# Nietzsche and Freud: Pandora's box of transgressive contemporary art

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***Abstract:*** *Kieran Cashell defines the art of transgression as shaped by the "dark troika" (Nietzsche, Freud, and Bataille). This paper examines how their philosophical and psychoanalytic contributions have influenced contemporary art, particularly, works that challenge traditional aesthetics such as form, symmetry, and beauty, often described as "de immundo" by Jean Clair. Nietzsche's early work,* The Birth of Tragedy*, introduces the Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy, which highlights the tension between order and chaos, providing a framework for understanding transgressive artistic expressions. This paper links Nietzsche's philosophy to Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly, in relation to the sublimation of repressed drives like aggression and sexuality in art. It further explores how contemporary transgressive art reflects these ideas through the violation of societal norms, taboos, and the exploration of the body's limits. Dance, as a bodily medium, plays a crucial role in these explorations, serving as a space for embodying chaos, passion, and liberation. Both, visual art and dance, through their engagement with the repressed and the taboo, subvert established boundaries, allowing for an exploration of deeper aspects of human nature and cultural norms. Ultimately, this paper asserts that transgressive art, including dance, remains a potent means for challenging and reconfiguring the limits of representation and social order.*

***Keywords:*** *Transgressive Art, nietzschean aesthetics, psychoanalysis, dance, contemporary art.*

## 1. Introduction

> *"They can no more touch our eyes than our hands. If this happens, it is because there is no idea in these things, no form in them, no separate form to represent the hirsute and the unclean." (Plato, Parmenides, 130d)*

A photograph of a man covered in his own excrement. A dress crafted from dozens of cuts of fresh meat. A crucifix submerged in a transparent container filled with urine. A woman methodically mutilating the lobe of her ear with a razor blade, proceeding to scar her arms, feet, and hands. Another woman, dressed in white, meticulously removing the thorns from a rose and placing them in a lace handkerchief, which she then, uses to pierce her forearms and groin until she bleeds. A simulated rape, mutilated genitals, agonized screams, and copious

amounts of blood, enacted as part of a 'cathartic ritual' performed with extreme realism. A man suspended in the air by seventeen hooks piercing the flesh of his torso and back for hours. An unmade bed, surrounded by the remnants of its occupant's existence over thirty days: empty vodka bottles, menstrual blood stains, syringes mingled with semen, used cigarette packs, and pairs of soiled socks. Human excrement cast in bronze and displayed in public parks across London. A loaded gun aimed at a man voluntarily allowing himself to be shot in the legs and arms from a five meters distance.

What connection, if any, do Nietzsche and Freud's ideas have with such forms of art? How might Nietzsche's concepts of the Apollonian and Dionysian, or Freud's theories on aggression, relate to these forms of extreme and transgressive art?

These questions form the central objectives of this study. More specifically, we aim to demonstrate the value of Nietzsche's work on evaluating and understanding artistic practices categorized as extreme or transgressive art (Cashell, 2006). It is crucial to clarify that Nietzsche was not an overt advocate on incorporating ugliness, abjection, or what could be described as "extreme aesthetic strategies" into art. Rather, his philosophy offers a dichotomy between two archetypal approaches to art: the Apollonian and the Dionysian (Nietzsche, 1996). The former embodies the pursuit of harmony, form, and the exaltation of art as the noblest of truths; the latter represents an art of chaos, non-form, and the orgiastic chorus - a form of art aimed at dismantling the "forms" upon which Nietzsche believed the counterfeit foundations of art and culture were established (Nietzsche, 1996).

Freud has served as an extraordinary reservoir of ideas and frameworks for modern and contemporary art. Notably, one of the most extensive compilations on modern art includes a chapter titled "Psychoanalysis in Modernism and as Method" (Foster, Krauss, Bois, & Buchloh, 2007). Hal Foster, in *Art Since 1900* (2007), examines how Freudian thought has informed explorations of visuality, ranging from surrealism and Dadaism to performance art. Foster notes: "...psychoanalysis and modernist art share several interests: a fascination with origins, with dreams and fantasies, with 'the primitive', the child, and the insane, and, more recently, with the workings of subjectivity and sexuality, to name only a few" (Foster et al., 2007, p. 15).

This shared fascination, as Foster et al. suggest, includes an "art of the insane", art rooted in projection, abjection, repression, dreams, the primitive, and the uncanny. Such themes have captivated not only artists but also curators and theorists of art and culture, including Foster (1993), Kristeva (1982), Krauss (1994), Kuspit (2004), Trías (2008), and Žižek (2008).

It is, of course, impossible to exhaustively address the influence of both Nietzsche and Freud on contemporary art and culture within a single study. Nevertheless, in the following pages, we seek to outline key aspects of their impact on contemporary extreme or transgressive art. Our focus will centre on two primary areas: Nietzsche's metaphysics of the artist and Freud's theory of aggression, whilst also briefly exploring the ways in which Nietzsche's thoughts influenced Freud's psychoanalytic framework.

## 2. The Metaphysics of the Artist in Nietzsche

> *"You think I run after the odd because I don't know the beautiful, but no, it is because you don't know the beautiful that I seek the odd". (Lichtenberg, 1765-1799/2000)*

In what has perhaps been one of the major arguments that have served to expose a possible

Hegelian crisis or end of art, the notorious separation between art and beauty, which has occurred, above all, since the aesthetics of the grotesque in the nineteenth century, stands out. This aesthetic inversion is then consolidated during the twentieth century in numerous artistic expressions, in what Kieran Cashell (2009) calls a "transgressive art".

In our view, Nietzsche's influence on these forms of artistic production is impossible to wade through, not because the philosopher would have been an outspoken advocate on incorporating ugliness into art, but rather, because of the ontological opposition he made, to an art based on what we shall nominate, the archetype of the logos-apollonian continuum, to which he opposed the possibilities of art based on an eros-dionysianism. In the first case, there is the search for truth through art by means of harmony, forms and exaltation of beauty as a virtue. In the latter, a sensual art, of the non-form, the encomiastic chorus, an orgiastic art tending to unveil the false character of knowledge and culture (Nietzsche, 1966).

In this scenario, the central Nietzschean topic of his early writings is The Artist, which Vattimo (1986) relates to as one of the two paths travelled by the avant-gardes of the 19th century: on one hand, that of radical technicist experimentalism, as a will to form, and on the other, that of the nihilist artist, who seeks to dissuade all art subject to a constructive ideal and to experience the deconstruction of all hierarchy, both in the products and subjects, artists and receivers.

From the Greek conception of being, which understands beauty as a form of ontological intellection, Nietzsche introduces an interpretation of being grounded in dual aesthetic categories. In this framework, art is positioned as the core from which the artist interprets and deciphers the world. This process, considered by Nietzsche as the essential metaphysical activity of the artist, enables a fundamental clarification of the totality of existence. As Nietzsche states: “Only the perspective of art allows the thinker to look into the heart of the world” (Fink, 2003, p. 19). In this context, and specifically in the art of tragedy (the primordial expression of a pre-Socratic aesthetics), Eugen Fink observes that Nietzsche conceives aesthetics as the true nature of reality, destined to become the fundamental organon of philosophy:

> *(Art) is understood as the deepest, most authentic approach, as the most primordial form of understanding. The concept can, at best, follow it. Understanding becomes immediate only where it commits itself to the more profound vision of art and reflects its creative experience. (Fink, 2003, p.9)*

If tragedy originated in the chorus, as Nietzsche proposes, it must be understood as a “Dionysian chorus that discharges into an Apollonian world of images” (Nietzsche, 1910). These images, however, like Attic tragedy itself, are merely forms of redemption for existence, seeking to make the cycle of life bearable through a decadent quest for metaphysical security, grounded in essences and a rational order of the universe. The Dionysian and the Apollonian are thus positioned at the origin of the artwork, distinguished in a manner that Nietzsche compares to the differentiation of genders (op.cit).

The interplay, or agon, between these forces-drives (Triebe) defines a theory of art that identifies an apollonian-figurative dimension (associated with image, form, and plastic arts) and a dionysian-non-figurative dimension, characterized by ecstasy, dance, and music. Both "beauty" and "intoxication" contain within them, the seeds of an explosion and the dissolution of the idealist aesthetics of "subject" and "object". As Heidegger (1991) asserts, if beauty disrupts the object, intoxication disrupts the subject. The art of transgression, then, resides precisely in this intoxicating power, where forms are dissolved and disfigured without the necessity of

proposing new ones.

> *When Nietzsche writes that 'it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified' he is seeking nothing less than an alternative for metaphysics - what he terms Socratism and Platonism. In whatever guise, metaphysics strives for reassurance in essential structures, in a perfect world. (Vattimo, 2002, p. 23-24).*

In The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music, the essence of all existence is revealed in its totality: a primordial chaotic substrate that humanity has sought to organize through a multiplicity of forms (Nietzsche, 1872). The "Metaphysics of the Artist" (Fink, 2003) thus implies that Nietzsche invokes art—above all, the figure of the artist—as a rebellion against all claims to a "true world," precisely because he contends that no such world exists. Once the veil of reality is lifted, what remains are mere appearances, accompanied by the tragic sentiment that ensues. For Nietzsche, art would therefore function as a remedy for humanity's ailment of truth.

> *Against the pretensions of the "true world", Nietzsche proposes an aesthetic justification of existence by rescuing the euphoria of an arrogant, vacillating, dancing, burlesque, definitely "childish" art. Once the essences and foundations have disappeared, the tragic element reappears: excitement, uncertainty, vertigo, ambiguity regain their lost importance. Where does the yearning for tragic myth come from, to give an image of the terrible and enigmatic things that lie at the bottom of existence? What does morality mean from this point of view? Art and not morality justifies existence, tragic knowledge cannot be mere indifferent contemplation, on the contrary, it puts our destiny at stake and plans fate. (Ambrosini, 2012, p.3)*

To further what Lenain characterises as "the implementation of a strategy and conceptual equipment designed to discourage the figures of transcendence" (1993, p. 17), the philosopher from Röcken wrote a brief pamphlet on Christmas night in 1872. In this work, Nietzsche solidifies his scepticism towards the architecture of knowledge and advances a critical theory of language, exemplified in the following excerpt:

> *(...) (Man) has invented a uniformly valid and obligatory designation of things, and the code of language also supplies the first laws of truth: for here, for the first time, the contrast between truth and falsehood is born. The liar uses valid designations, words, to make the unreal appear real; he says, for example, "I am rich," whereas, for his condition, "poor" would be precisely the correct designation. He abuses fixed conventions through arbitrary impersonations or even inversions of names. (Nietzsche, 1966, p. 2)*

All these aspects, typical of a negative ontoepistemology, which harbors an early dionysian worldview of art already present in *Die dionysische Weltanschauung* of 1870, would be taken up directly or indirectly by many of the expressive attempts of the extreme art of transgression. The inclusion of the permanent quotation to the body, its exudations and residues, is also the inclusion of the dithyrambic chorus and a response against any assigned objective implying a moralizing tendency of art. This is how Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* does not aim to encourage the production of works of art, but rather the production of the artist himself, as an incarnated becoming of art. With this, the art that supports the mimetic ideal of classical art is

left in the horizontality of the world, naked and stripped of the representative forms that had covered its field of symbols, metaphors and allegories that Nietzsche will destroy as valid forms of knowledge in *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn* (On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense from 1872).

Despite this apparent generalized appreciation of art, Nietzsche's early, so-called "youthful" or "romantic" perspective alludes to the fact that it is in ancient tragic art that the Apollonian-Dionysian contrast is to be found in depth, a duality of singular forms that will later be absorbed into the latter concept. Although over the years Nietzsche referred to *The Birth of Tragedy* as a "naïve" writing exercise influenced by his admiration for Wagner and Schopenhauer (Vattimo, 1996), in this text he inaugurated an aesthetic theory which, in turn, is *a psychology of art.* For Nietzsche, it is the clash between opposing artistic drives that would give rise to the work of art. From the Nietzschean result of this dialectical tension within the individual, of which all human culture would be the fruit as *Kunsttriebe*, (artistic impulses)[1], Freud would gather his own theory of culture and a theory of drives, and, although he never explicitly mentioned Nietzsche's thought, the parallels are evident (Karwautz, Wöber-Bingöl, & Wöber, 1995).

For the time being, we can say that Nietzsche, in his writing *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn*, will leave open his suspicion, as Freud will later do, regarding the real moral foundations of culture. In the case of the Viennese psychiatrist in "Civilization and Its Discontents" (Freud, 1930), it is ultimately argued that the development of culture is not to be equated with reasons triumph, as the ideals of modernity would have it, but with the development of the ability to repress the most basic instincts, something that Marcuse (2013/1964) would also make clear in his writing "One-Dimensional Man". In this way, aggression and sexuality, two aspects that will be central topics of Freudian psychoanalysis and of some of his followers linked to the theories of object relations, will also be common resources in what we have called an art of transgression.

In what follows, we demonstrate how one of the most eloquent and expressive places that the art of transgression finds its fascination with the irrational and abject, comes from some of Sigmund Freud's theories on the human psyche.

## 3. Freud and the Death Drive

> *Current art psychologies often focus too heavily on the visible, surface-level order of art and its aesthetic appeal, thereby hindering a deeper appreciation of the many inarticulate phenomena that fall outside art's aesthetic framework. A truly depth-psychological analysis of art must, through deliberate effort, reverse this usual approach, seeking instead the seemingly accidental and insignificant details in which the unconscious creative process can unfold, safely hidden from conscious observation (Ehrenzweig, 2007, p. 5).*

In context of modern philosophy, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were significant precursors of the pessimistic perspective regarding the potential rationality of culture that dominated the

1 The psychoanalytic reinterpretation of this phenomenon of the emergence of culture can be found in Freud's 'Civilization and Its Discontents', through the mechanism of 'sublimation' that would make possible the transformation of drives rejected by the ego into socially accepted behaviors, such as art, science or religion. "He who has neither science nor art, let him then have religion", Freud maintains in that writing, showing the marked regressive character implied by the religious quest, as an "oceanic experience" of primordial character. Despite the notorious influence of both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Ernest Jones points out how, as time went by, Freud progressively denied any source of influence from these thinkers, from his initial explicit admiration.

eighteenth century. Although Freud appears to have made considerable efforts to downplay any similarities or influences not originating from his own insights into the unconscious, his intellectual development bears traces of Nietzsche's influence.

In a letter to Wilhelm Fliess dated January 1, 1896, Freud wrote: "I see that you, by the detour of your being a doctor, reach your first ideal, to understand men as a physiologist, just as I nurture in the most secret of my heart the hope of reaching my initial goal, philosophy, by the same path" (Freud, 1985b). By February 1, 1900, Freud had procured Nietzsche's works, hoping to find the words for much that remained unarticulated within him: "I have now procured Nietzsche, in whom I hope to find the words for much that remains mute in me, but I have not yet opened it. Provisionally, too inert" (Freud, 1985a). Yet, years later, Freud confessed: "I denied myself the elevated enjoyment of Nietzsche's works with this conscious motivation: I did not want representation-expectation of any kind to interfere with the elaboration of psychoanalytic impressions. Therefore, I had to be willing—and I am willingly willing—to give up any claim to priority in those frequent cases where laborious psychoanalytic research can only corroborate the insights gained by philosophers intuitively" (Freud, 1917, p. 15). Later, when asked how much philosophy he had read, Freud's answer remained somewhat ambiguous: "Very little. As a young man I was strongly attracted to speculation, and I curbed that attraction ruthlessly" (Assoun, 1982, p. 13).

In line with his theory of aggression, Freud later conceptualized the death drive, or "Thanatos," as the force opposing "Eros," the life drive. Although Freud often used the terms death drive and destructive drive interchangeably, he made a distinction between them in a conversation with Einstein about war. The death drive is directed inwards, towards the self, while the destructive drive, stemming from Thanatos, is directed outwards (Einstein & Freud, 1933). As early as 1909, Stekel had already used the term Thanatos to describe a death wish (Einstein & Freud, 1933). Cybulska (2015) argues that Nietzsche's influence on Freud's theory of aggression and destruction is evident, even though Nietzsche did not explicitly use the term "Thanatos."

In his work *The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche* (1910) explores the duality between Apollo (symbolizing form, individual limits, beauty, and order) and Dionysus (representing excess, unbridled passion, dissolution of limits, and destruction). This conceptual framework seems to have provided Freud with a basis for understanding the opposing forces within both the individual and society. Thus, both Freud and Nietzsche explore the genealogy of these concepts, albeit from different domains, yet converging strikingly similar elements.

Chapman and Chapman-Santana (1995) conclude that Nietzsche's concepts which are notably influenced by Freud, include the unconscious mind: the idea that repression drives unacceptable thoughts and feelings into the unconscious, making the individual emotionally comfortable and effective; the notion that repressed emotions and instinctual impulses are later expressed in disguised forms (for example, hostile feelings may be masked by altruistic acts); the concept of dreams as complex, symbolic illusions, and the idea that dreaming is a cathartic process with beneficial properties; and the suggestion that projecting hostile, unconscious feelings onto others, who are then perceived as persecutors, is the basis of paranoia.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud expresses his conviction that culture is not the result of the highest processes of human reason or logos, but rather the repression of two fundamental drives: aggression and sexuality. The historical events that followed Freud's writing seem to validate his belief in the fragility of human rationality. But how did these ideas about the role of aggression—not only in psychopathology but also in the formation of culture—take

shape in Freud's work?

Alfred Adler, in 1908, proposed the existence of a primary aggressive drive (Adler, 1917). However, according to Ernest Jones (1953–1957), Adler's conception was more sociological than psychological, viewing aggression as a struggle for power and superiority. In contrast, Freud's understanding bordered on biology, chemistry, and physics, focusing on the biological and instinctual aspects of aggression.

Although Freud did not initially consider aggression as a fundamental drive, he began to explore its role as early as *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). In this work, he suggests that aggression might initially be understood as an aspect of the sexual drive: "Sadism would thus correspond to an aggressive component of the independent and exaggerated sexual instinct and, by displacement, usurper of the main position" (p. 31). Later, he expanded on this idea, writing: "We have the right to assume that cruel impulses flow from sources actually independent of sexuality, but that both can come into connection early on..." (op. cit.). In the fourth section of the same work, Freud concludes that it is plausible to assume that impulses of cruelty originate from sources independent of sexuality but become linked to it at a primitive stage.

By 1915, in *Triebe und Triebschicksale* (Instincts and Their Vicissitudes), Freud formalized his position, asserting that aggressiveness is independent of the sexual instinct and arises from the ego instincts. His hypothesis of the "death drive," introduced in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/2024), marked a significant evolution in his theory. Here, he proposed that, beyond the pleasure principle, there exists a fundamental drive directed towards the dissolution of life and a return to an inorganic state. In Chapter VI of this work, Freud elaborates on the death drive, suggesting that life contains an inherent tendency toward self-destruction.

In *The Ego and the Id* (1989), particularly in Chapter IV, Freud extends this discussion, positing that aggression is a secondary manifestation of the death drive. In this view, aggression originates from the death drive but is redirected outward, rather than being directed inward. This conceptualization positions aggression as an external expression of a primal, self-destructive force. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud further examines the death drive, focusing on its external manifestations in society through aggression and destructiveness. He highlights how the internal destructive tendencies of the individual are projected outwards, shaping social relationships and structures.

Finally, Freud identifies sublimation as a critical defense mechanism that channels inadmissible drives—such as sexuality and aggression—into socially acceptable behaviors. He argues that sublimation is central to cultural achievements, including art, science, and other advanced expressions of human creativity (Freud, 1936/1992).

How then are the Nietzschean and Freudian concepts as reviewed been integrated into the aesthetics of extreme or transgressive art? We now consider whether and how the Pandora's box opened by the philosopher and the Viennese psychiatrist has influenced contemporary artistic productions.

## 4. The Dark Troika and Transgressive Art

Kieran Cashell (2009) observes that Transgressive Art, rather than constituting a defined aesthetic genre, is fundamentally a "globalizing oppositional practice with a myriad of sub-genres, assuming a multiplicity of expressions that perpetrate the violation of social consensus and taboo" (p. 9). This violation aligns with what Bataille (1986) identifies as the economy of prohibitions, a system that delineates and safeguards the socio-symbolic field by maintaining taboos and norms. Within

this framework, Nietzsche's active nihilism and Freudian psychoanalysis appears to have played significant roles, serving as intellectual cornerstones for such transgressive practices.

Bataille's transgression conception is particularly relevant here. For Bataille (op. cit.), transgression does not abolish the prohibition but rather affirms its existence through its violation, creating a dialectical tension between the forbidden and the act of crossing boundaries. This interplay resonates deeply with Nietzsche's critique of traditional morality and Freud's exploration of the unconscious drives that underpin human behavior.

Together, Nietzsche, Bataille, and Freud form what Cashell refers to as the "Dark Troika," the principal influencers behind the extreme art expressions that seek to challenge and destabilize established social and cultural norms. These invariably unsettling acts, inspired by the philosophical and psychoanalytic legacies of this triad, remain central to the transgression aesthetics as they continue to interrogate the limits of representation and societal consensus (Cashell, 2009).

In contemporary art, the Apollonian embodies order, form, clarity, and beauty. For instance, one might consider Stelarc's *Suspensions series* (Stelarc, 1984). While the image of an individual suspended by hooks inserted into their skin may strike some as extravagant or even abject, such performances—whether by Stelarc, Orlan, or Marina Abramović—demand a high degree of physical and mental discipline, exemplifying Apollonian control and form. Conversely, Dionysian represents chaos, passion, and irrationality. This is vividly demonstrated in the works of Hermann Nitsch, particularly his *Orgastic Theatre of Mystery*, where the use of blood, raw flesh, and other visceral elements generates chaotic, ritualistic experiences. These performances encapsulate the Dionysian ethos, invoking the primitive and regressive elements explored in Freudian theory. Could one argue that this functional perspective on transgression suggests a mechanism of regulation through opposition or differentiation—akin to the workings of a cultural "dream work"? Such a mechanism might serve to process unacceptable content, enabling the endurance of neurotic tension, schizoid splitting, or paranoid alienation. This could be framed as a kind of "praxis of abjection" that is simultaneously regulative and normativising.

Nitsch, a key figure in Viennese Actionism, supports this interpretation, as evidenced in his reflections: "The cultural practices of transgression allow the public to access the neurosis indirectly and, through the indirect experience of violation, to be psychologically strengthened by the process" (Nitsch as cited in Kieran, 2009, p. 3).

From this perspective, Nitsch justified his ritual spectacle of self-inflicted pain, sacrifice, blood, sweat, semen, and urine as cathartic mechanisms that liberate the spectators from neurosis and repression through what seems to be a kind of vicarious displacement, providing certain resilient qualities to the viewer.

Viennese Actionism, cathartic ritual, and the expulsion of trauma are further supported by Nitsch, who considers that our intellect is essentially repressed energy, such that, inevitably, the expression of such repression will appear as "violent, orgiastic, and obscene," and therefore lacking any social form. Nitsch adds: "Everything that appears as negative, unpleasant, perverse and obscene, the lust and sacrificial outcome of hysteria, the resulting expiatory hysteria serves the intellect to spare it the pollution and shame involved in descending to the extreme" (Nitsch as cited in Cashell, 2009, p.4).}

However, for many people and art theorists, it would be impossible to conceive an art style or aesthetic category that works with the remainder, the organic residue, decomposition, detritus, violence, or the *Immundo*, as Jean Clair (2004) refers to it, or with manifestations perceived as

openly demented, repulsive, or (in)directly lacerating for a spectator. Nevertheless, figures such as Dieter Roth, David Nebreda, Andrés Serrano, Mike Kelley, Jana Sterback, Tracey Emin, Gina Pane, Franz West, Annie Sprinkle, and Chris Burden freely roam the streets. None of them have ever been institutionalized—though some have been for brief periods—and, moreover, flesh, blood, urine, faeces, semen, and all manner of excretions and exudations, along with syringes, empty bottles, cigarettes, and torn bodies, have been exhibited in books, museums, biennials, and galleries, despite the fact that, afterwards, viewers often describe the experience as akin to post-traumatic shock or an experience close to what Julia Kristeva has described as *abjection*:

> *"When I find myself invaded by abjection, this torsion made of affects and thoughts, as I call them, has no definable object. The abject is not an object in front of me that I see or imagine... The abject is not my correlate, which, by offering me its support on someone or something else, would allow me to be more or less differentiated and autonomous. From the object, the abject has only one quality, that of opposing the self… [T]he abject, a fallen object, is radically an excluded one, and it attracts me to where meaning collapses." (Kristeva, 2004, p. 10-11)*

In this way, and despite this shock—or perhaps by virtue of it—the power of abjection has aroused the interest of theorists, academics, students, and art agents, giving rise to seminars, publications, and congresses that seek to reflect the artistic validity of these "art actions" and their proposals. Their ability to permeate the institutional sphere of art seems to be sustained, on one hand, by the negation of canonical forms, and on the other, by the prestige granted by the transgression of social consensus and taboos.

In consideration of a frequent aesthetic resource in Transgressive art, Cynthia Freeland, in her book *But Is It Art?* (2001), explores the function and use of blood, which seems to have historically acquired an exhibition value, insofar as there is a base community with shared cultural meanings, beliefs, and moral norms. For Freeland, some modern artists, through the enactment of a ceremonial ritual, seek to occupy the place of the Mayan King, who, at Palenque, before a multitude of subjects, drank blood three times after piercing his own penis.

This transgression of the somatic and symbolic body simultaneously was justified as part of the sacrificial ceremony necessary to open a threshold of transcendent order in the profane time and space, through which a sense of the world's centre (Omphallos) was configured, in which this space and time were renewed by the grace of ritual and the role of homo sacer (Eliade, 1951/2006). However, unlike the Dionysian cathartic ritual at the origin of Greek tragedy, to which Nietzsche refers, unlike the pre-Columbian sacrificial ritual, and beyond the possible role of the artist as a modern sacerdos (Clair, 2004), one might think that when the contemporary artist uses the resources of transgression, he does so in the absence of a narrative, a symbolic attribute, and even more so, in the absence of a community with a unified belief system before which the act of transgression could arrogate a shared ritual or sociocultural value.

For the artist of transgression to fulfil his role as a shamanic initiator, the articulation of his ritual performance should operate within a determined "social form," a system of shared beliefs, a social consensus, something that the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has accounted for in his notion of the shamanistic complex, under the concept of symbolic efficacy (1963a). As a middle way between organic medicine and psychoanalysis, Lévi-Strauss leads the discussion on the relationships established between the traditional shaman and the psychoanalyst, taking as a reference *The Sorcerer and His Magic* (1963a) and *The Effectiveness of Symbols* (1963b),

concluding that shamanism is defined as a cultural complex comprising three interrelated factors that affect healing: the shaman (and his belief in his power), the patient (and the belief in the shaman), and the shared beliefs of the members of the society that includes them.

Thanks to their complementary disorders, the sorcerer-sick couple embodies for the group, in a living and concrete way, an antagonism inherent to all thoughts, whose normal expression remains vague and imprecise; the sick person represents passivity, alienation from oneself, as the informulable is the illness of thought; the sorcerer represents activity, overflowing from oneself, as affectivity is the wet nurse of symbols. The cure brings these opposites into relation, ensures the passage from one to the other, and manifests, in a total experience, the coherence of the psychic universe, a projection of the social universe (1977, p. 165).

Yet, transgressive art, interested in the presentation of the body and its resulting products when it exudes, is wounded, or in relaxation, is by no means a new phenomenon. What is new, however, is the excess of exhibitionist realism, the passion for stripping reality bare and removing all symbolic function, following the Nietzschean paradigm of "dissuading all forms of transcendence" (Lenain, 1993), whether it be the idea of the god, the symbol, metaphor, or metonymy.

I could even be that, to consider the relevance of transgressive art, the grotesque, ugly, repugnant, and incoherent have already been domesticated for aesthetic contemplation. This is evident in the works of Serrano and his *Piss Christ,* or Nebreda and his excremental self-portraits. Perhaps the digitally reproduced image alone loses effectiveness as the visually represented, in the face of what is presented in person. In this case, we cannot speak of a re-presentation, since there is clearly no such thing. However, this art, for Clair, is less a resource of abjection and more an art of renunciation: "an art that puts on stage its own abandonment" (2004, p. 22) or, we might say, an art that exhibits, from its self-definition, its own critical ineffectiveness, beyond the gesture of denial or opposition to the artistic tradition, at least as we have known it for several centuries.

## 5. The prestige of transgression

It could be pointed out that a part of transgressive art supports the reflection on the status of the body, through the exhibition, complexification and problematization of its somatic components, from its pure forms to its bodily waste. The work of Goya, Rubens, Blake, Bacon, Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty"; Poe and Baudelaire, through the 1932 film 'Freaks', to *Viennese Actionism* and Chris Burden's *parasuicidal performances*; Joel Peter-Witkin's photography, all of them could function, argumentatively, at least, as crucial axes of the historical fascination for the abject, grotesque, sinister or ugly, or simply, as that which radically separates Art from Beauty and Truth, an Aesthetics of the ugly that is sustained by the paradoxical relation of attraction/repulsion established with those registers. However, does this alone make it possible to think of the abject, repulsive and ominous as aesthetic categories defined in the manner of a Nietzschean active nihilism that proposes new modes of being in art?

If we use art history as a parameter of analysis, we could say that there is no art without transgresson. In one way or another, art has always considered relieving expressive forms, materialities, ideas and objects of representation over previous forms of art. However, it could also be said that never until the 20th century did a part of art have to make a gesture of resignation and progressive renunciation of the Platonic ideal that traces a thread between art, beauty and truth. Is it perhaps that ugliness, the grotesque and abject are issues proper to this era, as a

manifestation of the decadence of culture and as a fulfillment of the Hegelian prognosis of the "end of art"? (Henrich, 1985).

If we were to place contemporary art in a more extensive historical matrix of analysis, as Michaud proposes, situating it in the history of human productions in general, receiving the contributions of archeology or anthropology, from a broader point of view that takes into account the extreme diversity of practices, productions, ornamentation, rituals, as well as the use of art in the course of human history (2009), contemporary art could appear, as Spanish philosopher and anthropologist José Jiménez (2012) points out, as much less surprising and transgressive, and even more trivial than both its detractors and supporters believe.

In the philosopher and anthropologist Jiménez's[2] blog, there is an entry referring to a certain exhibition at the *Quai Branly* Museum in Paris, called "Masters of Chaos". As described in that post (2012), the exhibition, articulated in three large sections with a strong relational emphasis between art and anthropology, sequentially exhibits *The disorder of the world, The control of disorder* and *The catharsis*. According to Jiménez (2012), among the ancient ceremonial devices, symbolic power devices (formerly called fetishes), Egyptian, Hindu or Dyonisio sculptures, to the paintings of Bosch and Picasso, exhibited together with Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, there is a work with subtext by French artist Ben Vautier (1991): "there is no art without disorder". This sentence, a central theme of the exhibition, holds a premise that Jiménez, because of his anthropological training, finds completely fascinating:

> *In all human cultures, the order of life, social organization, and relationship with nature inevitably confronts ambivalence and denial. Hence the need to establish ways of controlling or mastering disorder, which are usually established through symbolic figures, gods, or ambivalent spirits that allow communication between these two planes of experience. At the same time, this process leads to the existence of specialists in intercession, mediators through whom human communities attempt to promote control or mastery of disorder. They are specialists in dissociation: possessed priests, enlightened ones, shamans, who also usually conduct the rites and ceremonies through which humans seek to achieve or restore balance between both planes of experience. (Jiménez, 2012)*

However, those who justify this art of transgression can understand it as a correlation of a necessarily outrageous social consensus, where forcing the limits is a constitutive element of all art.

> *The authentic art: all the arts, and not only the visual arts, carry within themselves as a constitutive element the sign of transgression, the questioning of any supposed limit of expression or sensible representation, and consequently, also of the social and political order. (Jiménez, 2012)*

In this regard, Jiménez does not share with the curator of the exhibition, Jean de Loisy, the possibility of shamanic initiation as a relational concept or symbolic axis of the exhibition, since the identification of the artist with a possible priestly role – "*a sacerdos at the service of the sacer*" as Clair (2004) puts it– to which today's society would entrust him, through exercises and proposals of transgression, questioning the established order, could in no case be equated

2 The referenced blog can be found at: http://josejimenezcuerpoytiempo.blogspot.com

to ceremonial practices in which the artist seems confined to a counter-figure of the shaman or the *sacerdos*, with the consequent subordination of art to religion or symbolic ritual, since this would be nothing more than, once again, subsuming art in the realm of the sacred.

If one wanted to find a possible validation to this implication of the artist as Homo Sacer in an *aesthetics of transgression* with all its praxis of excess and transgression of the limits imposed by culture, Rudolf Otto (*Das Heilige*) from the sacred numinous, alluded to an expressive possibility that seeks to contain within itself a dialectical path, in the face of the impossibility of thinking the divine, separating the sacred, the holy, the sacrosanct and the luminous, from the profane, the impure, the abominable and the dark. *Sacer*, in this sense, would be what manifests this impossibility in a unified whole, being or object, where "veneration and horror, disgust and sanctification, the *holy* and the *unclean*" are mixed. However, for Jiménez, this thesis is not feasible either, essentially because the *specificity* of art is different, since art is "*constitutively transgression*, always open transgression, beyond the fixed structure of rituals and ceremonies" (2012).

## 6. The Dialectics of Transgression: Nietzsche, Freud, and the Subversive Power of Dance

The influence of Nietzsche and Freud on the art of transgression has been pivotal in understanding how modern and contemporary artists explore the boundaries of the body, the individual, and society. Nietzsche's philosophy of active nihilism has indirectly inspired numerous artists to shed all forms of transcendence and confront the darker, repressed aspects of human experience. His conceptualization of the Dionysian—characterized by chaos, ecstasy, and sensuality—serves as a counterbalance to the Apollonian ideals of order and rationality (Nietzsche, 1996). Freud complements this perspective by providing a framework for understanding how repressed drives, such as aggression and sexuality, manifest in artistic expressions. He highlights the significance of sublimation, symbolization, and the exploration of the unconscious (Freud, 1961).

While acknowledging that transgression in art has historically held prestige and function, its validity is contingent upon its reflection on the human body, individual limits, and the role of repression and social norms in establishing order and culture. Despite arguments for and against this type of art, it is crucial to recognize its limitations—particularly when extreme violence is incorporated into cathartic rituals devoid of shared symbolic narratives or unified belief systems (Clair, 2004). Without a communal narrative to imbue meaning into these acts, transgression risks becoming mere negation without transformative potential. Nevertheless, transgressive art serves as a reminder of our chaotic, irrational nature, asserting its place in the world.

Dance, as an expression of the body in motion, has historically functioned as a medium for exploring tensions between order and chaos, discipline and freedom. From philosophical and psychoanalytical perspectives, Nietzsche and Freud provide essential theoretical frameworks for understanding how dance operates as a vehicle for artistic transgression that challenges established aesthetic and moral boundaries.

The Greek notion of *zoon politikon*, as articulated by Aristotle (2001), underscores a profound reverence for the body as a manifestation of cosmic life force (*energeia bios*), present across all forms of existence. However, over subsequent centuries, this reverence diminished; corporeal energy became associated with effort and suffering within a theological framework that linked physical existence with sin. This shift estranged the human body from positive perceptions of the world due to prevailing guilt and the eroticization of sin (Boethius, 1918).

This perspective extracted a metaphysical essence from the physical body, epitomized by Boethius of Dacia (c. 480–524), who defined human beings primarily as "persons," fundamentally characterized by their minds—incorporeal entities. Consequently, the mind overshadowed the body in this new paradigm, leading to perceptions that humans could exist independently from their physical forms. René Descartes (1996) later sought to reframe this mind-body relationship by equating mind (*res cogitans*) with body (*res extensa*), positioning them as distinct yet interconnected substances within his dualist framework.

Within the context of dance, Nietzsche's dichotomy of the Apollonian and Dionysian offers a compelling lens through which to examine this art form. The Apollonian embodies structure and discipline—qualities often associated with classical ballet—while the Dionysian represents chaos and passion, resonating with experimental or transgressive dance practices such as butoh or Pina Bausch's improvisational choreography. Nietzsche's celebration of the Dionysian parallels Freud's theories regarding aggression and repressed energies, both underscoring dance's cathartic potential (Lepecki, 2006).

Freud's insights into the unconscious further enrich this analysis; dance serves as an enactment site for sublimating unconscious drives like aggression and desire. Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection (1982) suggests that dance can confront societal taboos while engaging with "borderline states" between subjectivity and objectivity.

Rudolf von Laban's movement theory categorizes bodily motion into dynamics such as effort and flow, offering nuanced frameworks to analyze how dance oscillates between discipline and chaos (Laban, 1971). The works of theorists like Susan Foster (1996) illustrate how choreography inscribes cultural narratives within dance as both resistance and affirmation. The aleatory techniques of Merce Cunningham, alongside butoh pioneers like Tatsumi Hijikata, exemplify how dance challenges conventional aesthetic frameworks (Lepecki, 2006).

Thus, transgressive dance practices embody Nietzschean and Freudian dynamics: they destabilize Apollonian order while engaging with Dionysian chaos. In doing so, dance not only challenges traditional aesthetic boundaries but also serves as a potent medium for exploring deeper dimensions of human existence, resonating with Freud's exploration of repressed drives and Nietzsche's celebration of the ecstatic release of primal energies. These practices affirm dance as a vital arena for engaging with the complexities of human nature, situating it within the broader discourse of transgressive art.

## 7. Conclusions

The role of Nietzsche and Freud in the art of transgression has been crucial for understanding how modern and contemporary artists have explored the boundaries of the body, the individual, and society. Nietzsche's philosophy, centred on active nihilism, has indirectly influenced the practices of numerous artists, inviting them to divest themselves of all forms of transcendence and to confront directly the darker and repressed aspects of human experience.

The conceptualization of the Dionysian, characterized by chaos, sensuality, and the liberation of instincts, presents itself as a counterbalance to the Apollonian ideals of order and rationality. Freud provides an essential framework for understanding how repressed impulses—such as aggression, sexuality, and destruction—are dimensions of human experience that can be liberated and expressed through art, underscoring the importance of sublimation, symbolization, and the exploration of the unconscious.

While it is possible to recognize that transgression in art has always held prestige and function, its validity depends on its capacity to reflect on the state of the human body, the limits

of the individual, and the role of repression and social norms in establishing order and culture.

The tendency to subvert the prevailing order has manifested in the work of historical artists such as Goya, Rubens, Blake, and Bacon, as well as in movements like Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, Viennese Actionism, and Chris Burden's parasuicidal performances. Similarly, the fascination with the abject, grotesque, and excessive has prompted a radical critique of the relationship between art, beauty, and truth—questioning that world of apparent forms denounced by Nietzsche, which rests on an accumulation of consensual metaphors termed "truths."

However, it is important to acknowledge the limits of this type of art, especially when extreme violence is incorporated into cathartic rituals that lack a shared symbolic narrative or unified belief system. In the absence of a common narrative that imbues meaning into these acts, transgression risks becoming mere negation without transformative capacity; yet simultaneously reminding us of our chaotic and irrational nature that also demands its place in the world.

Dance, understood as the expression of the body in motion, has historically served as a medium for exploring tensions between order and chaos, discipline and freedom. From philosophical and psychoanalytical perspectives, Nietzsche and Freud provide fundamental theoretical frameworks for understanding how dance functions as a vehicle for artistic transgression that challenges established boundaries of aesthetics, morality, and corporeal behavior.

Transgressive practices in dance—such as Butoh or Pina Bausch's improvisations—defy social expectations of the body by liberating their movements from traditional constraints, exposing what is hidden, repressed, and excessive. These forms of dance not only question aesthetic norms but also subvert social and moral standards related to bodily perception, revealing the potential for a radical transformation of humanity. Thus, dance becomes a powerful medium for exploring profound dimensions of human existence that resonate with Freud's ideas about repressed impulses and Nietzsche's celebration of ecstasy derived from primal energies. In this sense, transgression in art and dance is not merely a confrontation with established norms but an affirmation of the transformative and liberating potential inherent within human nature itself.

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