

Anne-Britt Gran

When the Body Becomes the St

- about death, dwarves and doubles

The body is no longer what it was. In society, the body has become the location for the shaping of identity and the fear of death. Secularisation has invaded the body. The virtual body has arrived to stay - the cloned body will be next.

On stage, the body is still its old self. In many areas of stage art the body is taken for granted, as something given and unproblematised. The body is just an instrument in stage direction and choreography, an aesthetic tool. Consciousness of the *body* is the blind spot in the way stage artists deal with their bodies and weakens performance expression.

The performance director Kirsten Dehlholm demonstrated at a seminar in Oslo in 1997 the way in which she consciously works with the body as a figure on stage. In this article I will first make a detour around the body in culture and then look at Kirsten Dehlholm's working methods in staging the body on stage.

IN SOCIETY

We slim the body, we pierce it, paint it and train it. We have a whole generation of body artists who know how to discipline, ritualise and stylise their own bodies. They are not producing works of art as dancers, actors and performance artists do, but works of the body for their own use. Hunger artists expose the beauty of the skeleton, body builders drape the skeleton with muscles. Piercers perforate the skin and fill it with silver, the tattooed mask their skin with cultural symbols, and never see their skin as nature again. They create *works of the body*. Not unlike the romantic art genius, these body artists appear as autonomous individualists who have made their bodies sacred places for the creation of identity. But these activities do not take place within art institutions, nor are they explicitly related to aesthetic dilemmas. The sublimation of art in life's praxis has been developed in the *body* with the stylisation of the body.¹

The body as a problem on the stage within Modernism coincided with the development of directing as a new profession, and it became the director's task to solve this problem - the actor's body became the director's greatest nightmare.

House, techno and rave are answers to the ritual body. Here there is a search for the body which enters into the great collective, or the body that becomes one with rhythm. In a way one can say that there is a longing for a state of mind that transgresses the body as such, a longing for an experience of collectivity, trance, happiness and intoxication. The body is used as a *tool* to move beyond the body.

Stylisation and ritualisation of the body can be seen as two different strategies for dealing with the secularised body. Through stylisation the body becomes a workshop for physical alterations to search and/or sculpt identity. The physical nature of the body is the focus of the activity. The body becomes a stage. Ritualisation is a strategy that uses the body as a transitional location for mind expanding experiences. Secularisation of the human being has taken many centuries (in the West) and this secularisation has now reached the point where it attacks the body. God forsaken culture has invaded a body which can sense, but not necessarily accept, its *nature morte*.

The body is difficult to place within the dichotomy nature culture. Rather, the body is *nature-culture*, a kind of hybrid.² Large sections of our culture (sic) are now in the process of denying that the body is nature - making death invisible at the same time as genetic engineering makes the body a culturally constructed nature.³ It is easy to look at the disciplining, masking, theatricalisation and stylisation of the body today as a denial of the body as nature, here understood as (that part of) the human being which dies. Is it the fear of death which produces extreme cultivation of the body? Secularisation defines the body as nature on the same level as other natural beings (the animals and the trees). Aesthetics and discipline do all they can to hide this fact.

Whilst death reminds us of our nature,

our culture points towards a state of being where the creation of identity has been set free from its roots, its home and religion - and is no longer tied to one identity.⁴ Identities are shaped and produced, they are no longer extracted from the earth. We can juggle with masks and roles in a way which has not previously been acceptable to a bourgeois understanding of identity where the notion of autonomy and authenticity has always been primary. The body has become the privileged place for the construction of identity.

The aestheticised body is the exemplary hybrid: does the pierced hole in the nose belong to culture or nature?

ON STAGE, IN THE PAST

The question of the body's status in performance is in no way a postmodern invention. It follows modernism as a shadow, and is, moreover, tied to a criticism of realism as found, for example, in the work of Edward Gordon Craig and Vsevolod Meyerhold. The problem which the modernists faced was simple: how should one portray the human body on stage in a non-realistic way. The human presence on stage held theatre within the claws of naturalism. The body was presented as all too natural, all too like the bodies off stage. When the goal was to represent the world in a new (non mimetic) way, the body became the central problem. The Symbolists were the first to systematically deal with this problem and they were ruthless: hide it behind veils, replace it with marionettes or shadows, but for God's sake remove the actor's body from our Symbolist stages! Bodies are too material, real, realistic, too much nature and too little art/culture. There was one exception: the female dancer. She appeared as the stylised body, as an abstraction beyond the bodily.

Different forms of stylisation so became one of the most important tools in the

modernist performance. Bodies had to move in a stylised manner in order to avoid realistic representation and in addition they could be masked or padded out with costumes. Only in this way could bodies appear as “artificial” and man made. The body as a stage problem within Modernism coincided with the development of directing as a new profession. And it became the director’s task to solve this problem - the actor’s body became the director’s greatest nightmare.

ON STAGE, TODAY

Neither theatre nor dance has managed to face this tremendous change in culture’s relation to the body. Here I am not thinking of certain performances which have thematised anorexia or tattooing, but of how the body is staged. Body artists have long ago surpassed the Modernists in the stylisation and masking of the body. The sign systems of the street and the stage are pointing in opposite directions as are their respective bodies. The new experiences of the body have partly been integrated in performance art and contemporary dance, whilst traditional theatre could not be further away from the younger generation and its body culture than it is today.

The coming body generations could make stage art unnecessary. When the body is staged, the self is aestheticised and rituals flower, and the independent art becomes, so to speak, surplus. Aestheticism leaves art institutions and moves into the *body*. The body becomes the stage.

The first thing stage art has to do in order to meet the new grounds on which the body functions in culture, is to reflect the body’s status and behaviour on stage; what function does the body have on stage and how can it be put on stage? The body can no longer be treated as the place from which the voice comes or as the instrument which

produces movement.

Kirsten Dehlholm, in her Oslo lecture, made a distinction between the body-figure as sign, authenticity and virtuality. In her work she always relates to these different ways of exhibiting the body. The body can be exhibited as both sign and authenticity at the same time, and the use of authentic dwarves in the performance *The Picture of Snow White* is an example of this. They are both authentic dwarves and Snow White’s dwarves. Kirsten Dehlholm also works with the questions raised by genetic engineering and cloning, believing them to be one of the greatest challenges for the “old” body on stage. In her musical performance *Monkey Business Class* she focuses on the relationship between copy and original - the virtual and the authentic body.

To analyse further the work of the body on stage, the categories of symbol, icon, index, authenticity and virtuality can be used. These are not mutually exclusive categories, rather the opposite. When staging the body you can play on more than one of them, in one and the same body. Often, many of the categories are present simultaneously from the perspective of the stage artist. This can be unintentional. The aim of this systemisation in practice is that it should be possible to translate these categories into concrete scenic work. The way in which these operations ought to take place is a question which, in the end, finds an answer in the practical, concrete work itself. Theory can sharpen the awareness of how the body functions on stage in the presence of the audience. It is more than just one amongst a variety of aesthetic tools: it is the central location for the focus of attention in our culture. I establish the possible meanings of the categories through looking at their etymological origins⁵. The said categories are examples, not absolutes. Equally it is important to stress the context of usage, namely,

the performance, the situation in which the performance was experienced and my own background as a woman and a theatre scholar in the 1990s.

THE BODY AS SYMBOL

The term “symbol” originates in the Latin *symbolice* and *symbolus* which means “pictorial image” and “mark of ideal” (a signet ring).⁶ The symbol is arbitrary in relation to that which it symbolises; any thing can be a symbol of anything else. The flag, for example, is neither the nation nor resembles the nation. Which does not mean that the functioning symbols are arbitrary in relation to a social or historical context. The symbol is both conventional and acquired. In our context this means that the body on stage can be a symbol for anything: the nation, love, war, the machine, old age, death and so on. On stage we can choose to use the body as any kind of symbol whilst the challenge lies in finding a scenic form (gestures, costume, voice register, size, energy levels and so on) that can “fill” the symbol. It is also necessary to find symbols which can be recognised in the specific performance context.

THE BODY AS ICON

Icon, on the other hand, has a less arbitrary relation to its own significance. The word comes from the Greek *eikon* and the Latin *iconicus* and means “portrait in life size”. The icon is meant to resemble and be as big as that which it represents. The icon is motivated by its resemblance to its referent. A striking example in stage arts, for me, is the way in which the thin and trained dance body often involuntarily becomes an icon for the perfect body in culture. This icon has become almost a prerequisite in dance, no matter what the dance is trying to say, and without regard to that which the body is trying to express. Western audiences are

predisposed to see this icon because of the aestheticisation of the body in culture; especially because of the training and slimming of bodies. When this is the audience’s perceptory horizon, artists have in one way or another, to reflect this in the way in which they deal with the body on stage.

In many forms of stage art the body can never be separated from the personal body; from the person to whom it belongs. What identifies a person (hair colour, facial shape and so on) also belongs to the body. In everyday language the body is often spoken about as if it was an abstraction, whilst the person is something concrete. Or in other words, the body only has arms and legs while the person has a face. The body of which I am speaking here, has a face.

Star performers in realist theatre are forged in different institutional theatres. They appear in an endless stream of performances. In Norway we even have some *prima donna* actresses who receive applause on every entrance. What is interesting is that these performers almost become icons of themselves. We see the actor/person behind - or rather beside - the character independent from the role/character they play. The enormous focus on the person determined by the Western tyranny of intimacy has made this possible. Funnily enough this brings the naturalistic style of acting closer to the principle of “non-acting” in performance art (which denies representation); it is never clear whether it is the role or the person which we see and hear.

THE INDICATING BODY

The meaning of the word index with which I am concerned is “the one which reveals, makes visible, reports, informs”. The term shares its etymological origin with *indicium* which means information, message and sign, distinguishing marks, proof. In semiology one has the notion that there is a causal relation between the sign itself and

that which the sign indicates (for example “smoke” as “fire”). Here the index will be treated as less causally motivated; the index can be both arbitrary and non arbitrary in relation to that to which it refers.

The body as index - or more precisely the indicating body - can further more be divided into the *expressive* body and the *narrative* body. These two “bodies” appear frequently on stage, without this necessarily influencing the form. The expressive body indicates the underlying emotional repertoire: the body reveals an emotion. In the Stanislavskian tradition one imagines that a sign is motivated; there is a relation between a particular body and the feelings which are shown - it is the actor’s body’s authentic feelings which are revealed. In other traditions - for example Meyerhold’s biomechanics and Dario Fo’s jesting, and in the non-interpretative performance tradition -

the notion does not exist, feelings are played by the body but not felt in it.

The narrative body tells a story or describes something. Here the relationship between the body as index and that which is indicated is arbitrary; any body can narrate anything. In both examples the body is a place of transition, either for emotion or for action. The body points to something else not to itself. If this body in addition operates within a strict director/choreographer’s tradition, one might speak about the indicating body as an instrument. The body is only a means to report the director’s feelings and ideas.

THE AUTHENTIC BODY

“Authenticity” stems from the Latin *authenticus* which means original, real and reliable, especially in relation to documents and statements. The original is, so to speak,



Intruding Relatives directed by Kirsten Dehlholm, 1997.

identical to itself, it is not pointing to anything other than its own truth. The authenticity of the body is its unique quality (looks, size and so on) and its universal quality: that nature dies. In other words, all bodies are unique and all bodies die. Authenticity is not better than the non-authentic, the original is no better than the copy. Authenticity is just one of the body's possible stagings; death being the last.

In stage art the choice of authenticity is explicitly or implicitly present through the director's choice of certain actors for certain roles or in the choreographer's choice of certain body types. The effect of the choice of authenticity is greatest when it moves away from the cultural body ideal or it clashes with an expected praxis of behaviour. Therefore we can conclude that what seems authentic also is culturally decided. An example of the first is using disabled, fat or old people as dancers. Authenticity is evident as they are real disabled, fat or old people. An example of going against tradition is when Kirsten Dehlholm makes use of authentic dwarves in her performance *The Picture of Snow White*. The difference between using real dwarves and ordinary actors playing dwarves is enormous. For the first time one sees that Walt Disney's seven dwarves are really dwarves and not children or products of fantasy. The effect is stunning. Following the performance art style, this production also talks about the dwarves' lives, what it is like to be a dwarf.

Authenticity is consciously used as an artistic effect in theatre, in performance and in dance, but just as often the authentic body is present on stage without being reflected in the form. In the dance performance *Skjør* (Fragile) by Unn Margritt Nordseth, trained dancers were used who could master the choreographer's repertoire. In a discussion with the audience some spectators expressed their difficulty in believing

in the fragility because the dancers appeared to be so strong and solid. A disabled man in a wheelchair had on the other hand no problems in identifying with the dancers' delicate movements! The able spectators focused on the dancers' muscles and body control, which did not seem to be especially fragile. Authenticity is also "involuntarily" present. If authenticity is completely left to itself, there is the danger of working against the content and concept of the performance.

Authenticity is currently challenged by two perspectives: the virtual body and the genetic possibility of human cloning. Both the three dimensional virtual body (achieved) and cloning (possible, but still not achieved), will challenge our perception of originality and truth. Does authenticity presuppose that one can distinguish between copy and original - or is it enough to know that somewhere, there is/was an original?

THE VIRTUAL BODY

The word virtual comes from the Latin *virtus* meaning skilfulness, power and strength. Philosophically speaking virtual is used in terms of a power or ability that is really present - but just as a possibility and without being active at the moment. In physics the term is used in connection with a (virtual) picture (in optics) that is conceived and possible, but not in fact existing.

Virtuality and cloning are considered as a threat against the authentic body, and this again leads to an increased focus on authenticity. Authenticity is threatened by its own double which is *identical* - in looks - but made of completely *different* stuff. The challenge is that one cannot see it; there is a difference, but it is not visible.

Such a realistic virtuality has not been achieved up until now, but in the dance performance *Pôles* by the Canadian PPS Danse the contours of a new stage art - maybe also a new medium - are present.

Authentic bodies were in the same room as projected virtual bodies that looked three dimensional but were too transparent to create insecurity about what was what. When the authentic and virtual body for an instant met together in the same movement, an - almost horrific - ambivalence of brand new format was created. The virtual bodies would probably have solved Craig's *Ubermarionette* problem and the Symbolist horror of naturalism. A hundred years later the body is enveloped in other problems.

Authenticity and virtuality will be an inseparable coupling on stage. We can imagine the effect of the insecurity created on stage in a murder scene: who are they shooting? The body that can die or the virtual body which we can turn on and off again. When our sight can no longer distinguish, the difference is just death - the authentic body's only advantage.

Translated from Norwegian by Geddy Aniksdal and Maggie Gale

This article was first presented as a lecture for choreographers at Statens Ballethogskole in Norway and parts of it have already been published in the cultural newspaper, *Morgenbladet*.

1. The reference here is to Peter Burger who in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, 1984) has given up faith in sublimation in the praxis of life.

2. The notion of the body as nature-culture and a hybrid is inspired by Bruno Latour's, *Vi har aldri vært moderne. Essay i symmetriske antropologi* (We Have Never Been Modern. Essay in Symmetric Anthropology), Oslo, 1996. I want to emphasise that Latour is not talking about the body in this

context, but of phenomena such as the ozone layer. The ozone layer is both human-made culture, a natural phenomenon and a political affair. If one reduces the ozone layer to either one or the other, one loses the whole point of the idea of the hybrid.

3. In society invisible death contributes towards this; death is being hidden away in hospitals and institutions. In Academia theory about the body as text/sign/discourse/the body as absolute culture - contributes to such an amnesia of the body as nature.

4. Here I am thinking about the decentralising of the subject which has taken place in Post-structuralism and psychoanalysis and thereafter in the changed perception of identity in feminism, parts of anthropology and in literary theory.

5. The distinction between the symbol, icon and index is clearly inspired by Charles Peirce and belongs as such to a specific semiology - they are signs for something else. The term authenticity is differentiated from the term sign. Thus I do not join the Post-structuralist theory wave that has transformed everything into signs and representation. I do not, therefore, imagine that the whole world is signs, texts or a discursive formation and that there is something of the body which is not sign namely, the authenticity that we connect to the specific nature of each person, and death as the limit of that nature.

6. The etymology has been taken from Johansen, Nygaard og Schreiner, *Latinsk ordbok* (Latin Dictionary) Oslo, 1965, if no other source is given.

ANNE-BRIT GRAN (Norway) works as a theatre scholar at the University in Oslo, Norway. She has given numerous lectures and seminars on theatre.