

Review Essay

Drid Williams

Helen Thomas, *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press (Palgrave Macmillan), 262 pages, including endnotes, bibliographical references, name and subject indexes. ISBN 0-333-72432. Hardback, \$75.00 [US]; paperback, \$24.95 [US].

"Clearly, the root problem is how to define and locate human agency"
Brenda Farnell, 'Getting Out of the *Habitus*' (2000: 403).

Helen Thomas depends heavily (and uncritically) on Bryan Turner's sociological theory of human sociocultural life (pages 12-17, 20-24, 28-30, 53, 62, 94, 166, 217) and Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* (pages 20, 51, 56-8, 87, 117-18, 150, 165, 171, 206, 226). She thus shoulders the ontological burdens of Turner's and Bourdieu's work, and, she evidently approves of Sheets-Johnstone's phenomenological approach to dancing—a further burden—making this book problematical three times over. How?

I believe that many students of sociology, cultural studies or the dance do not know that Bryan Turner's attempt to recover human agency through embodiment rests on the notion that "the effectiveness of persons in socio-cultural life resides in *the discourse-independent agency of the bodies of persons*," or that the search Turner undertook, [important though it was in itself], led him only as a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology and the concept of the 'lived-body' (Varela 1999: 385).

I think many students do not know that Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* "is theoretically problematic from the perspective of a realist philosophy of science" and that "*Habitus* turns out to be a hypothetical cognitive and transcendent causal nexus that *has no ontological grounding* because it exists somewhere between neurophysiology and the person (Farnell 2000: 412, italics added). I wonder if Thomas realizes that, when talking about dancers in a lecture setting, ("they were indeed listening with and through their bodies," p. 92), she appears to endorse Sheets-Johnstone's concept of "bodily logos." These problems will be addressed in that order.

For Turner, the 'agentic body' means that it is 'active' (Turner 1984: 51-54 and 245-251; 1987: 240-241, and 1991: 31-33 and 67-68). Because it is alive, the human body is now (magically!) agentic.

All that has to happen is for nostalgic social theorists to acknowledge the demand for a notion of effective agency, then to recognize that some theory of embodiment must be a pre-condition for its realization. The crucial point at this stage of Turner's argument is his assumption that Merleau-Pontian philosophy is itself unproblematic for his theoretical purposes (Varela 1999: 388).

Had Thomas read Farnell (1994) with diligence, she would have discovered why there are problems with Merleau-Pontian philosophy:

The proper location of causation and agency, and a genuine conception of the person are required. As Varela puts it:

The reversal of the centre of privilege in Cartesian dualism is ultimately rooted in the tacit acceptance of the conceptual incompatibility of causation and agency prescribed by the Humean tradition. After all, if *mind is a ghost in the machinery of the body*, moving or not, the body is the only 'reality' for the location of causation *and* agency. But if the body as machine, the objective body, is rejected as such because of its deterministic status, then the body as 'lived', the subjective body, must, it is thought, be accepted as the only alternative. Somehow then, as a Jamesian act of faith, it is viewed as nondeterministic as long as it is 'lived'. And so the subjective body is mistakenly viewed as the only proper location for agency [Varela 1992: 7].¹

Varela's analysis articulates several conceptual errors found in recent attempts to return to the work of Merleau-Ponty in order to find ways to transcend the exclusion of 'the body' from social theory. To emphasize that part of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology that deals with the 'lived body' and 'intentionality' and to exclude his attention to the problem of connecting bodily gesture with language . . . in fact, brings his approach to a dead end (Farnell 1994: 932-33).

The "dead end" to which Farnell refers is prominent in the phenomenological approach of philosopher, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, who, in an essay entitled "Thinking in Movement" (1981) postulates a 'lived body', which (as Varela explains) does not mean

that we have a mindless body, a machine in motion without a ghost. Quite the contrary, what we have is a *mindful body*. A body that is mindful is a lived body. It is exactly this thesis that propels Sheets-Johnstone into the consideration of certain traditional philosophical assumptions she is in fact challenging with this investigation into improvisational dancing. These assumptions stem from Cartesian dualism.²

What may well be the major thesis of her article is the idea of the mindful body, or what Sheets-Johnstone calls "bodily logos." What we have here is "that fundamental creativity founded upon the bodily logos, that is, upon a mindful body, a thinking body, a body which opens up into movement, a body, which, in improvisational dance, breaks forth continuously into dance and into *this* dance, a body which moment by moment fulfills a kinetic destiny and invests the world with meaning" [Sheets-Johnstone 1981: 406] (Varela 1995: 231).

In other words, "The mindful body in movement is mind literally inhabiting its natural mode of being: mind actually living *in* movement. This mode of natural being is a declaration of animate existence. In each moment of spontaneous creation of declared animate existence, there is the instantaneous unification of sense and motion . . . Thus we have thinking *in* movement, not thinking *with* movement, as pure spontaneity and as pure motion" (Varela 1995: 231-2).³

If Turner's analysis of the body is a return to phenomenology, and his approach is flawed (Farnell 1994: 933) such that it can lead to Sheets-Johnstone's notion of a "bodily logos," then what are we to make of it all? In a facile summarization, Thomas says,

Merleau-Ponty also rejected the Cartesian mind/body dualism and insisted that the body and the psyche are inextricably connected. For Merleau-Ponty (1962), human beings are embodied subjectivities and any analysis of the relation of the self to the world has to begin from the fundamental fact that we are embodied. The body is not simply a house for the mind, rather it is through our lived experience of our bodies that we perceive of, are informed by, and interact with the world (p. 29).

About Bourdieu, we read,

Social bodies, then, are not simply written-on pages. Rather, they are produced by acts of labour, which in turn have a bearing on how individuals develop and maintain their physical being. These acts of labour also affect the way people learn how to present their bodies in everyday life through body techniques, dress and style. As the individual's body comes to be formed, it bears the unmistakable marks of his or her social class. The inscription of class on the body is a result of three particular determinants, the social location, the habitus and taste (Thomas, pages 56-57).

Again, Thomas could have profited greatly by reading Farnell (2000): "To see if *habitus* is adequate to account for these aspects of social life to which Bourdieu draws attention, we must ask, what is the *habitus exactly* and how does it connect with what people say and do? Bourdieu tells us that the generative schemas and dispositions of the *habitus* are durable because they are learned during the early years of life. Inscribed in 'bodily hexis,'⁴ they are habitual and unreflexive, '[T]he agent does what he or she "has to do" without posing it explicitly as a goal—beneath the level of calculation and even consciousness, beneath discourse and representation' [Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 128]. And again: 'Bodily hexis . . . turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking and thereby of feeling and thinking.'" Farnell asks,

What is the ontological status of 'dispositions' and how is this different from the status of 'rules'? How do dispositions activate the generative schemas of the *habitus*, if they are beyond the conscious grasp of the agent? And if they are, how is the *habitus* not deterministic?

Bourdieu tries to avoid determinism by suggesting that the *habitus* only disposes actors to do certain things. It provides a *basis for* the generation of practices but does not determine them. But if habitual schemas are 'generative', there must be some means by which agents draw on their *habitus* as a resource of some kind. The problem with this formulation is that the process of generation, the socio-cultural content generated and subsequent adjustments to external constraints (demands and opportunities) of the social world, are all apparently unconscious, or less than conscious. Hence, it is not clear how this causal link might actually work, or how it can be the doing of an agentic person . . . I suggest that the invention of analytical constructs or mechanisms such as the dispositions and generative schemas of the *habitus* are necessary because *Bourdieu's theory lacks an adequate conception of the nature and location of agency*, and an adequate conception of the nature of human powers and capacities. The want of clarity surrounding Bourdieu's attempts to define his conception against critics is symptomatic of this failure [see Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 120-40]. Clearly, the root problem is how to define and locate human agency (Farnell 2000: 402-403—italics added).

As I read through *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory*, I wondered whether Thomas knew what "the root problem" was when she wrote her book? More important, did she know what the alternatives are?

Although the anti-Cartesian conception of human agency articulated in Harré's causal powers provides all the necessary conditions to get to dynamically embodied action, (see Harré and Madden 1975), its full realization requires a theory such as Williams's semasiology with its concepts of the signifying body and of the action sign (Farnell 2000: 409).⁵

Further to the point, I wonder whether Thomas understands “self-reflexivity,” since Deidre Sklar’s work [pages 66-67; 78; 80-84; 86; 228] is one of two focal points of Chapter 3. Is Thomas aware that Sklar’s version of a “personal anthropology” is a *failed version* of the concept?

The most disappointing feature of Sklar’s two essays [1991a and 1991b] consists of the fact that she pushes Geertz’s admonition to know *how* something is done over the edge: to the way people move as “a key to the way they think and feel and to what they know”. [She says] this is because “Dance ethnography is . . . grounded in the body and the body’s experience rather than in texts, artifacts, or abstractions [1991a: 6]. Not true. Bodily experience is certainly grounded in language, culture and considerable degrees of abstraction, but the real difficulty emerges in a sub-section, *Ethnography and Self-Reflexivity* [1991a: 8-9]. Here, the author doesn’t reveal the tacit commitments of a person to a sociological framework of meaning which authorizes claims to and achievements of knowledge, as Varela suggests, nor does she understand that to be reflexive, is to think about one’s commitment critically and responsibly: an objective interest in the relation between the person and his or her *role of knowledge* [Varela 1994: 63—italics added].

Because she had become aware of, thus wanted to confront her own prejudices (an admirable aim), she chose to emphasize the personal feelings of the investigator—an enterprise that, in our estimation, shouldn’t be grafted onto the *subjects* of an investigation. This, in fact is what “An Exercise in Applied Personal Anthropology” [Williams 1991: 287-321]⁶ is all about: a criticism of the self of an investigator who made these kinds of unconscious mistakes, plus the shift to the idea of a personal anthropology [Pocock 1994: 11-43] and an understanding of self-reflexivity that corrects for such distortions (Williams 1994: 6-7).

Sklar indulges in some rather embarrassing self-revelations. Her “dance ethnography” becomes more a travelogue including her emotional responses than it is an account meant to articulate features of another people’s performed event. Sklar clearly equates self-reflexivity with her personal, subjective *psychology*, which is precisely what the idea of a personal anthropology does *not* do. The idea of a personal anthropology involves a shift from impersonal to personal, *but not subjective*, knowledge.⁷ Sklar’s shift is from impersonal to subjective knowledge grounded in the investigator’s personal psychology. The evidence for this is on pages 4-8 in Sklar (1991b).

I also wonder whether Thomas is aware that, in spite of its many good points, Ness’s work has been criticized because of its “mysterious first chapter” (mainly theoretical) in which

the author wanted to bridge a gap that has appeared in dance scholarship in recent years. On the one hand is the new and growing ‘reflexive’ or ‘experiential’ school, influenced by the intellectual trends of other disciplines, especially the American version of reflexive anthropology and post-modernism. This group focuses on how it feels to dance, what goes on internally or subjectively in the muscles, joints, personality and consciousness of the dancer. The opposite approach is a sociological one; dances are seen as group activities that are performed by certain sub-sets of a society, communicating messages to the members of the society about status, role, social transitions, change and so forth.

I think the attempt to reconcile such opposing analytical approaches has pushed Ness into some untenable conclusions. Determined to find both subjective and social meanings of the dance, she traps herself into highly suspect statements, i.e. choreography is inspired by architecture; linguistic patterns are repeated in dances; bodily parts are chosen as expressive instruments to correspond to history, moral values, etc. . . (Franken 1994: 69-70).

It is in Chapter 5, however, that my strongest objections to Thomas's book arise, starting with the fact that "a phenomenological approach to dances denies [dancing and dances] any duration in time" (Williams 2004a: 72).⁸

Thomas's Chapter 5 (pages 121-145) opens with a quote from Marcia Siegal whose *At the Vanishing Point* (1968) was, and still is, a disaster from the viewpoint of those who are movement literate, because it repeats the same romantic vision of *dancers*, *dances* and *dancing* about which Heller (1969) wrote (Williams 2004a: 90-91).⁹ Taking inspiration from Siegal's quote, Thomas says, "dance, unlike other arts, does not leave a record of its existence in the form of a tangible object, like a painting, a script or a musical score. Rather, as it comes into being in performance so it is gone" (page 121). Did it not occur to the author that speech and music would also be "gone" if it were not for the human achievement of literacy? If there were literate choreographers, they would be on the same level as music composers or playwrights—they could produce written "objects" for their dances. There are scores for several of Doris Humphrey's dances, so why did she overlook the point (page 122)?

Music has been literate for about one thousand years, and speech for much longer than that; a viable script for movement writing has only been in existence since 1928 (see Farnell 1996), which may be why Thomas makes the naive mistake of equating scripts and musical scores as "objects" that are *the same as* a painting. Although Thomas cites *Ten Lectures* [Williams 1991], she must have skipped pages 79-81, where these matters are discussed in depth.¹⁰

"But," someone might ask, "why are these pages important?" Because her argument echoes Jane Harrison's contrast between 'things' and 'events'. We are told that events (such as dancing) are impermanent—gone forever—while a 'thing' made, such as a sculpture or a painting, is (relatively) permanent (Harrison 1948[1913]: 170-71). Harrison's (and Thomas's) contrast depends entirely on time elements and the assumption that there is no 'thing' made in the event of a dance. Unfortunately, both Harrison and Thomas are wrong with regard to the contrast they make.

[F]irst, dancers are logically prior to dances—to the act of dancing or to the notion of the dance—just as speakers are logically prior to speeches—to the act of speaking or to the notion of language. Harrison has said that there is no *thing* made in the case of a dance. If "thing" is defined as a material object such as a sculpture, she is right. However, if "thing" is defined as a virtual entity [Langer 1957: 6], or if things are defined, say, as manuscripts containing kinetographic scores of dances, then Harrison is wrong. . . . she is wrong in any case because she (like phenomenology) denies any ontological status to dances (to rituals, ceremonies, and dramas) *except when they are being performed*. To agree to Harrison's position is to commit oneself to the notion that events have no permanent, near-permanent, or long-range character in human social life; only things have duration in time, but this is an indefensible position. Events in human social life include the signing of declarations, court trials, wars, christenings, marriages, funerals, and much more. These events have long-range, enduring properties and characteristics. They also have lasting consequences. To deny ontological status or duration in time to them is absurd.

Second, are dances solely dependent upon actual performances? If we identify dances only as performances (in Saussurian terms, only at the level of *la parole*), we see them only phenomenologically—simply as "appearances," therefore as things that

have no real character or structure, which in any of their manifestations do not lend themselves to any kind of rational treatment. To identify dances only as performances trivializes them, just as we trivialize language if we identify it only as speaking (Williams 2004a: 73).¹¹

Having said that, I want to point out that Thomas's stated aim of Chapter 5 is perplexing: "This chapter will explore a range of theoretical and practical issues surrounding the concepts, processes and products of dance reconstruction. The exploration of the problematic issues that the desire to generate a 'usable' or 'retrievable' past raises begins, in a sense, where the last chapter left off" (page 121). Sophisticated readers will be perplexed because she stumbles and falls over an essential point regarding the ontology of dances in the first paragraph of Chapter 5. Consequently, one wonders of what the alleged theoretical issues to come consist? Since the only importance she attributes to movement writing is that of reconstruction, the prospects are bleak.

Thomas would have benefited from reading Page (1996), who presents movement-writing as a *complementary*, not an *alternative*, mode of recording to films and video-recordings, making the important point that *movement-writers work from the categories of the participants*, where film-makers do not.¹² Page's observations are summarized in the analogy she makes between filmed dances (rites, ceremonies) and movement texts and to audio recordings in relation to written musical scores.

The facts are that acquiring literacy skills in movement involves crucial decisions and commitment regarding 1. the aspiring writer's degree of alienation from bodily praxis; 2. the reduction of the cultural, *signifying human body* into a 'biological organism' or a "lived body," and 3. the endorsement of a genuine anthropology of embodiment, the most significant technology for which

will turn out to be, not, as might be supposed, video and film technology (although they are important aids), but the invention of an adequate script for writing human actions. What is required is a script that will provide the means to become literate in relation to the medium of movement just as we have been able to achieve literacy in relation to spoken language and music. By 'literacy', I mean the ability to read and write movement so that translation into the medium of words is unnecessary for creating ethnographically appropriate description of actions. The breakthrough that is represented by a movement script (in contrast to various forms of mnemonic devices) is that it provides the means to think and analyse in terms of movement itself. In Ardener's terms (1989[1973]), a script provides a mode of registration and specification that enables the apperception of movement events in ways that are otherwise extremely difficult, if not impossible. It enables body movement to be seen as movement flow rather than as 'successive positions', and as agent-centered action rather than as raw behaviour (Farnell 1994: 937).

Although I have presented the following arguments on the credibility of movement-writing and movement literacy elsewhere (Williams 2004b: 42-43 [credibility] and 51-52 [literacy]), they bear an abbreviated repetition: while literacy is commonly taken for granted with reference to spoken languages, it is not taken for granted regarding human movement. The reasons for this are three-fold: 1. Laban's script is widely believed to be just another complicated

mnemonic device, primarily iconographic in nature; 2. Laban's script is widely taught as "dance notation" as if the major requirement for learning the script includes prior ability to perform classical or modern theatrical dancing. As a result, non-dancers who have attempted to learn the system have had negative experiences, and 3. Since the script has been (and still is) so strongly associated with dancing, the system is misunderstood because of the same intellectual prejudices regarding Deaf signing (Baynton 1995, 1996) and the Hopi Snake Dance (Dilworth 1992).

Even a nodding acquaintance with the history of attempts to develop systems of recording dances and sign languages would partially dissolve the first problem. While it is true that there are a few systems for recording movement that are little more than memory aids and there are those (notably Sutton Movement Shorthand), that are primarily iconographic, Laban's script doesn't fall into either category.

With reference to the second problem: no one would deny that dance notators earned lasting gratitude because they kept Labanotation alive after its initial publication in Vienna in 1928. However, they narrowed its scope to the recording of dances, but in doing so, they limited its potential. Laban's script *isn't* exclusively tied to dancing.¹³

The question of whether or not Laban's script is a legitimate writing system was first addressed by Nelson Goodman (1969), and later by Williams (1972, 1999a), using Goodman's seven criteria: 1. contextual compliance, 2. syntactic and semantic disjointness, 3. finite differentiation, 4. constituent and contingent properties, 5. compliance with reality, 6. requisite antecedent classification of a 'work', a system, etc. and 7. identity of behavior (Williams 1999a: 77).

We learn from Farnell and Durr (1981) that it is impossible to understand or to represent human actions without taking into consideration *the spatial characteristics* of the action signs that are involved. How and in what ways a movement-writer's perceptions of the spatial dimensions are radically changed is skillfully explained by these authors [1981: 226-241] for the benefit of those who do not read or write movement. Movement literacy is important, however, for reasons beyond the dance and movement world itself.

Nothing that has been called "progress" or "civilization" would have been possible without widespread literacy and the fact that our knowledge of the structures and patterns of conventional languages came about through literate comparisons of written texts laid side-by-side. If we could compare texts of human action sign systems, we would reach comparable revelations about human life and culture. Thomas's emphasis on movement writing simply in terms of retrieving the past and a small group of dancers' experiences of difficulty learning Doris Humphrey's dance technique is hopelessly parochial.

Written texts of speech revealed such rules, standards and models of conventional language that we possess. Written movement texts could provide epiphanies of understanding due to comparison and the nature of movement-writing itself. Written music has furnished us with profound

insights into scales, structure, harmony. Written texts of action signs provide the same conditions for analysis and understanding, because “The Laban script becomes a mode of registration in and of itself, a means to apperceive and conceive of movement without the necessity of translating into spoken language terms but in ways that offer the same kinds of awareness of the medium that spoken language literacy provides” (Farnell 1995: 24). Elsewhere I have said,

Movement texts undermine the ways we normally think about human acts and actions because they force us, cognitively, to put images of human bodies into events and into our thinking about events. When you are confronted with a movement text, you can no longer live solely in a notionally abstracted world of words alone (Williams 1996: 122).

But, on the whole, human movement lacks literacy. Unfortunately, the non-literate do not see the invisible structures that govern cultural performances of moving, human persons. I also believe that movement-literacy among scholars in the sciences and the humanities would throw light on the human evolutionary process, which is, after all, an evolution of complexity. We might even learn that

gesture and movement as they are conceived and used in Western theatrical dancing *do not complete the natural histories of feelings*, in contrast to the majority of movements made in everyday situations: “Ritual, like art, is essentially the active termination of a symbolic transformation of experience” [Langer 1951[1942]: 49, cited in Williams 2004a: 20]. Langer describes her writing as “heresy” for her nonpositivistic ways of thinking [Williams 2004a: 38]. In *Problems*, she advances the thesis that a dance is a virtual entity [1957: 6, cited in Williams 2004a: 73].

The juxtaposition of Langer’s name with those of Sheets-Johnstone [1966] and Fraleigh [1991] on pages 29-30 might lead the untutored to believe that Langer was a phenomenologist. There are many strange juxtapositions of people to be found in Thomas’s book, but they will not detain us further.

Finally, I disagree with Bryan Turner’s endorsement on the back of Thomas’s book. He believes that Thomas “has pulled off an intellectual coup which is to integrate the sociology of the body and dance studies.” I don’t think she managed to that—or to do her homework—regarding the literature with which she attempts to deal. There are too many omissions; notably Farnell (1999). It is unfortunate, too, that *The Body, Dance and Society* rests on two major misconceptions all too prevalent in the dance world: the ephemerality of dancing (page 121) and its classification as “non-verbal” communication (pages 24-30).

Endnotes

¹ In the reprinted 1995 version of Varela’s essay, this citation is on page 219.

² Instead of thinking in the mind, we now think in the body—a simple reversal of standard Cartesianism.

³ Varela refers to an essay jointly written by Rajika Puri and Diana Hart-Johnson entitled "Thinking With Movement: Improvising versus Composing?" that addresses the issue of thinking *with* (rather than thinking *in*) movement. See Farnell 1995: 158-186.

⁴ [Farnell's note, 2000: 414]: Bourdieu's move to embody social theory relies on the dual notions of *habitus* and *hexis*, the latter . . . denotes a personal manner and style in matters such as deportment, stance, gait, and gesture that 'combines with the social (Bourdieu 1977: 83, 87, 94).

⁵ [Farnell's note, 2000: 414-15]: See Williams (1975; 1982; 1995; 1999b) and Varela (1993). 'Semasiology' is derived from Greek and refers to signification and meaning. Williams employed the term in order to distinguish her theory from other approaches to semiotics that include the sign functions of non-human animals and machines. In contrast, semasiology conceptualizes the signifying body and the spaces in which people move as specifically human; that is, as meaning-making practices specific to language-using creatures (Williams 1991: 363-4).

⁶ This essay is on pages 231-254 in Williams (2004a).

⁷ The explanation of this phrase can be found in Pocock (1994), i.e. "These features which are distinctive to the individual psyche are separable from the judgements of the person which constitute the personal anthropology" and "It can from this, I hope, be seen clearly that the assumptions of the personal anthropology are of a different order from that mass of assumptions, judgements and hypotheses which constitute the individual psyche" (*ibid.* 17-18).

⁸ See Williams (1991: 79-80).

⁹ See Williams (1991: 100-101).

¹⁰ See Williams (2004a: 72-74), with reference to two sections, "Do Dances Exist?" and "Things and Events Again."

¹¹ See Williams (1991: 80-81).

¹² There is a notable exception to this in anthropological literature: see Worth and Adair (1972), where native informants were given cameras and instruction, and they became "film-makers."

¹³ For relevant discussion and examples, see Farnell (1994) and Williams (1996).

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