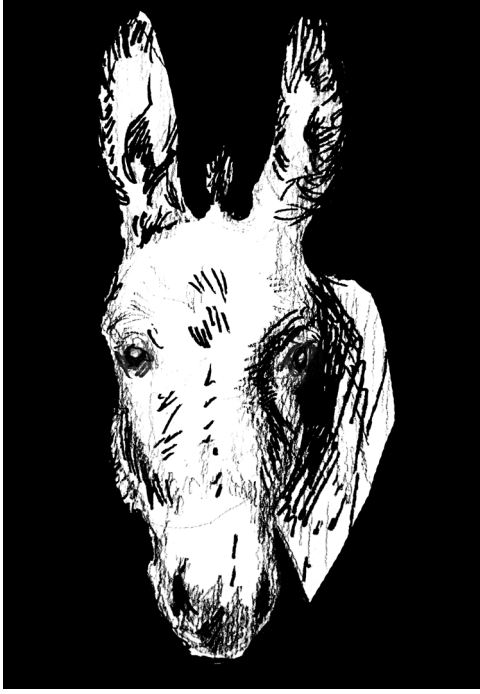

Montreal, April 5, 2015

Dear Balthazar, my dear donkey,

Excuse my delay in writing to you – a letter to Jean-Luc Godard, who you probably don't know, has taken up all my time lately. But I've been wanting very much to write to you. I feel like I already know you a little – you are in one of my films (in spite of yourself – I'll tell you about it). For this reason, you've been in my thoughts and I have been wanting to thank you for a while now.

When I see you in the film by Robert Bresson, Au Hasard Balthazar, I see all animals in you, and they all become beautiful. Beauty is strange. I realized something while watching a film by Miranda July one day, Me and You and Everyone We Know (2005): beauty doesn't exist, it happens. At the beginning of her film, the characters seem rather ugly and insipid to me – and yet an hour later, after seeing the whole thing, they become absolutely magnificent. Is it because I knew them better? Probably.

Au Hasard Balthazar. (1966). A cinematographic work by Robert Bresson

Me and You and Everyone we know. (2005). A cinematographic work by Miranda July

I think of this quote from Robert Bresson: "this is the system of poetry. To take elements that are as far apart from each other in the world as possible, and to bring them together in an order that is not the usual order, but rather your very own" (Bresson 2013, 182). This definition of poetry applies to beauty in general, and also to July's film.

Bresson, R. (2013). *Robert par Robert Bresson: entretiens, 1943-1983.* Paris: Flammarion

The characters in Me and you… are out of synch with reality, clumsy, and frankly hopeless – or at least, they have every reason to be – but they don't know it. Richard, the shoe salesman, and Christine, the taxi driver for seniors (played by Miranda July) communicate in a language bordering on esotericism. I'm thinking of their conversation as they are walking together, in which they decide that by the time they reach the next corner, their relationship will be over. The script contains a myriad of plot points like this, with unanticipated, absurd situations, and characters with outrageous comportment. July's poetry is housed in the script itself, while with your director, Robert Bresson, it mainly emerges in the articulation of images and sound during the editing process, and in a highly stylized directing style. Still, Miranda July's characters have a kinship with Bresson's in terms of their weaknesses and their honesty. In a completely other aesthetic order, I'm also thinking of horror film director Dario Argento, who says, in an interview with Vivien Villani: "The characters in my films are not "good" people: they are marginal, homosexual, deviant. […] I, too, have always felt different, my whole life. I understand what it means to live in society without being like other people" (Villani 2008, 17). And here is where I think about my own life, Balthazar.

Villani, V. (2008). *Dario Argento.* Rome: Gremese

The members of my family were always very free in their bodies, to my great dismay. When my friends rang the doorbell, my father would answer in boxers; and my mother, a former city slicker, would tan in her bikini on the front lawn. There was no question that we were the eccentrics of Papineau Street in Sept-Iles, the small town where I was born in Quebec's Côte-Nord. And here I am, all these years later, exploring eccentricity and making a new work out of it with a series entitled: Out. But how could it be otherwise, Balthazar? This is the only perspective I've ever had.

Like the protagonists in July's film, my parents and I were bodies that didn't completely master social protocols. Despite the insouciance of my parents about their bodies, they weren't the ones who taught me about what a body is. My relationship to the body and to dance began with cinema and television. Besides the animals in TV documentaries – monkeys in particular taught me a lot about the body, movement, and sexuality – I learned about the life of the body, and more generally social life, on the big and the small screens. TV series were a key resource, and incredibly instructive. The cardboard look, the stylized décor in many series made it clear that I was watching something completely staged. The way the characters were out of synch with their environment became apparent, and helped me accept my own sense of being different. This interest for the out-of-synch quality of our lives turned up again in my work in dance several years later. My set designs, for example, have a "fabricated" look. Sometimes they make you think of architects' models, photographers' studios, or the sets of TV series. I usually use a very large sheet of white paper. I spread it over one part of the stage, or fold it to divide the space. With this paper décor, I am trying to accentuate the artificial, fabricated nature of set design. And as I write this, Balthazar, I see more clearly the link that can exist between that which is artificial, anachronistic, and asynchronous; life is all the more visible when it comes from an apparatus. Was it the painter Francis Bacon who said: "The more artificial you can make it, the greater chance you've got of its looking real"?

The films of Miranda July and Robert Bresson show how individuals and their environments are out of synch, by way of a body that's "out of order," that has difficulty integrating itself. Filmmaker John Cassavetes has also explored this, with his disoriented stories and rebellious characters fighting for their lives. Cassavetes' method is diametrically opposed to Bresson's. The actor occupies a central role in the process of creation and, through his or her improvisations, contributes a great deal to the script. Although you gave Bresson a run for his money during the shoot – I read that he couldn't manage to direct you – I can't for a single moment imagine you in a Cassavetes film, Balthazar, even with all the humanity and kindness of actress Gena Rowlands. On the other hand, you are what I call a body from ''out-of-the-frame," just like the characters played by Gena Rowlands, Seymour Cassel and the whole Cassavetes gang, himself included.

You know, when it comes down to it, the body in my work resembles you a little. Just like you, the dancer often remains in one place, standing straight. He or she moves very little – in fact I find little reason for the dancer to move. I even admit to having had a bit of a complex about this, vis-à-vis my dance colleagues, but that was long ago now – it's not important anymore. Still, for a few years now, the body moves more easily, when I put it in a space other than the stage (a gallery, museum, for example). This is what happened in my projects Out of Grace (2010) and Out of Grace, M Museum, Leuven (2012), two choreographic exhibitions, and in Out of Mies (2014), an installation. As I write to you, it occurs to me that this may be what has led me to shift my choreography practice towards visual arts these last years – the need to give meaning to movement. These spaces exist in the real world as specific places. The dancers walk, step, and run through them, and their bodies give a new life to these public spaces. Take, for example, the three short films in my installation Out of Mies. Ah! yes of course, this is the project I must tell you about it, because you are in it – let me explain.

In these films, the dancers move through the three sites that Mies van der Rohe designed in Montreal: a housing complex, a gas station on Île-des-Sœurs, and Westmount Square, downtown. The bodies are there to punctuate the space with simple movements.

Out of Grace. (2010)*, Out of Grace, M Museum*, Leuven. (2012). Choreographic exhibitions from Lynda Gaudreau

Out of Mies. (2014). Film installation from Lynda Gaudreau

A mute body remains an enigma for me. In hindsight, perhaps I treated the architecture of Mies van der Rohe like a mystery – indeed, like a space waiting for the presence of a body to come to life. I'm interested in the furtive moments in life, in the most insignificant signs of life animating the body and, inversely, in the way in which the mere presence of the body transforms the space. As I write to you, Balthazar, I understand more fully why I'm interested in abstraction in dance, and why the dancers in my pieces rarely touch each other; they have to remain "out of the frame" of language, outside all psychology, renouncing all expressive intentionality. And here I return to the first part of my letter, the "fabricated" – whether space, or body from ''out of the frame'' – that cannot have meaning except through a staging, a framing in which the shot is constructed and shaped.

In an interview with Roger Stéphane on a TV program for the ORTF (Office de radiodiffusion-télévision française), Robert Bresson says: "We cannot copy life. We have to try to find something to reach life without copying it. If we copy life, we never reach it – we reach something false instead. And I believe it's through a mechanism that we might arrive at a truth, even a reality" (Bresson 2013, 202).

I never wanted to make a film about architecture, any more than I wanted to make a film about dance. I didn't know what this footage would become. But as I watched the images during the editing process, I understood the importance of the body. Without its very presence, the architecture filmed would remain merely an image. My attempt was ultimately to present the architectural space of Mies van der Rohe as a potential site for fiction, using the language of cinema and choreography.

0101. (2006). Choreographic work from Lynda Gaudreau

Bresson's work was already present in my research when I wrote 0101 in 2007, and, in 1996, my piece Still Life no 1. In 0101, bodies seem to be emptied out, as though blown outside themselves. They are flat, chaste, and distant. In Still Life no 1, the body places itself on a table and on a chair. It seems vacant, constantly searching for a frame. Balthazar, your body and your presence extract themselves from the language of human beings. You are impassive to the vices of each of the characters you encounter in your film. You are an animal, so you don't function in the language of humans; you remind us of the obsolescence of language. You are an endearing creature who asks for nothing. In Bresson's film, your body seems to be waiting, and we wait with you for something to happen.

Still Life no 1. (1996). Choreographic work from Lynda Gaudreau

We don't really know each other, Balthazar, and I hope you'll forgive me sharing these intimate thoughts with you, some of which may even be inappropriate. In the process of writing to you, a number of aspects of my life and my work have come clear – I wasn't expecting that. You are a confidante in spite of yourself. Thank you, Balthazar.

Lynda