re-performances, of a work gone by. He introduces the concept of the “will to archive,” which offers an alternative framing to others who have written on this quite well-theorized topic. Lepecki’s proposition is that the will to archive is neither a nostalgic desire to recover the past exactly as it was nor an attempt to rectify what cultural memory got wrong, but “a capacity to identify in a past work still non-exhausted creative fields” of what he – following Brian Massumi – calls “impalpable possibilities” (120). His ontological claim is that dance works should be considered autonomous and immanent, implying that they possess the ongoing potential for (re-)materialization. Reenactment, then, is the process by which choreographers single out the virtual potentials that lie dormant in a given work and which might not have been actualized at the time of their “original” creation.

“Choreographic Angelology” (Chapter 5) addresses the notion of solidity to rethink the conventional equation of dance (and the dancing body) with movement, flux, or flow. Perhaps counterintuitively, Lepecki turns to the elusive figure of the angel to make a claim for choreography as also being a solid matter, yet it is in fact the very versatility of the angel that allows him to draw together a disparate variety of theoretical, philosophical, socio-political, and artistic components. As an embodiment of the tensions between servitude and agency,

labor and power, ephemerality and history, the angel offers a primary emblem to reconsider the position of the dancer in choreography. Defining the concept of angelology as “a particular *affective-kinetic technology of labor* that enables the transmission and circulation of someone else’s messages” (143), Lepecki maintains that this idea has shaped the way in which the dancer and her labor are conceived of in the “Western choreographic imagination” (144). This image of the dancer is also informed by the fact that the formation of Western choreography as an art form coincided with the emergence of classical physics, as the physicist’s concern with formulating universal “ahistorical’ laws” of motion profoundly impacted the conception of dance (Serres qtd. in Lepecki 145). “In classical physics,” Lepecki notes, “bodies, including human bodies, and therefore, including dancers, are essentially, ontologically and physically, flow” (152). Because bodies are always changing, they are regarded as lacking the capacity to remember, which renders them ahistorical. Lepecki challenges this assumption drawing on Michel Serres’ critique of classical physics and the latter’s proposition to replace the primacy of flux with a “paradigm of solids” (Serres qtd. in Lepecki 163), in which matter is considered hard enough to retain its historicity. Finding a choreographic translation of this historical solidity in the work of Ralph Lemon and Walter Carter, Lepecki discusses their collaborations in relation to Michelle M. Wright’s work on “the physics of blackness” (145), which goes against the colonialist universality of classical physics and searches instead for a different kind of physics predicated on the agency and temporality of survival.

In the “Afterthought,” Lepecki takes up Eyal Weizman’s idea that the era of neoliberalism has witnessed a shift from valuing the testimony of witnesses towards forensics or a “forensic aesthetics,” which “privilege, indeed, *demand* an affective detachment from the event” (171). This emphasis on what Lepecki calls “dis-experience” leads him to plea in favor of witnessing, of which the potential is revealed in recent performances that put witnesses as storytellers on stage, such as, for example, in Jérôme Bel’s *Cour d’Honneur* (2013). It is the intersubjective and affective act of telling a story to another after the event that turns the witness into a political and socially engaged individual, which Lepecki extends to the role of the audience. Whereas the “audience as spectator” searches for facts and information for the sake of non-ambiguity and prefers to remain silent, the “audience as witness” speaks up to partake in “the political-aesthetic power of sharing experience” (175). Through the transmission of experience, the witness contributes to the singularity of the event, which changes every time it is retold, but through that very change, it also persists, as multiplicity.

This is a rich and complex book, with an impressive range of ideas that can hardly be accounted for within the scope of a review. There is no doubt this text will be of interest to students and scholars working in dance and performance studies as well as to artists within and outside of the academy. As the extensive list of artists and theoretical frameworks mentioned above indicates, this book productively counteracts the hegemony of Anglo-European practices, and white Anglophone scholarship, drawing fresh perspectives and lesser heard voices and practices into the frame. Whilst the works Lepecki discusses, and the singularities they produce, do not necessarily propose to be works of political activism, this book demonstrates how dance has the potential to disrupt the governing currents and conditions of our neoliberal age, regardless of the scale of their impact. Lepecki's provocations make this a thought-provoking and engaging text. His signature poetic writing makes it a challenging read at times, but also helps accelerate his implicit aim to integrate theory and practice. His unique way of organizing description, theoretical propositions, and the voices of others generates the impression that, for him, the act of theorizing is ultimately an experimental and experiential endeavor.

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