

# Some Hypotheses on Being Possessed: The Body as a Vessel

*Anh Vo*

If being possessed refers to the capacity of being inhabited by forces of otherness, there must be no fixed internal core to the body. The body is not an “I,” nor is it mine. The insistence on the body as a private property of the individualized subject creates an energetic blockage. Interpellated by this sensorial stratification, ghostly otherness is banished to the realm of noisy superstition. But just because all one hears is noise does not mean that the spirits are not speaking through the body.

In a way, the ongoing maintenance of the individualized selves can be analyzed as a never-ending exorcising process, that which tries to expel what is constitutively me as not-me in order to fabricate an illusion of coherence. As powerful as they are, rituals of exorcism only buy time. They cannot entirely stop the dead from haunting the living, or the otherness of the Other from encroaching upon the “I.” Within the biopolitical regime of “make live and let die” (Foucault [1976] 2003:241), which is compulsively fixated on life administration and optimization, exorcising death becomes even more urgent. A paradox arises: the more we try to extend life, the more we become haunted by death.

Another paradox: it is through exorcism that the capitalist logic of private possession is lived out. Conversely, it is the confusion between the me and the not-me that makes the experience of being possessed possible. To inhabit the body that is not mine is also to let the Other speak through the “I.” It is not a willful letting in of otherness, as if the body has a door that can decide to close and open to external forces. The Other is speaking at all times. They do not need our permission—though the overwhelm of otherness, felt as an intrusive pressing in, can be loosened through an acceptance of the body’s nonsovereignty.

When I write “the” body, I am describing this particular body that I am not comfortable calling mine. And I am also gesturing towards the abstract universality of what it means to be a vulnerable breathing being that carries a singular constellation of wounds simply from the fact of living. Here, universality does not flatten differences. Tuning into the shared pain and difficulty of living can tend to the particularities of wounds cut through each being—who is, at the same time, not concretely individualized by their differences.

Ontologically, the body is empty. Which is not to say that the body is a nihilistic void. Quite the contrary, it is empty precisely because it is full of everything other than its separate self. Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Thich Nhat Hanh suggests we use the verb *to interbe* in place of *to be* (Thich 2009). We inter-are, because on our own, we are nothing. Similarly, the body is a no-thing and it inter-is everything. The body, then, is less of a discreet physical entity than a vessel through which others move and speak. Within the metaphysics of interbeing, being possessed is a mundane reality.

Interdependence can be pleasurable and meaningful, but it can also feel destabilizing and threatening. It is disorienting to be entangled with others, to be a small no-thing among other no-things. Amidst the vast unknowability of the world, letting go of the narrative of independence can be terrifying. There is a lived necessity for the defensive consolidation of the “I.” Even as the border of the body is indeterminate, being wrapped around by the skin can feel deeply comforting, as it is an extension of the maternal womb. That comfort must not be disavowed. It should be worked with and worked through. One does not recklessly throw themselves into being possessed. There needs to be a process.

Sacrificial rituals can be especially helpful in moving through the anxiety of being compromised by the outside pushing in. Let’s say, I sacrifice an organ (the price I pay has to be a bit more than what I am willing to give up). In surrendering said organ, there is an opportunity for me to find alignment between what penetrates from the outside and what I can give from the inside. Emerging from this violent sacrifice is a profound oneness between what gets taken

from me and what I can forgo. There is no longer any meaningful distinction between outside and inside. The body becomes one with the world.

I believe possession is less about doing than being. I used to assume that possession orients around a cathartic losing of the self, which only makes sense if there is a self to begin with. Here, I am reminded of the Vietnamese concept *đồng tỉnh* (co-consciousness), which is shared with me by Việt Vũ, a performer trained in the northern Vietnamese spirit possession ritual, Hầu Đồng. *Đồng tỉnh* refers to the delicate altered state embodied by the performer who psychically makes space for the gods and the deities to co(in)habit without completely losing themselves in the process. Possession, then, is more about surrendering and getting lost in the immanent unruliness of the body. There is nothing to do but to get out of the way, to cultivate patience and sensitivity, to listen more perceptively.

It is tricky to perform being possessed if possession is not a doing but a sensorial fact of life. The frame of ritual and performance should not be seen as that which makes possession possible. After all, it is a frame. Ritual provides a contingent form to edge into the formlessness of life and death. It is an attempt at translating and making meaning out of the unintelligible speech of the Other. There is no finality to the task. Destined for failure, translation is a process to be revisited again and again.

It would be a mistake to presume that Western dance, in its exorcism of ghostly forces from physical matter, does not intimately understand the vessel capacity of the body. I am indebted to André Lepecki's articulation of choreography as an "apparatus of capture," as a technology invented to discipline and mobilize bodies to written commands. Lepecki traces the invention of choreography to Thoinot Arbeau's 1589 publication of *Orchésographie* (*orchesis* = dance, *graphie* = writing), which functions as a dance manual: a rudimentary form of dance notation *describing* "a martial march to the rhythms of a military drum" (2007:123). Through this unprecedented fusing of dancing and writing under militaristic force, choreography coagulates as a majoritarian force that penetrates and organizes the body according to Stately use. The vessel capacity of the body has been thoroughly extracted and exploited for the disciplinary project of choreography.

In the wake of this historical exploitation, can we ethically remain committed to the emptiness of the body without resorting to the defensive consolidation of the "I"?

#### References

- Foucault, Michel. (1976) 2003. "*Society Must Be Defended*": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*. Trans. David Macey, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. Picador.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat. 2009. *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*, ed. Peter Levitt. Parallax Press.
- Lepecki, André. 2007. "Choreography as Apparatus of Capture." *TDR* 51, 2 (T194):119–23. [muse.jhu.edu/article/216111](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/216111)