

# Book Review: Gay Morris and Jens Richard Giersdorf (eds.), Choreographies of 21st Century Wars

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Gay Morris and Jens Richard Giersdorf (eds.) *Choreographies of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Wars*. Oxford Studies in Dance Theory. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016,

This edited collection, a recent addition to the notable Oxford Studies in Dance Theory, is a *tour de force* contribution to the growing importance placed on understanding dance as political. Editors Gay Morris and Jens Richard Giersdorf have curated a robust and multifaceted group of sixteen essays that theorise the complex structural relationship between choreography, war and politics that has emerged in 21<sup>st</sup> century violent conflict. They proceed from the assertion that unlike 20th century warfare which was undertaken by nation states, 21st century conflicts have become decentred and amorphous. In this condition, the line between civilian and combatant is blurred and conflicts have no clear beginning or end, evoking the sense of constant and ubiquitous warfare. Choreography offers a unique and significant lens through which to analyse and understand the impact of these 21st century wars; where choreography is understood as a form of corporeal ordering and will. In making this argument, the volume situates itself as an important inheritor of thinkers like Mark Franko and Susan Leigh Foster who have critiqued dance's ahistorical foundations and advocated the importance of theory for understanding dance's social, political and cultural significance. Indeed, the collection offers both a selection by Franko and several contributors who cite works from both Foster and Franko's extensive *oeuvre*.

Brought together, the authors illustrate the multifarious ways in which choreography functions as socio-political forms of organisation and influence, illustrative of, and against a backdrop of the globalised militarised 21st century. While in what follows, I comment on these according to how I see them working together, what I greatly appreciated is how the selections were not already grouped into thematic areas that would direct the reader to an already predetermined perspective. The essays emerge as a complex yet nuanced network illustrating embodied and choreographed 21<sup>st</sup> century life and ask the reader to consider and organise the works for themselves – an exercise which might also uncover the already choreographed values of the reader. At the risk therefore of exposing my own predisposition, I was struck by three conceptual areas emerging from the volume: first, the need to consider the choreography being examined from some form of individual vantage point; second, the commitment to expanding the notion of choreography while maintaining its importance in relation to embodied effects; and third, the obligation to represent the complex historic genealogies of embodied choreographic effects. For the sake of giving voice to all of the excellent essays collected, I group these below into the themes above but note that several essays commendably hold all three themes in dynamic tension.

From the beginning editors' preface the reader is given a strong sense of the individual experiences with 21<sup>st</sup> century war that have shaped the lives of the volume's contributors and curators. Several essays in particular offer valuable forms of personal testimony to illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon they are analysing. Nicholas Rowe's hybrid essay juxtaposes a historicisation of the emergence of contemporary dance in the Palestine Occupied Territories with difficult personal testimony of his involvement in these events. Derek A. Burrill offers a poignant account of his participant observer investigation into players' personal experience with the first-person shooter video game *America's Army* and its troubling transformative use in the creation of real soldiers and active service. The celebrated choreographer Bill T. Jones offers a sensitive self-conscious attempt to understand the implications of his own choreographic impulses and the motivations that keep him producing art in troubled times. Rosemary Martin provides personal testimonies of three dance artists who experienced the Arab Spring Uprising in 2010 to situate the intricate and fraught relationship between nationalism and aesthetics. Dee Reynolds and choreographer Rosie Kay give the volume an important Anglo-British perspective with their autoethnographic discussion of Kay's 2011 work *5 Soldiers* and its cross-disciplinary exploration of the inspiration, development and analysis of the choreographic process and effect.

All of the essays in the volume foreground the chaotic political force of 21st century warfare through, ultimately, an embodied shaping and controlling of its amorphous populations. This form of embodied politics is particularly resonant in several essays. Alessandra Nicifero's discussion of the

relationship between torture and witnessing in Rachid Ouramdane's *Ordinary Witnesses* gives a perceptive analysis of the power of the embodied testimony. Sarah Davies Cordova provides an important contextualisation of the force of necropolitics in contemporary southern Africa through a discussion of Magnet Theatre's particular practice of embodied activism in their work *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking*. Yehuda Sharmin's skilful discussion of the detention and release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit provides one of the only pieces to focus fully on the important and complex way in which gendered norms are embodied and deployed in states of war for political effect. Harmony Bench offers a unique look at how the ontology of dance reality television and dance video-games post 9/11 has contributed to a state of heightened emotions that foment anxiety, fear and questions about belonging. Selections from Neelima Jeychandran, and Maaïke Bleeker and Janez Janša present compelling examinations of how viewing performance within the context of and about militarisation provokes complex and contradictory relationships to incitement to war and lobbies for peace. The volume closes with two important reflections on choreographer William Forsyth's *Three Atmospheric Studies*, his response to the Iraq War in the aftermath of 9/11. Gerald Siegmund argues that the absence of truth invoked in Forsyth's piece offers less simple and more fraught understandings of our individual lived and embodied contemporary realities. Mark Franko uses the work to show how choreography—or in his conception, the politicisation of corporeal expression—is at the very root of civil society.

Another important thematic of the volume is representing the complexity of understanding the effects of the past—a notion of the past that gives a sense of historical time but also illustrates that there is not simply one but multiple histories that accrue interrelated and confused chains of effects. Three essays in particular convey this complexity. Through the lens of her own field experiences, Janet O'Shea extends a complex tracing of Bharata Natyam and how it was positioned in three different historical periods of the Sri Lankan civil war. Ariel Osterweis importantly articulates how her exploration of Faustin Linyekula is an on-going understanding of the work and creation of Studio Kabako in Democratic Republic of Congo as geo-choreography. Finally Ruth Hellier-Tinoco provides a powerful hybrid essay whose intertextual strategy provides an indispensable means of understanding the compound and messed up histories and agendas that have contributed to the "Mexican Drug War" and its representations.

If the volume suffers in any way, it is, first, in how all the entries, including the editors' engaging introduction, present a complex phenomenon which begs to be unpacked at greater length. This is obviously due to its status as an anthology where deeper engagement has been sacrificed in the service of assembling pertinent wide-ranging debates that stand to spur the development of important new research. Second, although several contributors made important reference to it, an essay that evolved a discussion of the complex way in which globalised capitalism and neo-liberal economic policies have had such a significant influence on the amorphous choreographic war-scape of the 21st century would have been useful to include. Nevertheless this volume is masterfully curated and edited by Morris and Giersdorf. They have brought together a collection of essays that offer a singularly ground-breaking and multifarious contribution to knowledge by exploring how choreography is a structuring principle for understanding the complexity and dystopia of politics and war in the new millennium.

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