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# Meaning in Motion

N E W C U L T U R A L

S T U D I E S o f D A N C E

## REINSTATING CORPOREALITY:

### FEMINISM AND BODY POLITICS

Janet Wolff

Is the body a site of cultural and political protest? And can women's bodies be the site of feminist cultural studies? These are currently contested issues.

I do not see how . . . there is any possibility of using the image of a naked woman . . . other than in an absolutely sexist and politically repressive patriarchal way in this conjuncture.<sup>1</sup>

To use the body of the woman, her image or person is not impossible but problematic for feminism.<sup>2</sup>

Crucial to the debate about the political potential of the body is the more fundamental question of whether there *is* any body outside discourse—another matter of dispute.

Experience of the body even at the simplest level is mediated by a presentation of the body, the body-image.<sup>3</sup>

The positing of a body *is* a condition of discursive practices.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay I will argue for a cultural politics of the body, based on a recognition of the social and discursive construction of the body, while emphasizing its lived experience and materiality.

#### *The Dangers of Body Politics*

On 17 July 1989, a group of women staged a protest against the sole use by men of a bathing area at Sandycove, Dublin. The men often swam naked in this area, an artificial harbor on the seafront called Forty Foot Pool. The women's protest was to invade the area and to remove their own swimming suits. The reporting of this event makes clear the ambiguities and ultimate

failure of such body politics. The *Guardian* carried a short note, as a caption to a photograph. The photo depicts one of the women, facing the camera and walking out of the water, wearing only a small pair of briefs. Behind her men and boys in small boats stare. She walks past a line of young boys, who gawp at her body and laugh at her. It is not an attractive scene. Without having been at the event, one can only assume that female nudity achieved nothing more than male lechery. Moreover, the photograph in the press the next morning renders the liberal (and generally pro-feminist) paper the *Guardian* little different from the tabloids, with their Page Three topless pinups. The political gesture is neutralized and doubly canceled—first by the look of those at the scene, and second by its representation in the press for the reader's gaze. The lesson (or one of them) is that there are problems with using the female body for feminist ends. Its preexisting meanings, as sex object, as object of the male gaze, can always prevail and reappropriate the body, despite the intentions of the woman herself.

This can also occur with less naive interventions, which incorporate a critical understanding of the meanings and uses of the female body in our culture. The movie *Not a Love Story* is a documentary about the pornography industry, made by women and presenting a clearly feminist and critical view of pornography. When it arrived in Leeds, England, in the early 1980s, however, it was for some reason shown in one of the rather sleazy city-center cinemas. Its audience consisted of a few groups of women (the film had not had much advance publicity, and this, together with the rather peculiar venue, meant that large numbers of local feminists did not turn up) and a considerable contingent from the raincoat brigade. Individual men were scattered throughout the cinema. And the point is that they would not have been disappointed, for, as sympathetic critics have pointed out, in order to discuss the pornography industry, the movie spent a good deal of time showing pornographic images and sequences.<sup>5</sup> Again, this raises the question of whether, or how, women can engage in a critical politics of the body in a culture which so comprehensively codes and defines women's bodies as subordinate and passive, and as objects of the male gaze. Peter Gidal's pessimism, in the first quotation with which I began this essay, is a well-founded one.

Yet I want to argue that a feminist cultural politics of the body *is* a possibility. As Mary Kelly says, this may be problematic but it is not impossible. There is every reason, too, to propose the body as a privileged site of political intervention, precisely because it is the site of repression and possession. The body has been systematically repressed and marginalized in Western culture, with specific practices, ideologies, and discourses controlling and defining the female body. What is repressed, though, may threaten to erupt and challenge

the established order. It is on such grounds that some have argued for a body politics, and some feminists have urged a cultural and political intervention which is grounded in, and which employs, the body. I shall review these arguments, in order to draw some conclusions about the prospects for a feminist body politics in contemporary culture.

#### *Repression and Marginalization of the Body in Western Culture*

As Mary Douglas has shown, the body operates as a symbol of society across cultures, and the rituals, rules, and boundaries concerning bodily behavior can be understood as the functioning of social rules and hierarchies.<sup>6</sup> In some cultures, bodily refuse (excreta, blood, tears, hair, nail clippings) has magical, and dangerous, qualities. In its marginality, in the way in which it traverses the boundaries of the body, it comes to represent particular threats and powers, which ultimately symbolize social boundaries, transgressions, and threats. What counts as pollution varies from society to society, but in all cases, according to Douglas, it is a "symbolic system, based on the image of the body, whose primary concern is the ordering of a social hierarchy."<sup>7</sup>

There is a wonderful scene in Buñuel's film *The Phantom of Liberty* in which a bourgeois couple arrives for a dinner party. With the usual social pleasantries and exchanges, they are led by the hosts to join the others. The guests are all seated round a large dining table, but the table is not laid for a meal. Instead, it is covered by magazines. The guests leaf through these casually, while exchanging remarks. Each guest is sitting on a toilet. After a while, one of the guests discreetly excuses himself, stands up, adjusts his dress, flushes the toilet, and leaves the room. He goes to a small closet, locks the door behind him, and sits down. Then he pulls down a tray of food from the wall, and eats this in privacy, before going back to join the others.

This scene, of course, illustrates graphically the arbitrary nature of our social customs—specifically those that deal with appropriate and acceptable bodily behavior. We might rush to argue that there are *objective* reasons, of health, hygiene, cleanliness, for eating in public and defecating in private. But Mary Douglas's work clearly shows that these are only rationalizations. In this, "civilized" customs are no different from "primitive" customs. The discourse is one of cleanliness and hygiene, but in all cases the hidden meanings are those of social order and social hierarchy. This crucial anthropological perspective helps us to make sense of the particular, and peculiar, development of regimes of the body in Western culture.

Norbert Elias's pioneering study *The Civilizing Process* analyzes the develop-

ment and sophistication of manners in relation to social transformations in Europe in the sixteenth century and since. In particular he perceives the growth of notions of *intimacy* as part of the rise and consolidation of an intellectual class, which was able to distance itself from other classes, including the ruling strata. Manners thus serve as differentiating characteristics. Erasmus's *De civilitate morum puerilium* of 1530 was a key text, a turning point in the literature of manners and civilized behavior. Elias makes his point most clearly by straightforward quotation from earlier and later handbooks on manners. Examples from the Middle Ages include: "A man who clears his throat when he eats and one who blows his nose in the tablecloth are both ill-bred, I assure you." And "If a man snorts like a seal when he eats, as some people do, and smacks his chops like a Bavarian yokel, he has given up all good breeding."<sup>8</sup>

In Erasmus, we already have a much greater refinement of behavior, though not yet one that we would recognize as "civilized" by our own contemporary standards.

Your goblet and knife, duly cleansed, should be on the right, your bread on the left.

Some people put their hands in the dishes the moment they have sat down. Wolves do that . . .

To dip the fingers in the sauce is rustic. You should take what you want with your knife and fork. . . .

To lick greasy fingers or to wipe them on your coat is impolite. It is better to use the tablecloth or the serviette.<sup>9</sup>

And, with regard to behavior in the bedroom, Erasmus recommends: "If you share a bed with a comrade, lie quietly; do not toss with your body, for this can lay yourself bare or inconvenience your companion by pulling away the blankets. . . . If you share a bed with another man, keep still."<sup>10</sup> By 1729, a couple of centuries later, the rules of the bedroom were stricter. "You ought neither to undress nor go to bed in the presence of any other person. Above all, unless you are married, you should not go to bed in the presence of anyone of the other sex. . . . When you get up you should not leave the bed uncovered, nor put your nightcap on a chair or anywhere else where it can be seen."<sup>11</sup>

In the civilizing process, the body is increasingly patrolled, the range of acceptable behavior increasingly carefully and narrowly defined. Emerging from this process of gradual exclusion and privatization of areas of bodily functions is what Bakhtin called the "classical body." The classical body has no orifices and engages in no base bodily functions. It is like a classical statue. It is opposed to the "grotesque body," which has orifices, genitals, protuberances.<sup>12</sup> Francis Barker's fascinating study of seventeenth-century Europe documents

the developing idea of the separation of the body from the soul, showing in relation to selected key texts (a Marvell poem, a Rembrandt painting, Pepys's diary) how the body was increasingly redefined and privatized, its sexual and other needs and appetites denied.<sup>13</sup> Like Elias, Barker analyzes these transformations of discourse in relation to changes in class structure, labor demands, and the reconstitution of subjectivity. The "positive body," founded on the exclusion of desires and appetites, which now constitute the "absent body," is the ideal and necessary subject and object of rational science and bourgeois society.

Barker's analysis is indebted in turn to the work of Michel Foucault, particularly on the history of madness and the birth of the prison. From Foucault's detailed examination of the institutions of confinement, we have come to understand the construction in bourgeois society of the *docile body*<sup>14</sup> and the new forms of discipline (factories, schools, prisons, asylums) in which the most comprehensive surveillance has come to be exercised. The body is increasingly brought into discourse, and supervised, observed, and controlled by a variety of disciplines. In this process, and with the disappearance of older forms of bodily control such as torture, public spectacle, and so on, control operates through internalization, and becomes, to a large extent, *self-surveillance*. At the same time, large areas of bodily experience, such as sexuality and illness, are delimited and redefined. As is well known, however, Foucault argues *against* the thesis that the nineteenth century witnessed a severe repression of sexuality. Rather, sexuality came increasingly into discourse, with the proliferation of disciplines and practices that spoke of it: medicine, psychiatry, sexology, and so on.<sup>15</sup> These processes have continued into the late twentieth century, where new forms of discipline in consumer society operate through advertising, fashion, popular culture, and the market.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the recognition that the body has been systematically denied and marginalized in Western culture, and that this development is closely related to the needs and ideologies of bourgeois capitalism (its construction of a particular notion of subjectivity; its requirement for a reliable, docile, regular work force, its dependence on the self-regulation of its subjects), is confirmed by social historians, who have documented the control and elimination of working-class sports and popular recreations during and after the Industrial Revolution.<sup>17</sup> Blood sports, such as bullbaiting and cockfighting, were criminalized in England in the first half of the nineteenth century (though upper-class pursuits like the hunt were not). Fairs were controlled, and football transformed from a game of the streets to an organized spectator sport by the end of the century. Licensing laws were intended to contain drinking habits. Behind these measures lay a mixture of concern to retain a reliable working popu-

lation, fears about the political dangers of working-class gatherings, and ideological concerns linked to the class and domestic morality of the bourgeoisie.

If the body has thus been repressed since the seventeenth century, does it follow that the irruption of the “grotesque” body, the explosion into visibility of its suppressed features (sex, laughter, excretion, and so on) constitutes a political revolution as well as a moral transgression? Stallybrass and White are rightly cautious about any blanket endorsement of bodily transgression as inherently radical.

It would be wrong to associate the exhilarating sense of freedom which transgression affords with any necessary or automatic political progressiveness. . . . Often it is a powerful ritual or symbolic practice whereby the dominant squanders its symbolic capital so as to get in touch with the fields of desire which it denied itself as the price paid for its political power. Not a repressive desublimation (for just as transgression is not intrinsically progressive, nor is it intrinsically conservative), it is a counter-sublimation, a delirious expenditure of the symbolic capital accrued (through the regulation of the body and the decathexis of habitus) in the successful struggle of bourgeois hegemony.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the transgressions of the carnivalesque and of the grotesque body can in many cases, as they also point out, operate in reactionary ways, particularly with regard to gender. This is something I shall return to.

### *The Female Body in Western Culture*

Despite Foucault’s radical argument that the nineteenth century saw an incitement to sex, not a repression of it, there is no question about the oppression of women through the discourses of the body. One collection of essays, largely inspired by Foucault’s work, demonstrates the many ways in which contemporary discourses and practices rendered women inferior, put control of women’s bodies into men’s hands, and produced new sciences which redefined women and femininity centrally in terms of reproductive function, denying female sexuality while perceiving women as somehow closer to nature than men.<sup>19</sup> This equation of woman with the body, for the most part a product of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates and ideologies,<sup>20</sup> has a pre-history in classical thought. Elizabeth Spelman has shown that Plato, despite an apparent commitment to the equality of the sexes (in *The Republic*, for example), believed that women exemplified the failure to value the soul above the body.<sup>21</sup> His somatophobia and his misogyny, she suggests, are closely linked. Here, then, we already have the notion that women are closer (too close) to the body

compared with men. When we recognize the great value put on the soul or the mind as against the body (which is a central aspect of the process discussed by Barker, in which the “positive body” of rational science excludes and obscures the “absent body” of desires and appetites), the significance of the identification of women with the body is clear.

It is through the body, too, that women in our culture learn their own particular form of self-surveillance. Sandra Bartky identifies the “panoptical male connoisseur” in women’s consciousness.<sup>22</sup> The discursive practices that produce “femininity” are in the culture and within women. Thus they diet, dress for certain effect, monitor their movement and gestures. Unlike Bartky, I do not conclude that radical social change will come about as a result of a refusal of particular definitions and demands of “femininity” and the substitution of an “as yet unimagined transformation of the female body,”<sup>23</sup> for this addresses only the *effects* of gender inequalities. It is likely that any *new* definitions of “femininity” would equally provide the basis for control and self-surveillance. But the perception is accurate, that it is through the body that women collude in their own oppression, and the specifically feminist slant on Foucault’s analysis of the effects of discourse is an invaluable one.

Women learn as girls to monitor their appearance, and to conform to what is presented in the culture as some ideal of femininity. A group of German women explored in discussion the ways in which this policing (and self-policing) works, and how early it begins.

Every Thursday afternoon, the park was open to me for free; I had a special pass to let me in for my gym lesson. My mother had put my name down for the class so I could do something about my weak stomach muscles. She said the only way I could get rid of my tummy at my age was by strengthening the muscles with exercise. In a few years’ time, when I was grown up, I’d then be able to deal with it by pulling it in.<sup>24</sup>

Advertising and the fashion industry show us the perfect body for women, though, as Rosalind Coward has said, this ideal shifts slightly from one season to the next,<sup>25</sup> as shown in this text from *Cosmopolitan*.

If you just *love* being a girl (and really look like one), this is *your* time! After decades of “You can never be too rich or too thin,” the all-girl girl has reemerged to be celebrated and adored. Curves à la Monroe (if she’d worked out a bit more!) are what’s red-hot right now. So if you’ve been disguising all those luscious lines under industrial-strength bras and baggy sweaters, stop! Here are a few suggestions for really showing off this shapely, gorgeous girl.<sup>26</sup>

(It is noticeable, however, that the all-girl girl still has a small waist and perfectly flat stomach. There are apparently limits to the revolution in body ideal.)

Cultural theory, particularly in the visual arts and film studies, has explored for a decade and a half the representation of women's bodies in patriarchal culture, informed first by John Berger's early perception that paintings of the nude in Western art imply a male spectator and are constructed for the male gaze, and then by Laura Mulvey's influential article of 1975, which analyzed the operation of the male gaze and the representation of the female body in film in terms of psychoanalytic theory.<sup>27</sup> The issue of women's viewing positions and possible identifications has been one much discussed (and disputed) in recent years, though this is not something I shall consider here. The devastating implication of this work in general appears to be that women's bodies (particularly the nude, though not just that) *cannot* be portrayed other than through the regimes of representation which produce them as objects for the male gaze, and as the projection of male desires. The failure of the Dublin intervention should have been predicted, in the light of this. We have to ask what this means for feminist art practice (can women paint women's bodies? are there ways of subverting or circumventing the dominant modes of representation?) and for body politics (*can* the body, after all, be a site of cultural critique?).

### *Transgression and the Female Body*

What happens when the female body is affirmed and displayed, in defiance of the dominant ideals of the "perfect body," acknowledging the reality of actual women, the diversities of shape and size, the functions of corporeal existence (eating, excreting, menstruation, sex, pregnancy, aging, illness)? The "grotesque body," at least, should be immune from incorporation into the objectifying gaze. (The question of hard-core pornography, which depends on a particular deviation from the classical to the grotesque body, is an interesting one, requiring a more complex analysis of such imagery in relation to sexuality and representation in patriarchal society. It is something I shall have to leave to one side, however.)

Mary Russo considers the female grotesques of carnival. The examples she discusses are unruly women (including men cross-dressing as women, in this role) in popular uprisings in seventeenth-century England, terracotta figurines of "senile, pregnant hags" (discussed by Bakhtin), and Charcot's famous photographs of women hysterics.<sup>28</sup> She concludes that these figures are deeply ambivalent. As she says, "women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive—

dangerous and in danger."<sup>29</sup> These cases and images of women "in excess" of the idealized feminine may operate as threat (as well as example to other women). However, there are always reactionary connotations. The unruly woman is pilloried as a scold, henpecking her husband. Cross-dressing men are as likely to be portraying women with contempt as with respect. The image of the pregnant hag is "loaded with all of the connotations of fear and loathing associated with the biological processes of reproduction and of aging."<sup>30</sup> Female hysterics have a history of being locked up and contained. And at fairs and carnival festivities women were frequently abused and raped.

In any case, the excesses and reversals of the carnivalesque often operate to reaffirm the status quo, providing licensed but limited occasions for transgressions which are guaranteed to be neutralized. Whether or not there is any leakage into the culture in general from such occasions is an important question, though it is not one to which we can assume a positive answer. What I think we *can* safely affirm is the importance of the appearance itself of such transgressive images, practices, and ideas, for they render visible the suppressed. As Mary Russo says, how the category of the grotesque "might be used affirmatively to destabilize the idealizations of female beauty or to realign the mechanisms of desire" is the subject of another study.<sup>31</sup> Like her, at this stage I simply note the potential value of the existence of spaces for the female grotesque body for the daunting project of the subversion of its dominant construction and portrayal.

Related to the notion of the female grotesque is Julia Kristeva's concept of the "monstrous-feminine." In her psychoanalytic account, the maternal body is the object of horror, a feeling based in the fear of reincorporation into the mother, as well as in the fear of the mother's generative power. In becoming a subject, with defined boundaries, the child is separating from the body of the mother. As a result the maternal body becomes "abject"—an object of horror and threat.<sup>32</sup> Although Kristeva does not discuss this as a specifically gendered process, other recent work in psychoanalytic theory suggests that it is particularly the *male* child who confronts the trauma of separation, and who retains into adulthood the fear of reincorporation (and, hence, loss of masculinity and self).<sup>33</sup> This psychic process, undergone in a culture where it is women who do the mothering, explains the barely concealed level of violent fantasy men often manifest against women, the well-known construction of the virgin/whore dichotomy which counterposes the "pure" woman (the classical body?) to the slut (the grotesque?). As Barbara Ehrenreich has put it, in a foreword to Klaus Theweleit's shocking study of male fantasies about women:

It seems to me that as long as women care what we are in this world—at best, “social inferiors,” and at worst, a form of filth—then the male ego will be formed by, and bounded by, hideous dread. For that which they loved first—woman and mother—is that which they must learn to despise in others and suppress within themselves. Under these conditions, which are all we know, so far, as the human condition, men will continue to see the world as divided into “them” and “us,” male and female, hard and soft, solid and liquid—and they will, in every way possible, fight and flee the threat of submersion. They will build dykes against the “streaming” of their own desire. . . . They will confuse, in some mad revery, love and death, sex and murder.<sup>34</sup>

Discussions about the female body in terms of abjection, or the monstrous-feminine, tend to operate on different levels and to refer to rather different aspects of psychic processes. Sometimes they concern the Oedipal drama and the fear of castration. Sometimes they are based in a theory of fetishism (the phallic woman). At other times they rely on a psychoanalytic account that stresses the pre-Oedipal moment, and deal with the need for separation and consequent fear of reengulfment which I have been discussing. A more Lacanian version is based on the threat to the man’s place in the Symbolic, which produces a resistance to the pre-Symbolic (and the mother). Yet another version rests on the fear of maternal authority, or of the power of the “archaic” mother. All these accounts can be found in current film studies and cultural theory, and it is not my intention to assess or compare them. The general question raised by the notion of the “monstrous-feminine,” whatever its presumed origins, is whether it renders the (abject) body a potential site of transgression and feminist intervention. And I think our answer must be in terms of the same guarded optimism with which I considered the female grotesque: namely that the operative word is *potential*, for the dominant culture of patriarchy has already defined and situated the body, and the prospects for reappropriation are, to say the least, fraught with hazards and contradictions.

A third area of feminist body politics is what has been called “*l’écriture féminine*.” A concept originating in what is generally referred to as French feminism, this notion has a number of slightly different manifestations, of which I shall briefly discuss two.<sup>35</sup> In *La Révolution de langage poétique*, Julia Kristeva contrasts the realm and language of the Symbolic (the law of the Father, identified with and coincident with the coming into language of the child) with what she calls the “semiotic.” The semiotic is the prelinguistic, the bodily drives, rhythms, and “pulsions” experienced by the child in the infantile fusion with the mother. These pleasures and feelings are repressed on entry into the

Symbolic, but, according to Kristeva, since they remain in the unconscious, they may emerge at a later stage. In the writing of Lautréamont and Mallarmé, as well as Joyce and Artaud, the experience of the semiotic is articulated. (The term *l’écriture féminine* is not Kristeva’s, and of course her examples of this kind of writing here are all of men. However, the “feminine” nature of the writing consists of its supposed origins in the pre-Symbolic, prepatriarchal moment of the child-mother relationship.)

Kristeva is well aware that it makes no sense to propose the semiotic as somehow outside of language. In the first place, she is talking about writing, which is necessarily linguistic. And in the second place, the writers she discusses are, like everyone else, in the Symbolic—an essential condition of human development. “The semiotic that ‘precedes’ symbolization is only a *theoretical supposition* justified by the need for description. It exists in practice only within the symbolic and requires the symbolic break to obtain the complex articulation we associate with it in musical and poetic practices.”<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, her argument is that there is possible a particular kind of writing that originates in the prelinguistic, bodily experiences of infancy that have persisted in the unconscious into adulthood. Inasmuch as such writing subverts the Symbolic, it can therefore be seen (and has been so, by some feminists) as “feminine”—both in the sense that its origins are in the pre-Oedipal child-mother relationship, and in the sense that it escapes the rule of the Father and the dominance of patriarchal language and thought.

Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous have proposed a more direct relationship between women, writing, and the body, one in which men could not be the agents of “feminine writing.” Both begin from the specificity of woman’s body—for Irigaray, a plural, multiple, diffuse sexuality, for Cixous, similarly multiple libidinal impulses (oral, anal, vocal, the pleasures of pregnancy). Woman, says Cixous, must “write from the body”: “Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours. . . . She alone dares and wishes to know from within, where she, the outcast, has never ceased to hear the resonance of fore-language.”<sup>37</sup> *L’écriture féminine* is writing grounded in women’s experience of the body and sexuality, an experience which is not mediated by men and by patriarchy. This has been found to be an exceptionally liberating and suggestive notion by many feminists, who perceive in it the prospect of a cultural practice which is not compromised and contained by patriarchal discourses. The painter Nancy Spero has referred to her work as *la peinture féminine*, on the model of “feminine writing,” which, as Lisa Tickner says, commenting on Spero’s work, is “a form of writing marked by the pulsions of a female sexual body . . . and effecting various kinds of displacement on the western phallogo-

centric tradition of writing and the subject.”<sup>38</sup> In the next section of this essay, I will look at some of the problems involved in the notion of “writing from the body” as feminist practice.

### *Discourse and the Body*

One objection to the kind of body politics just discussed is that identifying women with their bodies is perilously close to those reactionary arguments in sociobiology and other disciplines, as well as in conservative common sense, which justify women’s oppression in terms of their biology—size, hormones, lack of strength, child-bearing functions, lactation, monthly cycles, and so on. So, for example, Judy Chicago’s famous art work *The Dinner Party*, which celebrates the hidden history of women, and, among other things, employs vaginal imagery to represent selected women from the past, has been criticized by other feminists for this equation of women with their biology (and specifically their genitals).<sup>39</sup> This is a complex issue, for there is also every reason to want to affirm that which is denied or denigrated, and to assert the specificity and experience of the female body.

Related to this is the objection that *what* the female body is varies by culture, by century, and by social group. It is a social, historical, and ideological construct. (As I argued earlier, it is clear that, for example, medical science has “made” the female body into a new entity in the modern age.) Biology is always overlaid and mediated by culture, and the ways in which women experience their own bodies is largely a product of social and political processes. The charge of “essentialism” is a serious one—that is, the criticism that concepts like *l’écriture féminine* often depend on an assumed basic, unchanging identity of “woman” and women’s bodies which ignores the realities of historical change, social production, and ideological construction. Elizabeth Gross has produced a carefully judged assessment of this debate, which I think is worth adopting, and which leaves us with the insights of Kristeva and Irigaray without the problems of an unacceptable essentialism: “Both these feminists have shown that *some* concept of the body is essential to understanding social production, oppression, and resistance; and that the body need not, indeed must not be considered merely a biological entity, but can be seen as a socially inscribed, historically marked, psychically and interpersonally significant product.”<sup>40</sup> The female body is seen as psychically and socially produced and inscribed. At the same time, it is experienced by women—primarily as lacking or incomplete. The feminist project of Irigaray, “to speak about a positive model or series of representations of femininity by which the female body may be positively marked,”<sup>41</sup> is endorsed by Gross.

The more radical version of this critique of essentialism argues that *there is no body outside discourse*. Parveen Adams’s argument, indicated in the third quotation at the beginning of this essay, is the psychoanalytic one that we never have an unmediated experience of a pre-given body, but rather that perceptions of the body are “represented from the start as agreeable or disagreeable.”<sup>42</sup> The experience of the body is always mediated by libidinal energy. To this we may add the parallel argument that the body is never experienced except as mediated through language and discourse. As I have already shown, the “body” is a product of social histories, social relations, and discourses, all of which define it, identify its key features (ignoring others), prescribe and proscribe its behavior. With regard to women’s bodies, Denise Riley follows through this perception to conclude that whether and when bodies are *gendered* “is a function of historical categorisations as well as of an individual daily phenomenology.”<sup>43</sup> The body is not always lived or treated as sexed. For, as she points out in relation to the politics of maternity:

If women did not have the capacity of childbearing they could not be arrayed by natalist or anti-natalist plans into populations to be cajoled or managed. But the point is that irrespective of natural capacities, only some prior lens which intends to focus on ‘women’s bodies’ is going to set them in such a light. The body becomes visible *as* a body, and *as* a female body, only under some particular gaze—including that of politics.<sup>44</sup>

There can, therefore, be no “direct” experience of the body, and we cannot talk about, or even conceive of, the body as some pre-given entity. This is as true for men as it is for women, but the particular implication here is that we need to be very careful in talking about a feminist body politics, whether one of *l’écriture féminine* or one of celebration of the female body. What constitutes the body, and what constitutes the female body and its experience, is already implicated in language and discourse. But this does not mean we must abandon the project. Recent developments in linguistics, psychoanalysis, and cultural theory have achieved the important task of challenging essentialism and naive realism, and of deconstructing the category of “woman,” demonstrating its construction in psychic processes, social and historical relations, ideological struggles, and discursive formations. But there are pragmatic, political, and philosophical reasons for resisting a total agnosticism of the body. As Denise Riley puts it, “it is compatible to suggest that ‘women’ don’t exist—while maintaining a politics of ‘as if they existed’—since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did.”<sup>45</sup>

In the first place, then, the instability of the category “woman” and the specific objection to identifying women with the female body (itself seen to be



ill-defined and not a constant), need not lead to the conclusion that the subject is irrevocably dispersed. There is some agreement among feminists that deconstruction, poststructuralism, and postmodernist theory are valuable allies in feminist analysis, critique, and political action, since they operate to destabilize patriarchal orthodoxies and also to oppose mistaken notions of uniform female identity.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, politically and experientially, it makes sense for women to mobilize around the social construct of “woman,” for, as Riley says, modern feminism “is landed with the identity of women as an achieved fact of history and epistemology.”<sup>47</sup> To that extent, too, the female body, as discursively and socially constructed, and as currently experienced by women, may form the basis of a political and cultural critique—so long as it is one which eschews a naive essentialism and incorporates the self-reflexivity of a recognition of the body as an effect of practices, ideologies, and discourses.

Finally, inconsistencies of the more radical anti-essentialist position have been pointed out. In the context of feminist film theory, Mary Ann Doane sees essentialism and anti-essentialism as opposite but equivalent mistakes.

Both the proposal of a pure access to a natural female body and the rejection of attempts to conceptualize the female body based on their contamination by ideas of “nature” are inhibiting and misleading. Both positions deny the necessity of posing a complex relation between the body and psychic-signifying processes, of using the body, in effect, as a “prop.” For Kristeva is right—the positing of the body *is* a condition of discursive practices. It is crucial that feminism move beyond the opposition between essentialism and anti-essentialism.<sup>48</sup>

As she says, the question about the relation between the female body and language, raised by deconstructionists and discourse theorists, is a question about a relation between two terms.<sup>49</sup> In other words, the critique of essentialism does *not* amount to a proof that there *is* no body.

In the following section, I will draw some preliminary conclusions from this discussion about the prospects of a feminist cultural politics of the body, which need not be doomed to negation or reincorporation by the male gaze and by a patriarchal culture.

### *Gender, Dance, and Body Politics*

Since the body is clearly marginalized in Western culture, it might appear that dance is an inherently subversive activity. Indeed, the marginality of dance itself as an art form in the West suggests that this is so; compared with orchestral music, opera, film, and literature, dance has had minority appeal.

But we must beware of making the easy assumption that use of the body is itself transgressive, in a culture which allows only the “classical body.” Here, from a key text on dance, is an accredited discussion of the ballet.

The bearing of the classical dancer . . . is characterized by compactness. The thigh muscles are drawn up, the torso rests upon the legs like a bust upon its base. This bust swivels and bends but, in most *adagio* movements at any rate, the shoulders remain parallel to the pelvis bone. Every bend, every jump is accomplished with an effect of ease and of lightness. . . . In all such convolutions of the *adagio* the ballerina is showing the many gradual planes of her body in terms of harmonious lines. While her arms and one leg are extended, her partner turns her slowly round upon the pivot of her straight point. She is shown to the world with utmost love and grace. She will then integrate herself afresh, raise herself on the points, her arms close together, the one slightly in front of the other. It is the alighting of the insect, the shutting of the wings, the straightening into the perpendicular of feelers and of legs. Soon she will take flight and extend herself again. Meanwhile she shows us on the points what we have not seen in the *arabesque* or *développé*, two unbroken lines from toes to thighs.<sup>50</sup>

The classical ballet has colluded in the preservation of the classical body, emphasizing in its commitment to line, weightlessness, lift, and extension an ethereal presence rather than a real corporeality. In addition, the strict limits on body size and shape for girls and women dancers reinforce a denial of the female body in favor of an ideal of boyish petiteness. (It is no surprise that the incidence of eating disorders among ballerinas and would-be ballerinas is far higher than that among the general population.<sup>51</sup>) The roles created for women in the classical repertoire—fairies, swans, innocent peasant girls—collude in a discourse which constructs, in a medium which employs the body for its expression, a strangely disembodied female.

Modern dance, from its beginnings early in the twentieth century, has usually been seen as an important breakthrough for women. For one thing, many of the major innovators and choreographers in modern dance have been women, whereas the classical ballet has always been dominated by men. Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Mary Wigman are among the key figures here. The modern repertoire also consists of many pieces which deal with strong women, and with myths and stories from women’s point of view. Most important, modern dance has totally transformed the types of movement seen on the stage, abandoning the purity of line and denial of weight of the classical ballet and introducing angularity, pelvic movement,

emphasis on the body's weight and its relationship to the ground. A notion of the "natural body" has been employed in this development, particularly by Duncan and Graham and their followers. This particular combination, of a conception of the natural body and a commitment to women's stories and lives, has led many practitioners and critics to conclude that modern dance *is* a medium for political as well as aesthetic transgression.

But, as the critique of essentialism has shown, we must be wary of a cultural politics which is based on any notion of women's natural body, or women's universal essence—the kind of conception, for example, which lies behind many of Martha Graham's representations of Greek myths. What this means is that dance can only be subversive when it questions and exposes the construction of the body in culture. In doing so, it necessarily draws attention to itself *as* dance—a version of the Brechtian device of laying bare the medium. Postmodern dance has begun to achieve this, and thus to use the body for the first time in a truly political way. This development is discussed by Elizabeth Dempster, who stresses that the key focus of postmodern dance (going back to Merce Cunningham in the 1940s, but for the most part emerging in the 1960s and 1970s) has been the body itself.<sup>52</sup> It is not uncommon for a postmodern choreographer to use untrained bodies in a work, alongside trained dancers. (Michael Clark's work is a British example of this practice.) Dance itself is thus deconstructed, and the operations and actions of the body made clear. The body itself may be the theme of the dance, and a good deal of postmodern dance is concerned with gender and sexual politics (Yvonne Rainer in the United States, DV8 in Britain). The repertoire, the style, the ideologies, and the illusion of transparency of the medium of both classical and modern dance have been overturned by postmodern dance. In such a practice, the body can indeed provide a site for a radical cultural politics.

The implications for a feminist politics of the body are clear, not just for dance, which is necessarily founded on the body as its medium of expression, but also for visual representation, performance art, and other arts disciplines. A straightforward celebratory art of the female body may have the welcome effect of producing positive images for women, in defiance of the dominant constructions of femininity in our culture. At the same time, it runs two kinds of risk: first, that these images can be reappropriated by the dominant culture and read against the grain of their intended meaning (as in the Dublin demonstration); and second, that they may collude with a kind of sexist thinking which identifies woman with the body and assumes an unchanging, pre-given essence of the female. Any body politics, therefore, must speak *about* the body, stressing its materiality and its social and discursive construction, at the same time as disrupting and subverting existing regimes of representation. Feminist

artists and critics have suggested strategies for this kind of intervention, including ironic quotation of works by men, juxtapositions of text and image which challenge representation, addressing the construction of femininity in the work itself, incorporating the self-reflexive commentary on the mode of representation employed, and what Mary Kelly has called the "depropriation" of the image.<sup>53</sup>

Body politics need not depend on an uncritical, ahistorical notion of the (female) body. Beginning from the lived experience of women in their currently constituted bodily identities—identities which are *real* at the same time as being socially inscribed and discursively produced—feminist artists and cultural workers can engage in the challenging and exhilarating task of simultaneously affirming those identities, questioning their origins and ideological functions, and working toward a nonpatriarchal expression of gender and the body.

#### Notes

- 1 Peter Gidal, quoted by Mary Ann Doane, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," in Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 217.
- 2 Mary Kelly, quoted by Rosemary Betterton, "New Images for Old: The Iconography of the Body," in *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media* (London: Pandora, 1987), p. 206.
- 3 Parveen Adams, "Versions of the Body," *m/f* 11/12 (1986), p. 29.
- 4 Doane, "Woman's Stake," p. 226.
- 5 See, for example, Susan Barrowclough, "Not a Love Story," *Screen* 23, no. 5 (1982).
- 6 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- 8 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, vol. 1 of *The History of Manners* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), p. 64.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 161, 162.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- 12 See Peter Sallibrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), for an analysis of body imagery and social change in Europe from the seventeenth century, based on Bakhtin's division.
- 13 Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984).
- 14 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 135–69.
- 15 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* (London: Allen Lane, 1979).
- 16 See Mike Featherstone, "The Body in Consumer Culture," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 1, no. 2 (September 1982).
- 17 See, for example, Robert Malcolmson, "Popular Recreations under Attack," in Bernard Waites et al., eds., *Popular Culture: Past and Present* (London: Croom Helm, 1982).

- 18 Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 201.
- 19 Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur, eds., *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
- 20 See L. J. Jordanova, "Natural Facts: A Historical Perspective on Science and Sexuality," in Carol MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern, eds., *Nature, Culture, and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
- 21 Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views," *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1982).
- 22 Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," in Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, eds., *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), p. 72.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 24 From Frigga Haug, ed., *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 126.
- 25 Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire* (London: Paladin, 1984), p. 39.
- 26 *Cosmopolitan* (U.S.) (August 1989), p. 186.
- 27 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972); Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975).
- 28 Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," in Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies / Critical Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1986).
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 217.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- 32 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). Barbara Creed has used this analysis in a most interesting way in the discussion of the basis of appeal of horror movies (Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *Screen* 27, no. 1 [1986]).
- 33 See, for example, Evelyn Fox Keller, "Gender and Science," in Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983).
- 34 Barbara Ehrenreich, "Foreword" to Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1 of *Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. xvi.
- 35 For a helpful discussion and critique of this term and its uses, see Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l'écriture féminine*," in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (London: Virago, 1986).
- 36 Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 68.
- 37 Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976), p. 889. See also Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).
- 38 Lisa Tickner, "Nancy Spero: Images of Women and *la peinture féminine*," in *Nancy Spero* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987), pp. 5, 7-8.
- 39 See, for example, Michèle Barrett, "Feminism and the Definition of Cultural Politics," in C. Brunt and C. Rowan, eds., *Feminism, Culture, and Politics* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983).
- 40 Elizabeth Gross, "Philosophy, Subjectivity, and the Body: Kristeva and Irigaray," in Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Gross, eds., *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), p. 140.

- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 42 Adams, "Versions of the Body," p. 29.
- 43 Denise Riley, "Am I That Name?" *Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 105.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- 46 See, for example, Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory," in *Signs* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1987). Also *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1988): special issue on deconstruction.
- 47 Riley, "Am I That Name?," p. 111.
- 48 Doane, "Woman's Stake," pp. 225-26.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 223.
- 50 Adrian Stokes, "The Classical Ballet," extract from *Tonight the Ballet*, in Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, eds., *What Is Dance? Readings in Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 244-45.
- 51 A personal account is the dancer Gelsey Kirkland's autobiography, *Dancing on My Grave* (London: Penguin, 1986).
- 52 Elizabeth Dempster, "Women Writing the Body: Let's Watch a Little How She Dances," in Susan Sheridan, ed., *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (London: Verso, 1988).
- 53 Mary Kelly, "Beyond the Purloined Image," *Block* 9 (1983). See also Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman, "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-Making," *Screen* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1980); and Lisa Tickner, "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists since 1970," *Art History* 1, no. 2 (June 1978) (reprinted in Rosemary Betteerton, ed., *Looking on: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media* [London: Pandora, 1987]).