# The Body as Non-Place: Utopian Potential in Philippe Decouflé's Dance Film *Codex*

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*En tout cas, il y a une chose certaine, c'est que le corps humain est l'acteur principal de toutes les utopies.*

Michel Foucault 'Le corps utopique'

## Introduction

The body is a problematic site for utopia. Literary utopian accounts of "a better way of being and living" (Levitas 1990: 7) describe bodily states in abundance – and often as a primary concern. The live body in the performative arts, however, constitutes a problem. Its very *life* is in a logical contradiction to utopia's constitutive impossibility. At the same time, physical practices such as body building, plastic surgery, the use of make up and medicine let everyday bodies emerge as 'utopian objects' (Gebauer 2001: 888). In what follows I examine the utopian potential of the body in artistic performance. I focus my considerations on the bodies of dancers in the opening sequence of French choreographer Philippe Decouflé's dance film *Codex* (1987). My aim in this is to argue for the body in the performative arts as a site with utopian potential that goes beyond an insular 'enhancement' of human capacity – be it health or beauty-wise. As a site of live performance, the body brings utopia to the present.

Artistic utopias are most commonly designed and conceptualised in literary form. Without wanting to ignore utopian trends in architecture or artistic experiments in Situationism, it is fair to say that utopia is most usually thought of as a literary genre. Some authors even see the literary form of both artistic and political utopias as a necessity: as a medium, the book (or another written account) allows for a formulation of utopian thoughts

without standing in the way of the ultimate impossibility that some theorists consider essential for utopias (see Seel, 2001).

Much has been written about utopia in art – and art as generally utopian (Marcuse, Adorno, Bloch). Research also exists on the utopian potential of performative art in particular (see Dolan, 2001, 2006). In this text, however, I don't want to investigate the progressive communality of art performances that includes performers and their spectators. Neither is my aim to suggest that (and how) bodily artistic experiments might transform those bodies that make up society. My focus is, rather, set on exploring possibilities and media conditions for extending the site of artistic utopia from the printed page to the dressed and moving body. Departing from Decouflé's *Codex*, I want to reflect the potential for not merely *thinking* a 'different being', but for *embodying* it in the performative arts.

**Philippe Decouflé: *Codex***

Film still from Philippe Decouflé's *Codex* (1987)
copyright DCA/naïve vision

In the opening sequence of *Codex* Decouflé's dancers appear as indeterminable moving figures. They are clad entirely in black and filmed against a white background, which makes it impossible to discern their features in detail. Dark leotards that cover the entire body and face, peculiar flippers with fringes and equally fringed headpieces detach the dancers' appearance further from 'human' and makes it impossible to distinguish even between male and female dancers.

The choreography consists of elements reminiscent of the classical Indian Bharatanatyam interspersed with everyday movements, like running. This contrasts with the dancers' uprightness, their turnout (rotation of the legs which causes the feet to turn outward), controlled *pliés* (bending of the knees) in the first position and some of their *port de bras* (arm movements) that repeatedly remind the spectator of ballet technique. The movement vocabulary alternates between the dancers moving their arms and tilting or rotating their upper bodies without moving in space much, and expansive steps and jumps through the studio. Additionally abstracting the image, the entire cast of ten dancers, at times divided into smaller groups, often carry out movements synchronously.

The impact of film and the costumes contribute to the dancers' detachment from customary notions of dancing human figures. The flippers make their movements appear clumsy and ungraceful. Decouflé films them from angles that add to their schematic appearance: close-ups of bodies turn into large black patches on screen, and overhead shots show the dancers from an altogether unfamiliar perspective. In editing, the choreographer overcomes the usual 'problem' of gravity in dancing when he shows images upside down. Edits also allow Decouflé to use movements at a speed that would be impossible on stage: the dancers oscillate in the air in impossibly long jumps, their steps appear bustling when sped up in fast-motion towards the end of the sequence.

### Bodies in Utopian Art

> Gewöhnlich beginnt die Geschichte mit einer Reise, zu Schiff oder zu Lande; immer geschieht etwas, was die gewöhnliche Erfahrung aus den Angeln hebt: Die Ebenen erstrecken sich ins Unendliche, das Meer wird immer gewaltiger, der Raum dehnt sich, verliert seine Struktur, ein Wirbelsturm kommt auf, der Kompaß fällt aus, die Orientierung geht verloren, schießlich bricht die Zeit. Am Anfang der Utopie steht eine Verwirrung der Sinne; die zeitliche und räumliche Orientierung geht verloren. (Gebauer, 2001: 885)

[The story usually begins with a journey, by ship or by land; something always happens that unhinges usual experience. The plains extend into infinity, the sea becomes vaster and vaster, space expands, loses structure, a hurricane develops, the compass fails, orientation gets lost, eventually time breaks. Utopia starts out with a confusion of the senses; temporal and spatial orientation gets lost.]

To start off, I want to link the spatial and temporal distortion in Decouflé's opening sequence to that in the beginnings of the classical literary utopias. In the above quote, the German philosopher and anthropologist Gunter Gebauer hints at the reoccurring motive of shipwreck and unknown islands geographically removed from Europe, such as Atlantis (Plato), Bensalem (Bacon), Taprobana (Campanella) or Utopia (More). The spatial distortions function to legitimise the secluded islands' existence 'off the map', but they are also a way to introduce and express a desire for radical difference.[1]

While More lays out a complete utopian vision and agenda which express a desire for social change, Decouflé's staging confronts the viewer with the unfamiliar. Following Levitas, I consider the *expression of desire for a radically different being* to constitute the fundamental defining characteristic of utopian art (see Levitas 1990: 7-8).[2] While More's and Decouflé's distorted set-ups of place and time both have in them utopian potential, their respective depictions of 'radically different being' couldn't be further apart. The two artworks *Utopia* and *Codex* depict bodies that diverge in content and function, as well as in form. More's *Utopia* strictly ties bodily efforts to functional ideals of human survival, whilst the content of Decouflé's body depictions is an experiment with staging dancers in a way that lets them appear non-human and unfamiliar. Both constructions of bodies happen in the realm of art. Yet, More's bodies function as the constituents of a desirable society. Decouflé's bodies, conversely, present a bodily state of radical difference that is devoid of a superordinate system.[3] Instead of describing bodies within a blueprint for better society, Decouflé explores the body as a medium of art.

What interests me particularly are the blatantly different body depictions regarding their form: where Decouflé's dancers *embody* a different state of being, More tells the reader about it in the form of literary fiction. The bodies and the order they are part of in *Utopia* are rendered through their author's language: the regulated, steadily moving individuals all clad in the same clothes form a mass-body fuelled by a uniform will that More portrays as unthreatening. Gebauer wonders what *Utopia's* disciplined, ascetic bodies would look like as enacted. But *Utopia* does not aim at such visibility – the body is part of a bigger narrated generality; an idealisation that is constructed by the text and one that, according to Gebauer, defies visual depiction altogether (2001, 885-6).

What are the formal implications of Decouflé's body depictions? Of a performance that makes dancers appear as distinctly detached from customary human form and movement? How can we categorise and deal with such a performance aesthetically, analytically and with regard to its utopian potential? We have seen that the bodies' different state of being doesn't raise a claim for utopian superiority. But doesn't the act of bodies abandoning human form and movement perhaps in itself have an implication that could be called utopian?

**Reflections on Contemporary Utopia**

I shall introduce my investigation of the body as a medium for utopian art with some reflections on the status of contemporary utopianism and outline the body's role in it.

Present, not future

While the body is prevalent as a *topic* of, for instance, Science Fiction literature, several factors appear to disqualify it as a possible *medium* of utopian art. A crucial one is that the body cannot really 'do' a future mode; unless it relies on assuming narrative meaning (by using gestures or language) it is a medium invariably tied to both the temporal and spatial presence. Whereas the mind is associated with 'thinking' (potentially into the past, the future and to somewhere far away), the body is located firmly in the field of 'doing'.[4] It simply isn't a place where speculations about – and conceptualisations of – the future tend to happen. Consequentially, artistic performance is determined by the body's spatial presence; bodily practices are supposedly tied to the here and now.[5]

This argument for excluding the body as a medium of utopian art is valid to a certain extent: in expressing temporal and spatial distance bodies might lack the efficiency of language. But then: are utopias really unequivocally about rendering faraway places or anticipated times to come? Utopia's traditional tie to the future seems to have become its most questioned feature in recent scholarship (Sargisson, 1996; Gebauer, 2001; Garforth, 2009; Kraftl, 2007, 2009):

Utopia has shifted from a context of social theory wedded to rationality, perfectability, and progress to one characterised in terms of desire, anti-foundationalism, and fragmentation. In that shift the link between utopia and the intention of securing a better

future becomes problematic. Indeed, the articulation of utopian visions and hopes with concrete prospects for future social improvement or transformation might be seen as a temporary product of the historical conditions and philosophical discourses of modernity. (Garforth, 2009: 9)

> According to this approach, contemporary utopianism has a transgressive, subversive function that is directed towards acting critically in the present, rather than designing in detail a desired future.[6] The decline of metanarratives lets the present's 'truths' disappear. Without such a stable foundation, thinking a better future has become problematic. (Garforth, 2009: 12-14)

The reflex association of utopia with narratives of future progress and revolution then emerges as deeply rooted in and specific to its modern context. Today, it seems that expressions of utopian desire are not so much about transforming the future but, rather, creating estrangements from the world as experienced in the present. Implying a temporal difference (as is done in Science Fiction) or a spatial difference (as was done in the classical utopias) might serve to further demarcate the radical difference that utopian artworks present from the way things customarily are at the time. Most importantly, however, utopias (re-) present a radically different form of being *in the present*. To have an impact, difference has to appear in the here and now.

Different, not better

Another factor that makes the body appear as a difficult – and even redundant – medium of utopian art is perhaps that bodies are already subject to relentless betterment in everyday life. We constantly enhance our ordinary human capacity and beautify our appearance. Bodies in the contemporary Western world are utopian objects in the sense that they are constantly 'under construction'; unceasingly on their way to a new, younger, more relaxed, fitter, less wrinkly, slimmer, healthier, tougher ideal (Gebauer 2001: 888). In 'makeover culture' (Jones) it doesn't take utopian art to make a better body. At the same time, the everyday body is only one instance that shows how problematic the notion of something unambiguously 'better' has become today. Unequivocal blueprints of progress – the progression towards a 'better' state – also necessarily entail stasis (a defined goal). In contemporary makeover culture, bodies are constantly in the making; they reach their ideal weight, only to be ready for breast implants, receiving an optimal nose and so on and so

forth. To evoke conditions that differ radically from the contemporary everyday it seems that utopian desire creates experiences of *alterity*, rather than improvement.

Individuals, not collectives

One final issue I want to touch on before turning to performing bodies in artistic contexts is utopian *agency*. In an age in which the belief in metanarratives and modernist or positivist goals have been questioned the idea of a collective striving towards 'the better' seems obscure. The working-class has lost its utopian impact while, at the same time, other groups do not currently have the same revolutionary potential, stresses Levitas (1990: 197). But instead of killing off utopian agency as such, it seems that we are dealing with the loss of a unified collective as a utopian agent. In a time of individualisation we cannot necessarily uphold collectivity as a defining characteristic of utopia. One could of course argue that – in this age of the database – the predominance of networks seems to negate any such individualism. There is much to be said for this, but it appears to me that we use – and exist in – networks such as Facebook primarily to advertise ourselves as individuals.[7]

**Unfamiliar Bodies in Performative Art**

Within this context, how can bodies in artistic performance be utopian? What embodied form can the desire for a *radically different way of being* take? In my discussion, I have touched on the waning role of the future in utopianism, the increasing normalisation of physical enhancement and the loss of the collective as a utopian agent. Having these as subject matter, then, is no longer enough for contemporary performative arts to be considered utopian. In a period when physical enhancement has become the norm and utopia is rooted in the present, rather than the future, in the individual rather than the collective body, performance has to take quite a different stance to embody – or embody the desire for – singular experiences of alterity.

The defining quest for a different *being* in utopian expression suggests to me the body itself – the *medium* of the performative arts – as a site for utopia. The body in performance would use its unique potential to *embody* utopian desire, instead of reproducing literary means to *tell* the spectators about bodies in a different time and space. When the utopian desire for difference is expressed in a story narrated *by* bodies, that could make the story's

*content* utopian, but not the bodies' *being*. If the performing body presents nothing but itself, then the question of its plausibility becomes moot: the performing body is already always a reality.[8] The utopian body in performance does not defeat reality when it defies gravity in dance, when it merges with technology to become a cybernetic organism or when it is twisted out of recognition in contortion. In such performances of *desire for different being*, bodies enact Deleuze and Guattari's dictum: "If desire produces, the product is real. If desire is productive, it can be productive only in the real world and can produce only reality" (2004: 28). As a sensation of presence in the event – rather than as part of a narrative – the performing body communicates through its production of affects. These moments of intensity, as O'Sullivan describes affects, are not primarily concerned with creating knowledge or meaning; "indeed they occur on a different, *asygnifying* register" (2001: 126).[9] Indeed, in exploring the utopian potential of bodies as media in performative art it seems productive to consider their 'asignifying' potential – the affective impact they make on our own bodies: "you cannot read affects, you can only experience them" (*ibidem*).

So where does that leave us? I have defined the artistic mode of presentation in which utopia could be embodied, rather than narrated. But if a performer would just enact his/her own presence that would hardly make for utopia. To become utopian a body would have to do more than simply embody its own being, it would have to be radically different. Let's pause to consider: if performing bodies cease to execute neat logically motivated actions that represent stable characters who make up a fair amount of artistic narratives, then this already alters performance significantly. Bodies become unfamiliar in their mere capacity of being non-representational. This mode of performing lets the body appear in a 'new', creative, affectual – utopian – way. The 'revolution' of embodying such a qualitative difference of physical being is in itself unsettling (see Kraftl, 2007: 122). There are several ways in the performative arts to create affects, which turn the human body into a 'radically unfamiliar being' and let the viewer perceive atypical orders of intensity. Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, suggest in their essay on the *body without organs* (2007) a whole range of connections to non-human systems and structures. In dance – or in its analysis – there's a tradition to relate human movement to the movement of machines or animals.[10] These strategies do not necessarily aim at imitating the other organisms' movement. Rather,

they are driven by an interest in exploring the moving body's possibilities themselves, and not how they can be made to signify something else.

The Finnish performance theorist Esa Kirkkopleto formulates his "Manifesto for generalized anthropomorphism" (2004) against a fundamental problem of theatrical performance: according to Kirkkopelto, the contemporary theatre's shortcoming is that it uses its key medium – the human figure – in a limiting manner (1). To Kirkkopelto, the theatre seems frustratingly restricted to the acting human beings' concerns with "the body, gender, background, history, community or race" (*ibidem*). As theatre limits itself to treating the struggle with these parameters, "freedom" is only considered as "a concern for shifting boundaries, for pushing and redrawing them" (*idem*, 2). Freedom in theatre is not – but should be – understood as a "freedom surpassing the human" (*idem,* 3). It is Kirkkopelto's vision to detach the phenomenal body from a predefined human figure. Kirkkopelto acknowledges in his manifesto that dance – as opposed to theatre – is one of the art-forms that has sometimes overcome these restrictions and "managed in the past centuries to break into what is generally referred to as 'non-figurative' art" (*idem,* 2). The practice of abstracting the human figure in dance can be traced in 20th and 21st century choreography from Loïe Fuller, Valentine de Saint-Point and futurist dance, Oskar Schlemmer's work at the Bauhaus to Alwin Nicolais, Merce Cunningham and postmodern dance as well as in contemporary choreography by, for instance, William Forsythe or Brice Leroux. Abstraction in dance leads to different forms of 'dis-embodiment': not only the stylisations of the ballerina's body as a sign of weightlessness (as in the romantic ballet), but radical acts of re-coding. It can deconstruct or even erase the body in its more common construction as 'body' – and with the goal to extract it as a sheer medium of movement[11] (Brandstetter, 1995: 366).

Philippe Decoufé's dance film *Codex* should be seen in this tradition of dance. The bodies in it oppose the assumption that they represent 'selves' who perform actions that are psychologically motivated. Even if their shape is vaguely reminiscent of the human body, they also assume animal characteristics. One ought perhaps to describe them in terms of graphic shapes. As such, their headstands in the beginning of the film choreography create an ambivalence – and indifference – between what is up and what is down. They challenge the organic structure of the physical body.[12] Deleuze writes about the figures in Francis Bacon's paintings that they seem to want to 'escape themselves' (2005). Like the bodies in

*Codex,* Bacon's figures challenge a presupposed organic structure. They refuse to fit in to any pre-given signifying organism. When a body appears in works of art, it immediately becomes subject to various ways of being organised, according to Deleuze and Guattari (2007; see also Deleuze 2005). Not only does the physical organism impose certain limits on the live body – the position of the limbs always structures its appearance in a certain way. Social conventions necessarily govern bodies' artistic depiction, with regard to how they move and dress to mark their age, gender and social position. If these are organisations any body has to deal with, bodies in art are, in addition, subject to the codes and conventions of genre. For works of art, it is still customary to have a meaning. In the performative arts, the body most often depicts this meaning by referring to a human concern. The utopian mission for performing bodies would be to show that these organisations – if perhaps not entirely overcome – can be challenged.

**Utopian Potential in Decouflé's *Codex***

Whether the bodies in Decouflé's *Codex* are utopian depends to a large extent on definition. They are if one accepts their expression of a seemingly impossible desire to escape their human organism as a sign of embodied utopianism. In the dance film sequence that I described above the dancer's embodiment of radical difference is affective, experimental and lacks the desire for a different social system. The desire they embody is for difference within their own art form. Decouflé's creative approach suggests to me that desire as a motivation for utopian expression doesn't necessarily manifest itself as a content of 'better' conditions. As indicated earlier it might be not so much the outcome – a certain goal that is the end of a linear progression – as the (process of) change and the novelty of the unknown that characterises utopian desire.[13] Obviously, Decouflé's dance film sequence does not suggest that the world would be a better place if more people walked around with huge fringed flippers and headpieces. What it suggests to me is, rather, the body's suitability as a site for affective expressions of utopian desire. In Decouflé's staging, the synthesis of utopia and the body goes beyond unambiguous physical enhancement. The body, like literature, is a place where conditions can be imagined that differ radically from the everyday. Much as literature has a capacity to imagine and describe utopian worlds, Decouflé's dancers embody a different way of being.

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## Notes

[1] Difference from the everyday, but perhaps also difference in itself. For notions of the unsettling, discomforting in utopias see Kraftl, 2007. He writes that poststructuralist writing on utopia has begun to: "disrupt the comforting, stable 'good' of the traditional utopia to imagine spaces that are unknowable, perhaps 'unthinkable'" (125).

[2] A more extended discussion of contemporary utopianism follows below.

[3] We have seen that not even a particular dance technique, to which dancing bodies are often subordinate, takes the ordering function of such a system in *Codex*.

[4] To rigidly dissociate the body from any conceptual – any *intellectual* – mode repeats the Cartesian dualism of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Underlying this are persistent residues of the flawed assumption that the mind is free to construct any scenario imaginable, whereas the body is biologically determined. This association of the body with nature and the idealisation of its authentic expression of interiority was cultivated during the Enlightenment.

[5] See Seel who holds that situations of extreme physicality (Seel refers to depictions of sex and violence) are used to add to an illusion of 'presence' in art (2003: 295-323).

[6] It can be argued that utopias have always had the primary function to provoke in their present context.

[7] In considering contemporary utopianism, we must pay attention to yet another change in agency. If the utopian can today be associated with the individual, rather than with the collective, we should bear in mind that the notion of coherent, rational intending individual subjects is in postmodern terms "at worst an illusion, at best a partial truth" (Garforth, 2009: 11). Literary utopias mirror this tendency. The classic utopias rarely made individual bodies visible and rather merged them into a great utopian whole. Contemporary utopian authors like Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, Samuel R. Delaney or Dietmar Dath do not only portray individuals, but show them as unstable and fragmented.

[8] See also Foucault's essay on "The corps utopique" in which he initially argues that all utopias must have been created *against* the body – to make it disappear. Towards the end he concludes that to be a utopia one only needs to be a body (2005).

[9] For a more comprehensive reflection on affects in the arts, see also Cull (2012).

[10] Much has been published in this area. For a very selective overview see Brandstetter (2010); McCarren (2003).

[11] But in dancing, a strong tradition of the opposite also exists: Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham's modern dance presents the body as a purveyor of insights into the self. In line with psychoanalytic theory, the underlying assumption is that the body keeps genuine what the mind distorts, making it an ideal representation of the self. As such, the body is expressive and interpretable. And it is always signifying something (the soul/emotion/the unconscious). If the notion of revealing a 'genuinely natural body' is less prevalent in the traditional classical ballet, the dancing body nonetheless is similarly constructed as a figure of unity. Not only is the dancing figure governed from a clear centre of gravity, the movement is ruled by a strict code of smoothly connected movement figures, performed with an unbroken flow. The ballet creates a unity of one movement in relation to the following one; each movement is embedded in its choreographic context (see Brandstetter, 1998: 45).

[12] In a body without organs, Deleuze and Guattari hold, any organ can produce any function (2007: 167).

[13] Kraftl suggests contingency and an open-endedness in utopian action (2007: 126). For an investigation (and questioning) of the necessity of 'intention' for utopian expression, see Garforth, 2009.