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The Body as a Means of Cultural Awareness and Social Intervention: The Case of Raymond Duncan and Penelope Sikelianos

by Ekaterina Diakoumopoulou

Using the example of the Duncan family this article will explore the human body as an object of self-determination, a means of overcoming social boundaries, a field of racist shooting and phobic enforcement, a reference point of public outrage and the complex between sociality and corporality, but also as a tool of political vigilance and social intervention. Does a body dressed in a tunic resist the western way of life? Or is it a stereotypical outpouring of people unable to modernize? Is the body instrumentalized as a means of narrating exoticism? The bodies of the Duncan family members are an occasion for discussion in the public sphere, even today.

Raymond Duncan, the older brother of American dancer Isadora Duncan, was born in San Francisco in 1874. He was philosopher, dancer, director, poet, actor, craftsman and mystic. In 1899 Isadora, Raymond, their sister Elizabeth and their mother travel from the U.S. to London, and they spend three nights sleeping “to a bench in the Green Park. [...] We lived upon penny buns and yet, such was our amazing vitality, we spent our days in the British Museum” (Duncan 28). Isadora was reading aloud excerpts on Greek antiquity from texts of Johann Winckelmann (1717-1768). He was a German art historian and archaeologist who had never managed to visit Athens but he had envisioned Athens as a “polis” of free individuals’ bodies (Potts 13). In London, Raymond Duncan visited the British Museum and “made sketches of all the Greek vases and bas-reliefs” (Duncan 30) and he developed an impulsive,

emotional relationship with antiquity.

The importance of classics at the end of the 19th century was a mass cultural phenomenon as Simon Goldhill has established: “Victorian culture was obsessed with the classical past, as nineteenth-century self-consciousness about its own moment in history combined with an idealism focused on the glories of Greece and the splendor of Rome to make classical antiquity a deeply privileged and deeply contested arena for cultural expression” (Goldhill 1). From the end of the 19th century, the Mediterranean human body was a subject of study for the classics.

On December of the same year, 1899, Raymond goes to Paris and invites his family to follow him: “In the spring he bombarded us with telegrams imploring us to come to Paris” (Duncan 30). Already since 1865 Paris had been the center of interest for all kinds of artists from around the world. “To visit Paris was to be exposed to culture, history, art, beauty, excitement and life. There was an enormous surge in the number of Americans studying art there, the most famous being Whistler, Sargent and Cassatt. However, hundreds more made their way to the capital of Bohemia in order to complete their artistic education, many becoming highly successful on both sides of the Atlantic, if rather less well known today” (Boyd 116). As in London, so in Paris Duncan visited the Louvre and captured the ancient Greek bodies. “Spent hours in the Louvre. Raymond had already got a portfolio of drawings of all the Greek vases, and we spent so much time in the Greek vase room that the guardian grew suspicious. [...] Raymond was very clever with his pencil. In a few months he had copied all the Greek vases in the Louvre” (Duncan 38-39).

After some wandering, in 1903, Raymond takes the big decision to make a dream come true: “We then revived a project which we had long cherished, of making a pilgrimage

to the very holiest shrine of art, of going to our beloved Athens. [...] sparkling eyes and high-beating hearts, to make together our long-deferred trip to Athens. [...] We wished our voyage as nearly as possible to resemble that of Ulysses” (69). In that year, in Athens, Raymond abandoned his modern attire for the ancient Greek tunic and he married Penelope Sikelianos. Penelope Sikelianos (1883?-1917) was the sister of Angelos Sikelianos (1884-1951), the Greek poet, who married the American Eva Palmer (1874-1952) in the United States, and the couple Angelos and Eva returned to Greece and revived the Delphic Festivals (Leontis 137-139). Penelope herself was a music theorist, weaver, singer and actress. In Athens, at a hill called Kopanos, in the area of Ymittos mountain, the Duncans started constructing the temple of “Clan Duncan”: “Raymond suddenly laid his staff upon the ground and shouted: ‘Look, we are on the same level as the Acropolis!’” (Duncan 75). He was in charge of the construction work and his ambitious goal, which was funded by Isadora Duncan, was to rebuild the palace of Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae (Roatcap 10-20). Isadora “on the one hand, she espoused a radical American individualism that materially supported a wealthy elite, on the other hand, she professed a communist love for the masses” (Daly 178-204).

In 1905 Raymond’s and Penelope’s son Menalkas was born in Paris. A European press release in American newspapers as *The Evening Statesman*, *Daily Capital Journal* and *East Oregonian*, on January 16, 1905, reveals: “Raymond Duncan, of California, brother of the famous dancer, Isadore Duncan, has startled Paris by parading the boulevards at tired in a classic Greek costume, with a tunic reaching to his knees, bare legs and a crown covering his long towing hair. Several times he escaped arrest for immodesty. Recently married a Greek girl.” Two years later the family settles in Berlin and continues to arouse undiminished interest. The press coverage reaches the U.S. and the news about the Duncan is constantly

being reproduced. Indicatively, the newspapers *Daily Arizona Silver Belt*, on July 14, 1907, and *The Marion Daily Mirror*, on August 03, 1907, report: “Old Greece in modern Berlin. Raymond Duncan, a brother of the dancer Isadora Duncan, is a modern American with ancient Greek tastes. [...] Mr. Duncan and his family, clad in the flowing Grecian robes and sandals, have appeared recently on Paris and Berlin boulevards. They propose to invade California and settle down permanently. Mr. Duncan declares that he will seek to convert the whole world to the ancient Greek garb, which it considers the only rational costume.” In fact, the most shocking news was revealed by the *New York Times* on July 14, 1907; the Duncans were refused admittance at several hotels in Berlin on account of their scanty attire.”

This was not the first time that the family was persecuted for the appearance of their bodies. The European and U.S. press are full of ironic articles and derogatory remarks, for example the disparaging statement of *The Topeka State Journal*, on July 23, 1907, “Who go abroad make themselves ridiculous.”

On August 23, 1908, the American newspapers *The Sun* and *The Times Dispatch* published an accusatory and disapproving article: “In Berlin a complaining bitterly of the deceptiveness of his promises regarding the Utopian Greek colony [...] Duncans who are reported to live in luxury while their followers are obliged to practice the simple life”. In 1909 they returned to London and the newspapers describe their ancient Greek attire offering to the reading public a multitude of details about the flowing white robe, uncut hair and sandals. “They recently arrived in town and whenever they walk on the streets or in the parks they find themselves the centre of a curious crowd”, as revealed on June 6, 1909, *The Sun* and *The Washington Herald*.

The Duncan family, together with Penelope’s sister Eleni Sikelianos, Andreas Devaris

and his brother Dionysios Devaris, important Greek art personalities, left London for U.S. in the end of 1909, aiming to realize a theatrical tour in the American States. They planned to stage the *Elektra* of Sophocles. Indeed, the troupe managed to make an impressive tour presenting the ancient tragedy in: Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle for a total of sixty-three performances, as Raymond Duncan himself describes in his autobiographical notes, which are preserved in the Special Collections of the Stanford University. European media coverage had sparked American interest. The repatriation of Duncan and his family did not go unnoticed more widely in the American press on December 1909, e.g. *Evening Journal*, *Sacramento Union*, *The Daily Ardmoreite*, *Perth Amboy Evening News*: “Raymond Duncan, who has aroused a great deal of comment in the capitals of Europe by going about the streets clad in the costume of the ancient Greeks, has returned to the country with his Greek wife and child and is attracting attention in the streets.” Duncan declared he and his family would not wear American clothes for the winter. On December 9, 1909, Duncan made a statement to the newspaper *The Evening Statesman*: “Our bodies are well cared for and we do not feel the cold as do those used to covering the entire bodies.” However, the quote from Duncan that made a bigger impression and was widely republished in several newspapers as *The North Platte Semi-Weekly Tribune*, *The Columbus Journal*, *The Loup City Northwestern* and *Evening Journal* was: “Go naked and you will be pure in mind and strong of body”.

The true paradox, according to the *New-York Tribune* on December 28, 1909, is the fact that the Duncans parade through the snowy streets of New York. As the days go by, the journalistic interest increases with the “highlight” of the following scandal. The incident occurred on Broadway, where little Menalkas was walking with his aunt Eleni Sikelianos and

her companion Andreas Devaris. A police officer arrested them with the accusation that the four-year-old boy was dressed inappropriately for the winter weather and was taken to the Children's Society. Raymond Duncan, the father, was charged with improper guardianship of a child and he answered through several newspapers, for example, on December 11, 1909, *The Topeka State Journal*: "Of all the children in this city to day, my boy is the last, probably, to require the care or attention of the Children's society. [...] It is most curious, most curious that anyone in this country of yours should have come to my home and tried to tell me how to love my baby. It is most curious". Duncan was an advocate of hyper-individualism and autonomous action. His autonomy presupposes a perception of human identity and body in which he incorporated his self-perceptions (Christman 143). The trial that followed occupied the press with the same undiminished interest, e.g. *The Washington Times*, *New-York Tribune* and *The Hattiesburg News*: "Mrs. Duncan, who was born on Ionian isle, was still boiling with indignation in court yesterday morning. Her limited knowledge of English hampered her somewhat, but she threw a fine scorn into her ejaculation of the word 'Barbarians!' [...] Little Menalkas seemed to stand the cold better than his parents. He sat on a desk in the corner and drew pictures for the matron, piping up in his childish treble occasionally: 'I'm not cold!' The gatekeeper and the policeman at the bar would glare at him and snap: 'Stop that conversation!' But Menalkas only laughed and kicked his brown legs. [...] Raymond Duncan gathered his flowing garments around him and said that he had wired the Greek minister at Washington telling him of the outrage that had been perpetrated on Miss Sikelianos and Mr. Devaris, two citizens of that country who had been dragged into the police courts on an absurd charge. 'And it will be queer', he said, 'if Greece doesn't demand an apology from this country. We call this a free country! I don't know whether it's legal or illegal. But I'm ashamed of my

country””. The charges against Raymond Duncan were dropped after he managed to provide two medical notes confirming that the child was in good health. After the court victory, the four-year-old boy could walk the streets with the ancient Greek appearance. However the ironic comments came back, e.g. on *The Birmingham Age-Herald*: “As the weather becomes hotter the Raymond Duncan style of attire will become more popular.”

U.S. newspapers reproduce the image of the child and publish extensive articles on him. Was the boy indecently exposed or did this emerge after his arrest? This is certainly a pseudo-question in the early 20th century. We must look for the moral and ideological conditions that supported the reflection on the body in public space. The body of little Menalkas was a stumbling block, a key issue in the ethics of the early 20th century. How was the child’s body mediated by the media in public? Did the publishers, editors and photographers of the newspapers have to share the pictures of little Menalkas? By what criteria and aesthetic intentions did they set the conditions for the view of the bodies? We know for a fact that at that time the photos in the newspapers were few and far between. The interest in this child’s health was not entirely authentic. The competitive journalism of New York newspapers in the early 20th century left no room for emotion (Nasaw 106-107).

However, the use of Menalkas’ body by the media proved useful because a public consultation was launched. The public outcry over his image has sparked outrage over the neglect of minors in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. These testimonies are mediated through the press. As Duncan said on *East Oregonian*, on December 14, 1909: “I should like to direct the attention of this same body to the thousands of children who are being treated cruelly every day under a legal system that permits them to be worked to death and half starved.” This is a new experience of using a body to the public media space. The

image of the child is consolidated and provokes discussions in the public sphere. The child's body becomes a public body.

A few months earlier, in 1909, the first White House Conference had been held on the Care of Dependent Children and declared that poverty alone should not be grounds for removing children from families (Yarrow 2). But there were also some negative reactions: Menalka's body became a hotbed of public outrage because it became a body of social intervention without him having chosen it. It is no coincidence that Menalkas, in his adolescence, when he was living in Paris, shook off the ancient Greek attire with relief.

In 1910, Raymond returns home, to San Francisco, with his wife and young son. Insults and public protests over the appearance of the Duncans are increasing. It turns out that the low temperatures of winter were a pretext, e.g. on *The Tacoma Times*: "Formerly of San Francisco, in promenading the board walk attired in ancient Greek costume, is a topic for much gossip here today. [...] The exponents of Greek simplicity arrived at Atlantic City and went to a restaurant. The proprietor refused to serve them unless they put on more clothing. When they left they were forced to pass through a crowd that had gathered about the restaurant."

On October 1909, the Duncans were denied permission to stage *Elektra* at the outdoor Greek Theater in Berkeley, California, because of the autumn weather. On November 1910, as revealed in the newspapers *The San Francisco Call* and *The Evening Standard*, a San Francisco police officer attacked one of Duncan's performers and yelled: "Put some clothes on!" A few days later we are informed by the newspapers *Sacramento Union*, *Medford Mail Tribune* and *The San Francisco Call* that Raymond himself was arrested for physically attacking two college students. This time, nudity is the pretext rather than the winter weather.

Bare hands and feet were a scandal both for male and female viewers. This is the second serious issue that arises: nudity or even semi-nudity in public spaces. Newspapers describe them as almost sexual objects. For the Duncans the appearance of the classical body is a powerful political tool of representation aimed at spreading the ancient Greek ethos. Once again the following happens; they are transformed from bodies in public space into public bodies. Their procession dressed as they are in public space is a public performance, which at the beginning of the 20th century causes embarrassment. Free bodies intervening in the western society of the non-free bodies. Duncan's bodies are political, consolidated objects and subjects of politics. Ten years later, in the 1920s, when the one-piece swimsuit appeared at the beaches, the first coordinated efforts appear to impose a sexual ethic, which is associated with nudity. Indeed, a campaign was launched to remove the standards of nudity from beaches, gyms, parks and the wider public space (Booth 171-173). In the years of the Great Depression, American nudity would be the subject of public debate in the United States. It was in fact a violent non-dialogue, which, however, brought to the surface conflicting notions of nudity and an extension of sexuality. There were organized efforts to suppress nudity and sexual liberalism, which were the threat to the remnants of moral totalitarianism of the 19th century (Hoffman 17-20).

On November 1911 several American newspapers, *The Day Book*, *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer*, *The Washington Times* and *The Pensacola journal*, republished that the family intended to sail back to Europe, together with Duncan's aphorism: "Americans do not take art seriously". Indeed, they returned to Paris and established the "Akademia", a community and school that offered courses in dance, art and crafts, until the 1970s. In 1912, Raymond and Penelope were evicted from their apartment

because, according to Raymond, the owner was disgusted by their appearance. However, he continued to be fearless, staging *Elektra* at the Théâtre du Chalet in Paris. There is one more report that Raymond was arrested in Paris as a victim of the anti-scant drapery movement and since then he does not seem to have been prosecuted for his attire in the public area anymore. So, what next? Nothing. Times have changed, a habit of scant clothing prevails in France, in Paris and Nice (Dickinson 98-100). Now, men and women are being prosecuted only for “excessive nudity”, as *Washington Standard* reports. Also on *The Sun* reported: “Paris is willing to let him freeze for art’s sake, [...] he becomes a familiar figure in the streets of Paris”. The most subversive press response is in the newspaper *The Tacoma Times*: “Seriously affects the tailors’ trade and the famous modistes are asking Duncan to design costumes for them”. In 1913, when a thief broke into the “Akademia”, the news crossed the Atlantic reaching *Los Angeles Herald*, *The Evening World* and *Evening Journal*. The thief failed to extract anything but left a message: “It is impossible to rob the nude.”

According to Foucault, the body is always shaped in relation to culture, history and society. The body is a means of understanding the ego and others only through society (Oksala 85-97). The bodies of the Duncan family in public are not just an early visual event but are political tools. They are bodies that resisted the coming leveling, against authoritarian rhetoric and enforcement techniques (Taylor 1-9). These bodies moved on the streets of New York in the early 20th century as a silent material of resistance, attracting the eyes and trying to gain attention not only as ancient Greek subjects but as carriers of another way of life, “the Physical Culture” (Miller 21). Is this a stereotypical invocation of a classic heritage or the imposition of exoticism hid a liberating mood? Besides, at the beginning of the 20th century the western world was tired of hearing about Greek uniqueness. Was Raymond Duncan,

adhered to a glorious past, incapable of adapting, of modernizing? The Duncan family gained visibility through the reflection of their bodies in public, in the first half of the 20th century, and their bodies had become a central issue of the public discussion. Several decades later, phenomenologists and sociologists have challenged conventional notions of body perception (Leder 17-35) and Raymond Duncan managed to be relevant again, ahead of his time. In 1955 he confessed to Orson Welles for the documentary series *Around the World with Orson Welles*: “Now you go along Fifth Avenue in New York, you look in Rockefeller Plaza and you see the charming little ladies and girls, skating with their bottoms showing!

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