

### **Bodily Regimes in Performative Philosophy: The Cynics and Shamelessness**

Thinkers of recent times from Nietzsche to Debord have often wondered why we have created a split between an “active” spectacle and a “passive” spectator in our spectacular relations since the Greeks. One explanation that can be given, by way of Nietzsche, is the decline of the bodily regimes<sup>1</sup> in general and its affect on society in the domain of spectacle; in other words, we have created *lazy bodies*. Although Nietzsche does not specifically discuss the role of the body in spectacle in his first major (and also last) critique of Greek theater in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he attributes the decline to the overestimation of the Apollinian forces and rationality and the undervaluation of the Dionysian forces. The Dionysian, the orgiastic and the ecstatic, for Nietzsche, however, meant primarily the bodily forces; in theater they were embodied by the chorus and by its activities of dance, song, and music. Nietzsche may be right in his assessment about the decline in late 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. of ancient Greece, but the bodily regimes were so ingrained into the Greek culture that the decline did not erase them from culture (radical erasure starts in late Roman times and in the early Middle Ages). The bodily regimes among the ancient Greeks were manifest in their cult practices, in athletics and the culture of the gymnasium, and in their orgiastic and erotic (especially homoerotic) practices. And when the philosophers emerged on the stage of history in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., they did not *suffer* from the erasure of the body that is emblematic of the later medieval and modern philosophers. Almost all schools of Greek philosophy, including the Socratic school whose founder is Nietzsche’s favorite target for his polemics, had embraced and cultivated certain forms of bodily regimes. In my presentation today I will focus on one school, the Cynics, as their form of bodily regime best represents the cross-section between performing and thinking.

The emergence of the Cynics is shrouded in mystery, because not much is known about its founder, Antisthenes. What comes down to us about the Cynics is mostly about Diogenes of Sinope who, according to legend, escaped from his home-city due to his act of effacement of the

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<sup>1</sup> By ‘bodily regime’ I mean those formations of culture that directly invest in the re-making of the human body in its multiple aspects as in sports, dance, erotica, and performance art.

coin and moved to Athens. The Cynics did share similar concerns with other post-Socratic schools such as the search for the good life, for the good state, and for truth-telling, but they departed from them in the way they stood against social conventions, in the way they associated with animals and the animal world, and in the way they did philosophy. Instead of relying only on the power of words, ‘logoi’, they also used acts, often shameless acts. These acts had certain performative value and created bridges between thinking and being, between mind and body, and between the performer and the observer. What follows below, I will present some of the Cynic acts reported by Diogenes Laertius and discuss how they engage the body at the level of primordial registers, which are: ecstatic, aggressive/violent, transgressive, erotic, and metaphoric (all of these registers are also present in the Greek tragic spectacle, albeit in different forms). For this presentation, I will also draw some pertinent ideas from my recent book, *Towards a Genealogy of Spectacle*.

*Ecstatic.* (Dionysian, the chorus as the core of Greek drama, according to Nietzsche).<sup>2</sup> Acting like animals, raising animals to a higher status, is an important sign of the Cynics, contra condemnation of the animal to a lesser status in and through the civilizing process. The Cynics’ association with animals, primarily with dogs, is indicative of their mode of living according to nature and also their capacity and actuality to lose themselves in other beings. In TGS, I present this theme as follows:

Ek-stasis, in its etymological sense, is coming out of oneself or the “loss” of oneself. Now the ultimate loss is one’s own death, but in the course of one’s life, one can experience ecstatic moments as one comes out of one’s everyday-ordinary way of life. Here a distinction can be made regarding general or total ecstasy (what mystics experience, for instance) and particular forms of ecstasy, which cultivate ecstasy in some aspect of human existence. Dance is an ecstasy out of regular movements of the body as in walking, poetry is ecstasy out of everyday language. Orgy or any non-

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche recognized this ecstatic/animal function in the satyr and the satyr chorus of Greek theater, which formed a bridge between the animal and the human worlds. In GT, sec.8 (First Paragraph) he writes: “Der Satyr wie der idylische Schäfer unserer neueren Zeit sind Beide Ausgeburten einer auf das Ursprüngliche und Natürliche gerichteten Sehnsucht...der dionysische Grieche will die Wahrheit und die Natur in ihrer höchsten Kraft—er sieht sich zum Satyr verzaubert.” Dionysian Greeks, as Nietzsche presents, gives us one of the best examples of “live performance” in the form of “embodied interaction” as opposed to mediatised performance, as David Krasner and David Saltz argue in their book, *Staging Philosophy*.

purposeful sexuality is ecstasy in the domain of sexuality in relation to procreative sexuality. (TGS, Aphorism 34)

We can read Cynic acts as ecstatic acts in which an attempt is made towards the other to become one with that other. Being like an animal or acting like an animal constitutes such a bridge. One example from Diogenes' life is: reported by Laertius: "Once at a banquet, some of the guests threw him bones, as if he had been a dog; so he, as he went away, put up his leg against them as if he had been a dog in reality." Shameful acts are performed to jolt the other side to move out of the ordinary into the extra-ordinary.

*Aggressive/violent.* (Greek tragedy: death and murder, the fall of the hero) Spitting on someone's face, beating with the staff, etc. are some of the aggressive Cynic acts. Violence as Artaud<sup>3</sup> understands it exists in spectacle to shake and enervate the whole spectacular field. I address the question of violence in spectacle in TGS as in the following excerpts:

Violence is necessary to attack the spectator and shake all the organs. To say that violence in the spectacle would lead to the exacerbation of social problems, as argued by moralists today and in the past, would be as ridiculous as to claim that nudity in spectacle would cause orgasmic responses from the spectators. The portrayal of violent scenes that are detached from their mythic/sacred base may contribute to social violence among the spectators for whom violence and the experience of the sacred are already disenfranchised. (TGS, Aphorism 102)

I claim, on the contrary, that scenes of death, violence and sacrifice contribute to the creation of ecstatic states and communion among the spectators and a strong bond between the spectators and the spectacle (with the expectation of overcoming the ontological separation between the S and the s). (TGS, Aphorism 103)

In archaic societies, sacrificial rituals were performed to bring the community together around the sacred object; an object that was feared and revered at the same time. Although there is no evidence as to what types of sacrificial rituals the Cynics practiced other than what was accepted at the time, there is indication for their violent acts, perhaps as sublimated sacrifice or as agonistic practices that were common in ancient Greece at the time. One such story from

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<sup>3</sup> Half a century before Artaud, Nietzsche called for externalization of cruelty in their appropriate outlets within the economy of a culture, although Nietzsche's framework is broader than theater (see my work on agon in Nietzsche).

Laertius recounts: "And when a man, who was very superstitious, said to him, "With one blow I will break your head;" "And I," he replied, "with one sneeze will make you tremble."" Breaking heads and making tremble were common occurrences in the combat games of ancient Greece. The Cynics were no strangers to such games.

*Transgressive.* (Prometheus and Oedipus myths, as interpreted by Nietzsche in BT).<sup>4</sup> Transgression is a significant aspect of the Cynic performance, as it was for the Greek tragedy also. Transgression is to go beyond the established norms, the everyday, the ordinary; the Cynics were known as the effacers of the coin, an act with which Diogenes was charged in his home-city and which came to symbolize the Cynic gesture. Transgression is second half of the human story, that compliments the world of taboos, as Bataille claims:

If the world of taboo, the orderly world, is one half of human life, the other half is the world of transgression where these taboos are violated. Festivals in archaic societies, according to Bataille, fulfilled that rudimentary need for transgression. Within the context of sacrifice, Bataille explains festivals as celebrations of the sacred; it is "the place and the time of a spectacular letting loose."<sup>i</sup> This letting loose had its limits, its own domain bound by the sacred. In a deeper sense, the festival is not a complete (or a permanent) suspension of the world of taboo, but a negation of it within a 'confined' space. We can also understand the originary world of Greek theater as the world of festivals in, at least, two areas: the link between theater and the revelries of the cult of Dionysus and the festive character<sup>ii</sup> of the staging of plays in ancient Greek culture. In addition, the fact that tragic heroes<sup>iii</sup> are transgressive types reinforces the transgressive nature of the tragic spectacle. We can then conclude that transgression lies at the genealogical origin of spectacle." (TGS, Aphorism 50)

One significant aspect of Cynic culture that separates them from the rest was their shameless acts. Shamelessness meant to break down the ordinary taboos in the public sphere as in urinating, masturbating, exposing private body parts (this should have been very easy for ancient Greeks with their light clothing), and acting like animals; they claimed that these taboos did not conform with our nature, our animal nature, and were bound to be transgressed.

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<sup>4</sup> In BT, sec.9, Nietzsche discusses Prometheus' transgression as an "active sin" since his stealing of fire meant to uplift human beings, as opposed to the passive sin of the Adam and Eve story.

*Erotic* (Greek tragic spectacle: satyr-play as erotic play, Maenads in the *Bacchanalia*). “Eroticism in the domain of sexuality is analogous to the total artwork in the domain of arts. It activates and brings together all human functions in the sexual life of a human being; in the erotic act, one becomes fractured but yet whole again. Therefore, erotic spectacles are needed to cultivate an erotic culture;<sup>iv</sup> however, such spectacles must be bound within a mythic context and, as a result, have cult value. Or else, artistic spirits among whom erotic urges flow upwards, will shy away from bringing their erotic works into spectacle. We can assume that the satyr plays in Greek theater had such a function...” (TGS, Aphorism 106) To what extent the Cynics like Diogenes intended their acts to be erotic is hard to assess; however, their sexual acts such as masturbation in public and invocations of adultery can be read as erotic signs. Many areas of the ancient Greek culture were eroticized; specific cults and gods, the athletic culture, the war culture, the symposia, and some of the schools of philosophy (like that of Socrates). We can assume that the Cynic sexual acts used certain erotic signs and symbols in order to be ‘provocative’ and thereby to break down the existing thought/action patterns and to create “embodied thoughts.”

*Metaphoric*. (re-creation of sound-image relations at the level of singulars,<sup>5</sup> poetry as the domain of the metaphoric par excellence). Another important contribution of Cynic gestures to performative philosophy is their attack on ordinary beliefs and concepts. Its effect can be similar to the skeptic suspension of judgment, but even more radical than that, if one is forced back to an *original* metaphorical act of word formation. In other words, Cynic attacks can help break down our inherited thought patterns and concept-formations by calling into question the process of transference in and through which images and sounds come together. It is necessary to understand *transference* in its broader context than those of language and psychoanalysis, as I discuss it in TGS:

Every act of creation is a carrying over, that is, an *übertragung*, a transference. Images, sounds, symbols, feelings, states of the body, blocks of sense-perception are carried over from one place to another in the combusting and bursting spirit of the artist.

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<sup>5</sup> In his short essay from 1872, “Truth and Lies in an Extra-moral Sense”, Nietzsche exposes the metaphorical layers at the origin of word-formation.

Nietzsche uses the term within a linguistic context as he explains the process of the creation of words. In Freud, on the other hand, the term is used within a psychic context as he explains how the dreams function. I propose to use this term for spectacular experiences. (TGS, Aphorism 117)

Many Cynic acts can be construed as interceptions into perception to break down the existing image-sound patterns. Since these interceptions consist not only of words but, more often than not, of gestures, they can have a variety of affects on the other side. And these affects can dissolve the ordinary perception. One legend that strikes me as a good example for the Cynic interception is as follows: “On one occasion, when no one came to listen to him while he was discoursing seriously, he began to whistle. And then when people flocked round him, he reproached them for coming with eagerness to folly, but being lazy and indifferent about good things.” Here whistling draws attention with which he attracts and at the same time repels the crowds.

In conclusion, performance in any form, mimetic or non-mimetic, cannot be only a mental activity, just as human beings are not walking minds. All human functions, mental or physical (and more often than not, they are hard to separate), belong together and must be sustained holistically in spectacle and performative philosophy, as I state in TGS:

The human body is vibrant, vital, and a growing being that consists of many senses, organs, functions, liquids, and so on. All of these must be activated and moved<sup>6</sup> in spectacular experiences. All of them *belong together* in one body; why would a spectacle affect our eyes and ears and leave all the other senses and organs unaffected? Scriabin, for instance, blended colors and smells with his music and took a step towards synaesthesia. (TGS, Aphorism 114)

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<sup>6</sup> In our age performance artists try to achieve this by using different types of media during the same performance. One such performance artist whose work I recently experienced is Jaime del Val. In his metaformance there are several plains of immanence, which crisscross one another in ways that exceed ordinary understanding; these plains are body-body parts, sound, and digital projection. The performer, who appears, with all the gadgets attached to his body, as though he just landed on earth from another planet—in his outdoor performances he looks like a naked astronaut—walks around or in and out of his audience in slow motions, as he coordinates his movements and projections with what is projected on the screen. Body parts, removed from their home, are now amplified, deformed, and transfigured. They are no longer recognizable as body parts on the screen; they create a different landscape and as such are transfigurations in a digital medium.

Since philosophy is the domain of thinking, it can easily tend to fly into the abstract domain and establish itself as separated from the body, as superior to the body, which is rooted in what Nietzsche calls the “Despisers of the Body” and in ascetic idealism as a mode of interpretation and will to power. Such a temptation must be resisted and bodily regimes in performative philosophy must be cultivated to anchor thinking unto the body, since the body and bodily functions are primary and the animal human is silent, has no say over its “human” destiny. I will end my presentation with Zarathustra who says: “But the greater thing—in which you do not want to believe—is your body and its great reason: it does not say I, but does I.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> *Theory of Religion*, p.54.

<sup>ii</sup> According to J. R. Green, “The fifth century Athenian was able to see major theatrical performances twice a year, at a festival called the Lenaia in January and at the City Dionysia in late March. Earlier in the winter period, in December, were celebrations of the Rural Dionysia at local theatres around Attica... We know comparatively little about the Rural Dionysia except that it seems to have originated as an agricultural festival, and historical evidence of a background in a fertility festival is to be seen in the processions with phallus-poles...” *Theatre in Ancient Greek Society*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>iii</sup> Prometheus, Oedipus, Agamemnon, Medea, Antigone, Orestes and many other tragic characters are all transgressive types; that is, they have transgressed some taboo in relation to one cult, god or goddess, or *nomos* in general, and are consequently pursued by them. In addition, tragic, mythic figures like satyrs and maenads are transgressive *by nature*, that is, by their intrinsic role in Greek drama.

<sup>iv</sup> It is not a coincidence that Sade wanted to create erotic spectacles by writing plays, although he is not considered to be a great playwright. He was unable to create by himself a mythic context for his erotic spectacles.

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<sup>7</sup> *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tr. by Graham Parkes, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p.30.