



<Marija Šćekić: Human Error. Photos: Sandra Vitaljić >

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# **HUMAN ERROR**

of MARIJA ŠĆEKIĆ

Dance as an art of the body is very close to human experience. The beginnings of gesture as a means of communication and dance as an integral part of life go way back to the beginnings of civilization as we know it. Expressing oneself with body and gesture is natural and in a way primary for man as unique tools that are today being used by complex language systems subsequently created as an upgrade. Movement as a means of communication is unique to all human kind, with very few exceptions. When we look at the dance history of ancient civilizations, we detect a firm connection of movement and dance

with religious and magic rituals, therefore a tight bond between bodily and religious or spiritual life of man.<sup>1</sup> However, with the beginnings of the philosophic thought and through its development, the dichotomy of the body (material) and the spirit (soul, mind) grew into one of the basic philosophic questions that haunted many thinkers and scientists trying to conceive the inconceivable – the human nature.

Is the human body, as a material, a spatial fact, only a shell functioning separately from the personality or what we call spirit or is the spirit really independent from this mortal, palpable physical fate? Is the mind or reason equally functional without sensation, emotions and feelings as distinctly physical phenomena? All these questions we can perhaps solve precisely by returning to the body, by entering the body. It is the ones that practice the language of the body, that test it every day, shaping it into an art, a bodily (dance) expression, whose daily assignment is to try to solve this problem. Also, to every admirer of the art of dance, the return to the dance theater perhaps represents the unconscious questioning of some stronger and deeper bonds of the body and spirit, and of the connection between body, emotion and reason. Entering the dance theater (or a club) is for the modern man the very closest he gets to the religious and spiritual experience practiced through dance by the ancient civilizations.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary neurologist Antonio Damasio, whose scientific work is based upon the indispensability of the body in the cognitive process, has used an interesting metaphor at the beginning of one of his works saying: *I have always been intrigued by the specific moment when, as we sit waiting in the audience, the door to the stage opens and a performer steps into the light; or, to take the other perspective, the moment when a performer who waits in semidarkness sees the same door open, revealing the lights, the stage, and the audience. (...) the moving quality of this moment, whichever point of view one takes, comes from its embodiment of an instance of birth, of passage through a threshold that separates a protected but limiting shelter from the possibility and risk of a world beyond and ahead. (...) I sense that stepping into the light is also a powerful metaphor for consciousness, for the birth of the knowing mind.*<sup>3</sup> Unknowingly, he drew a parallel between performing arts (dance) and philosophy or the theory of cognition. It is precisely Damasio's work, as well as the mentioned philosophic, Cartesian questions about the body-mind relation, that inspired the Croatian choreographer Marija Šćekić for her piece *Human Error* which premiered in Zagreb's Cultural Center Trešnjevka in May 2009. It is very significant how precisely such a physical and in the eyes of the modern man even primitive form of expression/cognition - dance – in the case of *Human Error* explains very successfully this important and long lasting polemic.

<sup>1</sup> Maletić, Ana, *Povijest plesa starih civilizacija (Dance History of Old Civilizations I and II)*, Matica hrvatska, Zagreb, 2002

<sup>2</sup> Thomas, Helen, *Dancing the Night Away: Rave/Club Culture*, in Thomas, Helen, *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Damasio, Antonio, *Osjećaj zbivanja (The Feeling of What Happens)*, Algoritam, Zagreb, 2005.



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As the central reference of man's dualism, of his split between the physical and the intellectual, Descartes' philosophic theory is usually referred to, a choice probably also stemming from the fact that Descartes is seen as the father of modern philosophic thought (*cogito ergo sum*), even though Plato had contemplated the same ideas, the separation of the soul from the body, which were further elaborated primarily thanks to Christian philosophy.<sup>4</sup> The Cartesian system consists of two parallel but independent worlds, that of the mind and that of the matter, each of which can be studied without reference to the other, but their relationship is one of interaction. In his concept of the matter, Descartes puts the rational path to cognition before anything originating in senses/emotions. Although his theory of the supremacy of the rational to the emotional has been rejected many times, its clarity and appeal have made Descartes one of the central referential figures of modern philosophy.

Modern scientists, as well as philosophers, thus increasingly turn back to the body, trying to prove its direct connection with cognition, knowledge and mind. Maurice Merleau-Ponty claims the body is capable of knowing the world on its own and therefore of acting as an independent vehicle of cognitive processes.<sup>5</sup> Max Scheler openly criticizes Descartes, "blaming" him for many of the biggest misconceptions about human nature. He says that the field of mental developments refers to the entire body and not only to the brain, and that nowadays we can no longer even consider an external (divine) linkage of the mental and the physical substances. According to Scheller, the spiritual must always consist of physiological and psychological parallel elements, whereas the psycho-physical life is single, *unified*.<sup>6</sup> While describing neurological processes, Damasio is trying to prove that the system of the reason has evolved as an extension of the automatic emotional system, with emotions playing different roles in the process of reason. Neurological *spots* in our body in charge of reasonable thinking are the same as those in charge of emotions and feelings, as well as for the bodily functions that keep the organism alive. Thus he establishes a direct connection between the body (that is, emotions) and a chain of operations enabling the highest achievements of the reason, decision-making and, as an extension, of social behaviour and creativity.<sup>7</sup>

Having set the context, we can now move on to the piece itself and describe the way in which Marija Šćekić has approached this topic, using her virtuoso dancer's body as a means of philosophical exploration. What is *the human error*?

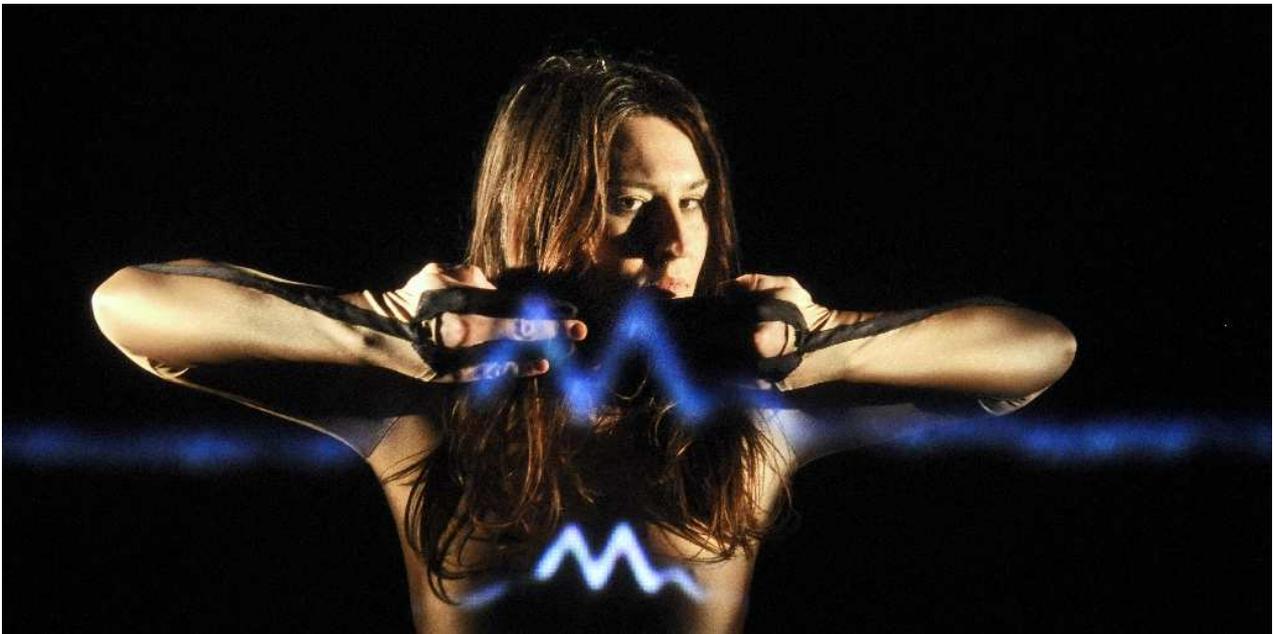
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<sup>4</sup> Russel, Bertrand, *History of Western Philosophy*, Routledge, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.

<sup>6</sup> Scheler, Max, *Čovjekov položaj u kozmosu (The Human Place in the Cosmos)*, Fabula nova, Zagreb, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Damasio, Antonio, *Descartes' Error*, Penguin Books, 1994.



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In *Human Error*, Marija Šćekić presents her own dancer's body on stage, *connected* by innovative wireless sensors to visual and audio computer systems which, interpreting her neurological activities in the course of physical movement, generate a visual and audio background, a virtual entity providing the audience with an insight into the body, into its inner self. The audience experiences the dancer's physical appearance and, at the same time, an audiovisual computerized interpretation of the inner choreography, the one that cannot be perceived by the naked eye. Along the lines of Damasio's theory, the dancer symbolically has an opportunity, to comprehend her own self through film (the audiovisual construct of the inside of her own body), while the audience bears witness and multiplies this cognition. But how?

Damasio divides the process of cognition through the body into five steps to obtain a scientific proof of the path from emotions to the emergence of a conscious feeling. In brief, this is a process describing the relation between the awareness of an organism of itself as a stabile system that keeps us alive and the awareness of the changes incessantly introduced into this system in the organism's encounters with its environment.

Initially, encountering the environment that affects it by evoking emotions, the organism creates mental models. In lack of a better expression, Damasio calls them visual representations of the object conveying various aspects of physical characteristics, namely: ... *the first problem of consciousness is the problem of how we get, so to speak, an integrated "movie-in-the-brain", a movie with as many sensory tracks as our nervous system has sensory portals – sight, sound, taste and olfaction, touch, inner body senses and so forth. (...) Solving this first problem as it roots requires the discovery of how neural patterns are implemented in*

*nerve cell circuits and, eventually, how those neural patterns become the explicit mental patterns or images that I regard as the highest level of biological phenomena.<sup>8</sup>*



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Apart from the images, the second presence denotes the individual as an observer, as a potentially active being with reference to the objects, as an individual in a special relation with an object. The human mind is not only capable of creating mental patterns (images) of objects, it can also create mental models which vehicle the sense of self in the act of cognition. This sense of self in the act of cognition, Damasio believes, is crucial in the problem of consciousness and he proceeds to describe it through the movie metaphor: (...) *the neurobiology of consciousness faces two problems, then; the problem of how the movie-in-the-brain is generated, and the problem of how the brain also generates a sense that there is an owner and observer of that movie. (...) Consciousness generates the knowledge that images exist within the individual who forms them, it places images in the organism's perspective by referring those images to an integrated representation of the organism.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Damasio, Antonio, *Osjećaj zbivanja (The Feeling of What Happens)*, Algoritam, Zagreb, 2005

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Returning to the piece, it could be said that Šćekić symbolically confronted herself and the audience with her images, offering insight into her own process of generating the consciousness of self. Her choreography, pure and clear movement within the familiar Laban's spatial and dynamic movement categories, stimulates the organism which in turn, via neurological signals, stimulates computer systems and their product, which we can eventually see and hear. However, by residing in her own movie, created on the principle of Damasio's steps from emotion to consciousness, Šćekić neither confirms nor denies his ideas. *Human Error* as a whole is not a scientific experiment, as one may assume from everything said so far, it is a piece dealing intensely with emotions and, primarily, with spirituality.

The very first image we can see on the stage, powerful and convulsive twitches of the hands originating in the centre of the body accompanied by the uttering of the word *khul* (Hebr. rotation, to rotate) spoken out loud, indicate an inner struggle, suffering and helplessness. The central motif of the piece is also the relentless spinning, invoking eternity, dervishes, circle dances, circle, the ecstasy of religious dances. Finally, the very beginning and the end of the piece are marked by Biblical quotes *In the beginning was the Word... and the Word became flesh*, by which Šćekić introduces the third, omitted element into this equation of permanent conflict between body and mind, the element of spirit/soul, which Damasio completely left out from his research, thereby making this scientific and philosophical debate a theological one as well.

Man's understanding of his own nature develops, permanently refuting and enhancing itself. If Descartes dramatically changed all known science by saying *I think therefore I am*, by claiming that all that is physical and emotional is separated from the rational, and if several centuries later Damasio entitled his work *Descartes' Error* claiming that reason is nothing but an evolved emotion, then Šćekić asks what knowledge is, what is it that makes it true and accurate, what is the real truth of our knowledge? This is the human error, the relativity of human knowledge, man's inclination to making mistakes and learning from them, and the constant craving towards truth and perfection.

It is Plato's theory of the soul, making way for the discussion on its separability from the body, to be more clearly articulated by Descartes, which offered a possible reading of these questions. He claims the destiny of every soul is its longing for god, for the one who knows the ultimate truth. Souls that lose the vision of this truth fall behind on their way and must go back to where they started from, to their earthly path, whereas the souls that get closer to the

truth have a chance to rise above the earthly existence in the next life.<sup>10</sup> The human nature has no knowledge, but the godly nature does – these are the words of Heraclitus, echoed by many other Greek philosophers. Xenophanes said: *Men have seen little and thus know little, and the human knowledge is in its essence deceptive.*<sup>11</sup> Man obtains knowledge through his own effort and, although he can never reach absolute enlightenment, it is in his nature to strive for something better. The human knowledge in itself is imperfect but the wisdom of the gods is flawless, Xenophanes says. Man can occasionally say something perfectly truthful and yet he possesses no irrefutable knowledge like the gods do. Finally he says that god, unlike mortals, is not a body and a mind, he sees god as something non-corporal. In his concept of the truth, Hecataeus does not share his contemporaries' opinion, claiming instead that the human knowledge is independent of gods and that man is independent on his journey to discover the truth. Like Xenophanes, he finds the human journey to be one of constant scrutiny and search. Unlike them, Heraclitus does not see the human knowledge as merely a group of occurrences connected with the outer world, he says *I searched within myself.* Man, says Heraclitus, is somewhere between gods and beasts. Beasts, with their impressions of the senses, can only penetrate the visible, whereas the divine knowledge can comprehend the invisible as well. Man, on the other hand, is capable of combining his perceptions of senses/feelings and of speculating on the invisible. And finally, Empedocles concludes by basically saying what Descartes wrote again centuries later. Departing again from the assumption that the human perception is incomplete with narrowly limited sensory organs that cloud the thoughts, he says: *In his lifetime, man sees little, dies quickly and is only certain of the things he had stumbled upon along the way.*<sup>12</sup>

As a choreographer, Šćekić, of course, believes in the body, she believes in its knowledge. With her body and her dance, she communicates, transmits both emotions and thoughts. Her body is literally a medium. The quote from The Gospel of John, *In the beginning was the Word (and the Word was with God, and the Word was God)(...) and the Word became flesh,* is doubt in the intellectual, is faith in the body. Šćekić writes these words in the Hebrew language and script, and in this language the same word (*dabar*) denotes word, speech, news, promise, statement, case, law case, court proceedings, event and thing. The Israeli did not see this word as a mere vehicle to convey thought but as something more, something dynamic and creative. Word was seen as a creative force bringing into being the world itself (*creating it*).<sup>13</sup>

The word (language) is the subsequent creation of the civilization, generally considered as the most important and the most magnificent achievement of the human mind, however, knowledge was evidently there before language and it resided in the body. Contemporary sociology, especially anarchoprimitivist John Zerzan, criticizes language and the perception of the languageless, scriptless

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<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Snell Bruno, *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature*, Dover Publications, Inc. 1982.

<sup>12</sup> Idem.

<sup>13</sup> Rebić, Adalbert, *Značajke hebrejskog jezika u odnosu na spoznaju i interpretaciju* (Characteristics of the Hebrew language for cognition and interpretation), Bogoslovska smotra, tome 73, No. 4, February, 2004.

prehistoric man as a pitiful and brutal creature. He goes so far as to claim that language and ideology as its side-product are a system of distorted communication between two poles and are based on symbolization. In modern languages the word *mind* describes something existing independently in our body, whereas in Sanskrit the word for *mind* depicts *working inside*, meaning an active involvement of senses, perception and cognition. Zerzan writes that language is a materialization of the experience of the mind and, referring to Freud and Lacan, claims it has been developed in order to suppress emotions and that it represents the man's conquering of the world. Quoting linguist Muller, Zerzan writes about a disease of language, about its deviating the thought and its incapability to describe things directly. *There is a profound truth to the notion that "lovers need no words" (...) we must have a world of lovers, a world of the face-to-face, in which even names can be forgotten, a world that knows that enchantment is the opposite of ignorance.*<sup>14</sup>

The dancer's relentless spinning and her frenzied twitches at the beginning and at the end of the piece are the cognition of the error, of self-fallacy, of the permanent process of seeking and of helplessness in the absolute cognition which is in fact unattainable, of the knowledge which is essentially dubious and subject to constant rebuttal, of the human error of separating the body, mind and soul.



<Marija Ščekić: Human Error. Photo: Nina Đurđević / Sandra Vitaljić>

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<sup>14</sup> Zerzan, John, *Anarhoprimitivizam protiv civilizacije (Against Civilization)*, Naklada Jesenski i Turk, Zagreb, 2004.