

# “*Velox*” show: risk-adventure in Deborah Colker’s contemporary dance

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**Abstract:** The objective of this article was to identify the body in risk-adventure in Deborah Colker’s contemporary dance. It is an interpretative study, with a qualitative approach. Through *Vídeo Mix*, the choreography “*Alpinismo*” was analyzed, where the ballet dancers dance in a vertical stage, an unprecedented creation. The discovery of this language opened other paths. Beauty, balance, bodies dancing through vertical walls form the show, leading the audience to an aesthetic contemplation of the illusion of risk. It was concluded that the body at risk, built in an aesthetic production in Deborah Colker’s show from her actors-ballet dancers, is one of the different social practices which involve risk in contemporary society.

**Key-words:** Dance. Movement. Corporal image. Acceptable risk.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Risk, proper of post-modernity, appears in different social practices and is inseparable from emotion and from adventure. The composed term risk-adventure appeared to emphasize an important displacement of modern senses of risk, which recover adventure as a positive dimension. For Beck (1992), German sociologist author of the concept “risk society”, we live in an out of control world, in which there is nothing certain but uncertainty. This uncertainty promotes a.

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certain disorder among men, who, deprived from modern certainties, see themselves without guidance for the decisions to be taken when facing the imponderable.

When the social order is failing in the anthropological function of guiding the existence, the risk is felt in the body itself, a confronting condition with that same body. Then legitimacy is conferred to life, through the symbolic metamorphosis of the body itself through strict training, and from there a new man is born, a super-men, a metaphoric vision of the “super-being”, says Le Breton (2000). For the author, there is a metaphoric game with life itself, it is enough to propel a symbolic exchange which favors a relationship in the world where zest for life is recovered by facing risk.

Contemporary dance, which appeared in the 20th century and is distinguished by freedom of movements, of expression, by the transmission of feelings and ideas, also adopted in its choreographies the thematic of risk.

Contemporary dance opposes classic ballet and modern dance. The first one is different from it because it has established movements, such as the use of the five positions of the feet turned outside, in external rotation, which is called *en déhor*, and the five positions of the arms, with round shapes. As for the second, the modern dance, it was revolutionary in its own time, liberating the body from strict movements, from the tight bodices, a guarantee for the correct posture and for their monitored growth (VIGARELLO, 2008b), and abolishing the ballet shoes. But the freedom for creation, the identity and the mix of dance styles are features of contemporary dance, each choreographer printing his/her mark, character, with movements to which they give meanings.

Deborah Colker, Brazilian contemporary dance choreographer and ballet dancer, socializes the risk-adventure and creates the movements of choreographies for the Company that bears her name from a risk aesthetic.

The shows *Velox*, *Rota*, *Casa*, among others, have as their theme boldness and daily life. But what caused the change in the configuration of shows, previously so formal and predictable? Maybe because art has currently as one of its purposes to represent the real and daily life, it is impregnated with risk and uncertainties.

This article has the objective of analyzing, in the perspective of body aesthetic at risk, the choreography *Alpinismo*, which is part of the show *Velox*, from Deborah Colker.

As for the methodology, the Video Mix was analyzed, a mixing of some choreographies from the shows *Vulcão* and *Velox*, shot at Teatro Municipal in Rio de Janeiro in September 2000. As the analysis category, the disciplined body at risk was used, in an aesthetic perspective.

## **2 BODY AND RISK IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY REFLECTED IN DANCE**

The means of communication inform us daily, at home, at work and in the most diverse places, about wars, crimes, accidents, frauds, stray bullets etc. We are constantly exposed to risks, one of the characteristics of contemporary society.

Although risk is a modern concept, we do not know if we live in a world that is riskier than in the past. It is not the quantity of risk, but the quality of control, or its management, which makes the difference. For that, Beck (1992) uses the expression “manufactured uncertainties”, which are reinforced by fast technological innovations and accelerated social responses, creating a new global risk landscape.

For this author, the institutionalized expectation of control, even the key-ideas of *certainty* and *rationality*, are collapsing. It is not climate change, the ecological disasters, the threats from international terrorism, the mad cow disease etc. which create the originality of the risk society, but the

growing perception that we live in an interconnected world which is getting out of control. Also for Giddens (2002), the concept of risk is directly related to the concept of reflexive modernity, which are sociocultural and aesthetic conditions of the post-industrial era until the present day. Risks, says Beck (1992), are systematic ways of dealing with dangers and the insecurities induced and introduced by the modernization process itself. Fear is not granted by God or natural forces anymore, but by progress and modernization. Those new risks are manufactured risks, in the terminology of Giddens (2002).

Beck (1992) usually states that the central problem in classical modernity used to be the distribution of riches, while in reflexive society the problem became the distribution of risks. Hence, while equality was the key-word of classical modernity, the motivating force of risk society is safety.

What is risk, then? Danger that is more possible than probable. It is an ambiguous concept. It is noticed only by the negative side of wars, crimes, stray bullets, but also by the positive. The risk-adventure, approached by Spink (2001), is an example in which people deliberately choose to live it (COSTA, 2000). It is the desired risk, a term used by risk thinkers Machlis and Rosa (1990, p. 162) when they refer to the “activities or events which have uncertainties regarding the results or consequences, and in which the uncertainties are essential and intentional behavior components”.

And why do people look for forms of pleasure which involve risk?

Psychology has been studying the desired risk as a personality trait, which denotes an individual search for new experiences and sensations and the willingness to run physical and social risks for them to be accomplished.

According to Gullone and Moore (2000), the risk desired has been expanded for beyond the traditional risk behaviors. The authors approach four specific types of risk: *thrill seeking*, risky, but socially acceptable, behaviors such as

radical sports and, in the present case, contemporary dance shows; *rebellious behaviors*, which include the rites of passage typical from adolescence, such as smoking and drinking; *reckless behaviors*, behaviors that are likely to have negative results— such as drunk driving or unprotected sex —, which are usually unacceptable for adults and antisocial behaviors, unacceptable both for adults and even for adolescents.

In this article we will focus only on the *thrill seeking* risk, i.e., risky but socially acceptable behaviors. In our case, in the contemporary dance of Deborah Colker, it deals with body movements that establish beauty and mastery, transforming the risk in aesthetic show. Therefore, we will limit ourselves to physical risks and a staging of the bodies of ballet dancers as the representation of boldness in challenging the logics of time and space until then reigning in the movement of contemporary dance.

Contemporary dance is not interested in showing perfect bodies, unified by shape, neither outlined by aesthetic or sexual imperatives. It seems to want, in fact, to express the corporal multiplicity made of muscles, bones, imperfections and qualities of human beings, talking about themselves, with no disguises and to an audience who identifies with what they see. Its choreographies seek to interpret daily life themes.

Elizabeth Dempster (1998), in her essay *Women writing the body: let’s watch a little how she dances*, gets to the concept of the body as an organism in flow. For it, the body is not a fixed or immutable entity, but a live structure which is adapted and is transformed continuously, available for many discourses. Dance, from this perspective, is directed to a process of construction of many bodies, a deed of the body, which allowed Deborah Colker to speak in her choreographies about the bodies which dare to dance the risk in elevated and vertical plans, representing the saga of climbers in their daily routine. On the other hand, Silva (2005), when interpreting Dempster, says that dance is shown to be conditional, circumstantial and, above all, transitional; it is a deed which is

erased by itself at the same moment it is being written. The body is shown, then, also as unstable, transitional, elusive, and light, subject to many representations, according to Silva (2005), mobilizing new qualities of the body and taking part of new social devices, as said Vigarello (2008a). In the case of risk in contemporary society, the dance of Deborah Colker transforms it in a show.

To transform the risk into aesthetic show, in dance, it is necessary to have strict discipline and intense training, to prepare the body and make it capable of executing movements with a high degree of difficulty, which may contextualize the image of risk, expressing with art the beauty of gestuality.

### **3 THE AESTHETIC OF RISK**

The images invaded daily life, technology has imposed its presence, allowing dramatized temporal constructions, whether in the cinema, whether on television or whether in dance, just like in the shorter changing of tempo, the duration of editing of contemporary shows. Deep changes happened in the show society, highlights Debord (1997), leading it to increasingly assume the aesthetic dimension. New raw material has appeared, such as plastic, which contributed with its ductability and variety of possibilities of colors for the aesthetization of the show and of post-modern life. Also risk, integrated to the aesthetization of arts and of daily life, enabled even tragedies to become admirable shows.

In contemporary western society, great importance is conferred on the body. Vision exerts a supreme power on the other senses, configuring thus a super valuing of the body image, on which our situation in society seems to depend. Currently, we invest a lot in the body, in the image of beautiful, because it is now considered what we have of most immediate, close and characteristic, i.e., we are subject to our own body and it exalts our largest image of subjectivity and of our history.

Our body was transformed into images, which put us in front of the valuing of risk in sports, in the financial market, at work and in the show. There is an encouragement to risk through the weakening of the body, which is thought and crossed by different technologies which made it virtual, demanding new relations with it.

Deborah Colker, ahead of her time in contemporary dance, used technology and took it to stage in her show “*Velox*” with this visual content of risk.

#### 4 THE VELOX SHOW

*Velox*, in Latin, means fast. This contemporary dance show, created by Deborah Colker in 1995, is made by several themes. It speaks to us about sports, the mechanics of movements, the questioning of gravity and self-improvement. The scenography and the art direction are from Gringo Córdia, a usual collaborator of the Company, and the sound track is composed by Berna Ceppas and Sergio Mekler.

Deborah Colker studied psychology and she was a volleyball player, which allows her to identify convergences between sports and dance, such as balance and concentration. The thematic of sports and transgression are present in her creations.

A complete success, *Velox* received also criticism: “The experts said that what I did was very athletic”, remembers Colker (2006). “Those same people today say that choreography with the wall was a slam dunk,” referring to *Alpinismo*, the third movement of the show, inspired in alpinism and thus called, where there is the presence of a vertical stage, situated at the back of the scene, where the floor and the wall are mixed, just like a climbing wall.

Colker puts bodies at risk just like the sports climbers do, in an elevated vertical plan, perpendicular to the floor, only with the support of hands and feet. The ballet dancers start the

choreography in a line with their back to the audience, they run towards the huge wall and plunge into a climb as if at that moment they would cross a Darwinian descendant anthropological portal. And, like mutant chameleons, they not only change color, but also species, transformed from biped into reptiles and apes, completely inserted in their new habitat. Stuck to this symbolic huge mountain- wall, they climb, go down, dance, jump with extreme control and corporal beauty, acquired through the technique of training mechanisms, which allow them to make whatever they wish with their bodies.

But who escalates the huge wall? A round, mobile, elastic body, in which interior lies reptiles and apes, metamorphosed into ballet dancers. In a desire for elevation, the body tries to frustrate the phenomenon of gravity, in order to go up, detach from the ground; changing the grip to the vertical stage, they go up and support their body weight, they do even inverted holds, against the action of gravity, in a vertical ballet from their own force, potential, flexibility and precision.

Sliding and stretching on the huge wall in contorted shapes, they vary their supports in the clutches, now with four, now with three, now with two and even with one support. They jump from one and hold the other, staying for a moment without support in the air, losing the contact with the clutches. One jumps over the others, having their fellows as a support.

Ballet dancers appear from all sides, some stuck to the huge wall and others almost free. At a certain moment, they are stuck to each other, they climb, go down, appear and disappear quickly, upside down or sideways. Against the action of gravity, the body is presented in several situations. Now they appear as reptiles moving as if stuck, now they do ape like jumps as if jumping from one branch to the other, transmitting us the sensation of being on a wild mountain contemplating several animal species which play with one another, integrated in harmony that only the divine would be able to create.



A dancer appears jumping and turning at the same time in the air, having as a support for propulsion only the small clutches; legs are intertwined, passing inside one another with extreme beauty and complexity. Balancing and passages of women suspended by the hands of men are also executed, reminding a *rappel*, without the rope. A ballerina moves continuously, changing shapes as in a kaleidoscope, at the center of the huge blue colored wall where there is a red circle in the center, which takes us to the image of a target, which is the interior, where the arrow, universal symbol of overcoming normal conditions and of imaginary freedom from the distance and from gravity, will transcend the limits of human condition.

The actor ballet dancers climb this mountain-wall, symbolically the meeting of sky and earth, at the same time the earth’s center and axis, a point where desire and power, risk and safety are joined. Others are supported only by the hands, transforming their legs in balancing pendulums.

With control, lightness and precision, the ballet dancers have their bodies dominated, which allows them to travel free outside them, far away from them, and fly, transported to wherever they want to go and be whatever they want to be transcending what a body can physically do while dancing. They spread beauty and art in vertical.

At this moment, there is no stage, huge wall, neither audience, only an undefinable sensation of pleasure and freedom, an artistic orgasm, leaving the body, an ecstasy, a transcendence, some dizziness swallowed by the whirl of participation in that movement which reaches the vortex, an ecstasy which happens in the field of sensibility, highlighting its humanity (SCHILLER, 1995). Still, for the same author, by this impulse of beauty, man recreates and recovers freedom. It is through the playful impulse that man enjoys freedom in the sensitive world. And, the higher the technical ability, the higher the possibility of reaching the vortex. Beauty is the object of the live form and above it there is only the sublime.

Like clock hands, having the hands as fastening axis, ballet dancers rotate 360° degrees around themselves, as if they could dominate time and space, while others go up, getting to the top of the mountain-wall, reaching heights, home of Gods, allowed to a few, to those who reached what was unreachable until then.

They take safe risks, legitimate their own life, symbolically metamorphosing their own body in simulations of climbers-ballet dancers, being the “super-being” dancer from Le Breton (2000) born. The music from the choreography is continuous and intense, percussion instruments remind us of African drums referring to a primitive and wild environment, belonging to adventure sports. The percussion rhythm is accelerated and in synchrony with the movements danced and the expression of ballet dancers, a mix of who is challenging risk and who has just overcome it.

The audience, under impact, has the illusion of risk that those trained, rehearsed bodies communicate and all, ballet dancers and spectators, interact in a spectacular vertigo. The dancer is invented dancing and, according to Suquet (2008), they cannot stop manufacturing in themselves an emotion which generates in the observer a sensibility over the body (from the spectator), minimizing the distance between them, subjective, promoting resonance in the body do spectator, that the author called transport effect, a kinesthetic empathy. Then both, in sensorial introspective communion, are involved by the beauty of the show.

The choreography ends with seven ballet dancers dancing in the mountain-wall-stage and an eighth ballerina arrives and mingles with the bodies of others, hooking up to one of them; then, all, at the same time, turn their look to the front, as if only at this moment they had noticed that they were being observed by an audience which is watching in ecstasy, totally involved in this spectacular *performance* of metamorphosis, art and beauty, the sublime.

In the acknowledgement, moment of happiness and relaxing, the music played is a samba, the drumming, to celebrate the top of the *performance*. Now is the moment to relax, to dance samba, to have fun and celebrate the achievement of this mountain-wall, of getting to the podium and opening the champagne, of partying the great victory with the gods.

However, the safety of this body aesthetic in risk is done through intensive physical training which, according to a report from the choreographer, gave rise to nine months of tiring rehearsals, with a lot of discipline and determination. A training legitimated by the methodic development, proper from the 20th century physical formation, according to Vigarello (2008b), a game played with body limit, an ever higher mastery of the ability, linked to gestures and its effects, a self-blooming, says the author. Besides the technical mastery of the body in a new spatial language, whose supports and plans are changed over conventional dances, the beauty of movements was necessary, for them to be transformed in an unprecedented vertical dance. A dance whose aerial language would be translated in images of flights of the dancing bodies, of verticality, of fast creation of the dynamic instant, giving rise in us, admirers, to a reality of lightness and clarity, the impression of bathing in a light of ascension dream.

How can the dancers’ bodies be supported against gravity’s force? Which images are built that allow the inscription of those and in those bodies of such significant movements, opposing gravity’s force? Used to balances and unbalances in jumps and rotations, they dared more complex challenges, in which reduced points of support are constituted in multiples centers of force. They transcribe in their bodies specific ways of subjection of balance and movement.

The disciplined body of the dancer shows the relationship control-discipline discussed by Foucault (1987), i.e., the control imposes the best relationship between gesture and the global attitude of the body, a condition of effectiveness

and quickness. Discipline, according to Foucault, manufactures submissive and exercised bodies, docile bodies, which are based on efficient gesture. It increases the force of the body in economic terms of usefulness and decreases those same forces, in political terms of obedience. It is the exercise of the highest function of increasing the ability of the body, of taming to retrieve and take higher and better possession of its potential, for their own use of mastery, the power of effective and artistic mastery.

What was inherent in the activity of the *Velox* show was to reach the highest point in unprecedented creation, where the ballet dancers, in continuous overcoming through transposition of obstacles with complex difficulties, making their bodies expressive places and through actions which take shape and make their possibilities concrete. The creation of those movements is born from training and from the reward, a superpower, says Serres (2004).

In *Velox*, agile, flexible and beautiful bodies move through the air, drawing movements and promoting a striking visual experience to the audience, granting the sharing of common feelings and emotions, an imaginary, a specific and organic form of social link, marked by group communion and by effervescence, according to Maffesoli's (1997) thought.

The safety with which the ballet dancers flow in their movements causes an illusory impact of risk in the spectators, giving them sensations of dizziness which culminate in ecstasy facing the show.

The body leaves the floor and the points of support, climbs the flows and slides in the interfaces, uses only line escaping, is vectored, mentions Deleuze (2002). It becomes the expressive and action place of the human being and in it their potentialities take shape and are made concrete. In this aesthetic promotion, is implied a promotion given to the body as a place to experience the world, becoming visible to the accomplishment of lived experience.

The body in risk is an object of all the set of physiological and biochemical transformations, which adapt their limits. It seems that finding a physical limit is something that justifies the sacrifice of the body. Even if this is home to great suffering, it is conscious, desired, likely to be associated to pleasure that is consequent of an objective made concrete.

Le Breton (2000), when dealing with limit, says that looking for it is an anthropological need, and its search may mean, ultimately, a request for death to ensure existence. But Deborah Colker and the ballet dancers from her Company do not look for death, they look for challenging the limits of their possibilities in action on a stage, they look for the accomplishment in their own movements, as well as the admiration of the beauty of those accomplishments. They die, symbolically, their limits overcome, their challenges reached and existence appears, in fullness, the existence of surprising movements.

It is necessary to have a prepared and efficient body to perform choreographies with a high degree of difficulty. Currently, in contemporary dance, it is built, regarding technique and physical training, through countless hours of rehearsals specifically for the requirement of each choreographic set and the possibilities are unlimited for the creation of movements. Repetitions are intensified until the movement is refined, improved in the body, then, the particularities of its culture are transcribed, as a consequence of refinement, of sensibilities, of repetitions.

As a training mechanism, repetition is a means of transformation of quantitative into qualitative movement. When we repeat a movement, although it seems the same, it is not, each one is different from the other because who is doing it is not the same, says Deleuze (1988). At each movement, we live one unique experience, although it seems equal; if it were not like this, there would be no learning or mastering of this movement, i.e., countless quantitative repetitions would not be transformed in qualitative improvement. Sportsmen/women

would not be able to overcome previous records, ballet dancers would not reach the corporal mastery of dance technique, and piano players would not be able to perform a piece with such virtuosi that it seems so natural.

Repetition transforms the cultural in natural appearance. It does not change anything in what is repeated, but it changes something in the spirit which contemplates it.

Ballerinas, when they dance, demonstrate apparently to be natural, fluid, light in the execution of movements, because they acquired mastery of the corporal technique, through the obsessive search for quality, with repetition. To reach the degree of perfectionism desired in dance, in the case of a choreography where there is risk, it is necessary to repeat until the actors-ballet dancers are confident that the planned movements are ready. Risk is controlled and the *performance* transforms it in an illusion, transferring the importance of execution to the aesthetic beauty of movements and giving, to the eyes of spectators, the impression that it is easy for those who practice it.

Schiller (1997), in his studies, states that the Beautiful or the judgment about it is never entirely pure, as men always will give in to aesthetic contemplation, according to their state of mind at the moment, making the perfect balance necessary for such appreciation. This the bodies of *Velox* ballet dancers reached with perfection, mobilizing the contemplation of spectators with their *performances*.

One of aesthetic philosophy fundamentals from Schiller (1995) is the dynamics of aesthetic phenomenon, a moment of artistic fruition, a transitory arena of freedom, a temporal and spatial confluence of it. He suggests that it was found an energetic field of great receptiveness: playful, in the case of Beautiful, or of great intensity, pathetic, in the case of sublime, the individual should enjoy in the most suitable way.

Beauty, balance, bodies in dance through vertical walls form the aesthetic of Deborah Colker shows. For her, the

discovery of this new language opened other paths, as for example the choreography *Rota*, where the ballet dancers dance in a Ferris wheel – i.e., a vertical in movement.

The dynamic imagination present in the choreographic study *Velox* revealed an aesthetic value of the dream of flying, dreams of elevation, ascension and lightness, as Bachelard (1990) said. The ballet dancers bring in their ankles the wings of Mercury (Hermes), whose impulses make the fast creation of a dynamic instant.

## 5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As seen, risk which is typical of post-modernity appears in different social practices and is inseparable from emotion and adventure.

Deborah Colker socializes risk-adventure and creates movements, in the choreographies of her Company, from an aesthetic of risk. She successfully explored new possibilities for dealing with gravity, subverting, modifying and creating new relationships of body in movement with space. For this reason, the show *Velox* with the choreography *Alpinismo*, which mixes the movements of *rappel* and climbing in jumps with dance steps, was a watershed in contemporary dance in the country, marking the use of elevated space and establishing a body playing with risk and adventure in dance, an aesthetic dimension of risk.

Such a fact came at the exact moment when the systematic ways of dealing with danger and lack of safety, introduced by the post-modernization process itself, were demanding changes.

The risk concept is not noticed anymore only by the negative side of wars. Associated to adventure, risk-*Adventure* appears, from which Deborah Colker, with the new movements introduced in dance, serves as an excellent example. She established, among spectators, in the aesthetic

contemplation of the illusion of risk. For them, just like in circus shows, everything seems to be easy in an essence of tiring corporal work, art and safety.

What is left only, for us to conclude the article, is to find the understanding for the search of pleasure involving risk. Maybe the need for new experiences and sensations justify such search, because many of them who are not satisfied with the common objectives look for the concretization of their objectives in physical and social risks. Hence, the creation of risk-adventure or risk-desired in a number of social practices.



**Espectáculo “Velox”: risco-aventura na dança contemporânea de Deborah Colker**

**Resumo:** O objetivo deste artigo foi identificar o corpo em risco-aventura na dança contemporânea de Deborah Colker. O estudo é interpretativo, com abordagem qualitativa. Através do Vídeo Mix, foi analisada a coreografia “Alpinismo”, na qual bailarinos dançam num palco vertical, uma criação inédita. A descoberta desta linguagem abriu outros caminhos. Beleza, equilíbrio, corpos em dança por paredes verticais formam o espetáculo, levando a plateia à contemplação estética da ilusão do risco. Concluiu-se que o corpo em risco, construído numa produção estética nos espetáculos de Deborah Colker a partir dos seus atores-bailarinos, é uma das diferentes práticas sociais que envolvem o risco na sociedade contemporânea.

**Palavras-chave:** Dança. Movimento. Imagem corporal. Risco aceitável.

**Espectáculo “Velox”: Riesgo-Aventura en la Danza contemporánea de Deborah Colker**

**Resumen:** El objetivo de este artículo fue identificar el cuerpo en riesgo-aventura en la danza contemporánea de Deborah Colker. El estudio es interpretativo, con abordaje cualitativo. A través del Vídeo Mix, fue analizada la coreografía Alpinismo, en la cual bailarines danzan en un escenario vertical, una creación inédita. Este lenguaje abrió otros caminos. Belleza, equilibrio, cuerpos en danza por paredes verticales forman el espectáculo, llevando la platea a la contemplación estética de la ilusión del riesgo. Concluimos que el cuerpo en riesgo, construido en una producción estética en los espectáculos de Deborah Colker a partir de sus actores-bailarines, es una de las diferentes prácticas sociales que envuelven el riesgo en la sociedad contemporánea.

**Palabras clave:** Baile. Movimiento. Imagen corporal. Riesgo aceptable.

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