The Dancing Philosopher
For Susan Leigh Foster

Kenneth King

ABSTRACT: This excerpt from Kenneth King’s essay, “The Dancing Philosopher,” traces its genesis from Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra (a work that greatly impacted Isadora Duncan’s founding of modern dance) that, in tandem with the emerging technology of the writing machine (typewriter), camera and kinetoscope (cinematography), conjoined the kinetropic and lexigraphemic to inaugurate the kinetic cogito. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological exposition of corporeality further amplified the reflexive potential of movement and the philosophical understanding of kinesthesia, and King cites as well the technosophic synergy of John Cage’s and Merce Cunningham’s long artistic collaboration that furthered the frontier of a mind-body epistemic.

Yet counting, which seems simple to us, has really been one of the difficult problems of abstraction and presentation, for it has required a shift from essentially physical consummations... almost certainly first presented by the visual and kinesthetic perception of our own bipedal steps... Those same physical units, however, created bodily rhythms that entrained the whole musculature of a person’s truck and limbs... That created the Dance. The effect of this communal art was certainly enhanced by another motive, perhaps older (there is no telling) that was emphasized by the formed bodily movement: the corresponding mobility of the visual ambient. The Dance, above all else, animated the dancer’s world at the command of his own voluntary movements, and may have been a magical activity from its beginning

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Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Nietzsche’s prodigal and most enigmatic work, remains, despite its hybrid, almost unclassifiable genre, a philosophical landmark rare in the analytic canon of Western thought, and infrequently treated among the unending volumes of Nietzschean hermeneutics. Zarathustra is more than treatise or polemic, but an exuberantly prophetic, provocatively high-octane philosophical work written in the form of a fractured allegory whose sublime literary virtuosity is frosted with biting satire and a rarified poetic distillate. It features a trenchant underground absurdist theater of motley characters and talking animals suffused with ironically hyperbolical anti-Biblical bombast, sym-phonie in scope, with an overarching though elusive totality. Dance is continually referenced as one of its exalted mimetic triggers and serves as more than trope or metaphor. Zarathustra announces a new paradigm spects – Isadora Duncan rightly called Nietzsche the first dancing philosopher: “The entire Zarathustra is filled with phrases about man in his dancing being.”

The attribution of this double being first beamed up on the radar screen of Western civilization (a new archetype, or template of encryption?) might more rightly signify Zarathustra as a mythic reincarnation (Zoroaster), reborn prophet or alter ego of the author who has descended from a magic mountain bearing this gift. Is this a case of mistaken identity? All identity might be deemed a case of mistaken identity – ontological misappropriation being the deceptive name of any name game. Zarathustra nonetheless lent the work an invisible hand, leaving within the curvature or elision of Nietzsche’s signature the unmistakable mark of another masked or decoyed signatory. Though Nietzsche’s corpus has been relentlessly and restlessly exegeticized – and exegeticized – the dancing philosopher is perhaps the last great-unrealized idea that has eluded serious inquiry and so remains important to engage, interrogate and update.

Did Nietzsche actually dance, or was Zarathustra’s secret art a convenient metaphor for the Dionysian equation? The question might be moot, but reportedly the philosopher’s landlady in Turin caught sight of him dancing stark naked when she spied through his keyhole. An explosive cipher, indeed – spying on Nietzsche (as he has been ever since by generations prurient and indelicate), and Nietzsche dancing in flagrante delicto – a fantastic if not sensational trope, too. (That is, dance as sex with the cosmos, or dancing as a metaphor for forbidden knowledge or the polymorphously perverse, akin to being both sexes – possibly a requirement for the Übermensch?) Despite extolling the intoxicating magic elixir of the Dionysian, Nietzsche wasn’t a swinger – or only as a student before he contracted syphilis. Whatever the
crime or cosmic indiscretion, Nietzsche understood and celebrated the importance of a genealogy of mind animated by the moving body delineating an écriture of transcendental kinetic transcriptions. But why has only Isadora Duncan understood (this dancing philosopher, and what are we to make of the idea more than a century later?)

Philosophizing about dance and philosophizing with the instrumentality of a reflexive corporeality are quite different practices – Nietzsche fronted the horizon frontier of the latter. Exploring some of the concrete parameters for such a double practice makes transparent how the body reflexive⁶ coinhabits several realms and informs numerous discourses synchronously and simultaneously – the dancing body, being (being) an animated field, is a teletemporal intersection of interpenetrating ideas. Zarathustra was completed two years before Thomas Alva Edison announced the discovery of the kinetoscope (1888), which made images dance (cinematography) as Nietzsche made ideas dance, and more, reveal the peculiar resolutions of their interprecessionating signs (philology becomes semionostics, or the typography of cognitive ciphers). The dancing philosopher was thus positioned at the crossroads of a newly emerging spectrogenic fusion – and Zarathustra’s shattered allegory hypermimeticized the personifications of the dancing cogito through a prismatic dramaturgy of shady characters and dubious personas (shadow, jester, dwarf, hermit, tightrope walker, soothsayer, saint, magician, etc.).

In Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, Friedrich Kittler discusses Nietzsche’s first writing machine, an early model typewriter acquired before it was commercially available. The keys were positioned protruding from a ball like quills from a porcupine such that he couldn’t see the page underneath being typed.⁵ (Nietzsche needed a writing machine because of his debilitated eyesight.) Culturally the typewriter provided a huge advance over the telegraph for the dissemination of the word by providing a key for every letter of the alphabet as well as punctuation signs. Nevertheless, the rapid tapping of the single telegraph key coupled with the cables of Morse’s telegraphy presaged digitality and pulse frequency modulation as a proxy for the voice, as well as necessitated an electrically relayed code to encrypt and transmit messages, decades before Alexander Graham Bell’s telephone, Marconi, Tesla and the radio. (The radio was originally conceived to boost telegraphic transmissibility). As Marshall McLuhan insisted, technology extends the nerve networks of the human body and facilitates the transmissibility of messaged consciousness.

Movement too encodes experience and ideas, and facilitates the reading of signs; it also kinetically encrypts and kinelexically deciphers – Lucian, the Greek philosopher of antiquity, maintained the Mysteries could only be danced out. Though dance is often deemed an ecstatic, wordless experience, it can also be a medium and delivery system for bona fide knowledge. Martha Graham’s father, an alienist, reportedly told her: “the body doesn’t lie” – meaning the truth of physicality and character becomes readily transparent (though the body can dissipulate egregiously). The dancing philosopher was thus the harbinger or seer of an emerging kinetic cogito, corporeally teletheletic before the supporting technology arrived. The rhetoric of philosophy, too, is transacted in codes – leveraged by a philolexical palette that reflexes conceptual indexes and boosts the capacity for the spectrum maneuverability of interpenetrating discourse vocabularies to deliver up their cognitive frission, while providing essencespionage into the unseen and invisible – like a hypermimetic radar to penetrate the elusive X or the in-itself. Furthermore, the moving body acts as a lenticular, or lens in motion and scrying mirror for impulses, signals, signs, impressions, ideas, ciphers and persona lurking psychotropically behind or beneath the shifting, volatile limen of consciousness.

It’s not so much that one is able to think with the body, but that the synergetic activation of the nervous system, coupled with the extendibility of its bioenergetic meridians and their interpressionary interaction within the spatial folds and vectors of ideokinetic projection, intercept and engage networks of signs and constellations of traces, marks, mental substrates, glyphs, gestures, gestalts and cogitations – kinesthetic inscriptions. Pictures ride electromimetically on the moving body’s meridians and extended vectors, and kinesthesia transmits ideopathic imageries televisually; dancing is a synergy of biosystemicity. The geodesic parameters and kineciothetic indexes of corporeality generate ciphers and systemic correspondences of isomorphic confluence that animate a geomimetries of perception – that is, geography, architecture and topography create a ground of