



# Journal of Somaesthetics

BODY FIRST

Somaesthetics and Popular Culture

Volume 5, Number 1 (2019)

[somaesthetics.aau.dk](http://somaesthetics.aau.dk)

## Editorial Board

### Editor in Chief

Professor Falk Heinrich (Denmark)

### Issue Editors

Senior lecturer Max Ryyntanen (Finland)

Professor Jozef Kovalčík (Slovakia)

### Editorial Board

Professor Richard Shusterman (USA)

Honorary Professor Else-Marie Bukdhahl (Denmark)

Professor Stefan Valdemar Snævarr (Norway)

Professor Dag Svanaes (Norway)

Professor Arto Happala (Finland)

Post.doc Anne Tarvainen (Finland)

Professor Mie Buhl (Denmark)

Associate Professor Cumhur Erkut (Denmark)

Associate Professor Sofia Dahl (Denmark, Sweden)

Professor Kristina Höök (Sweden)

Professor Palle Dahlstedt (Sweden)

Associate Professor Yanping Gao (China)

Professor Mathias Girel (France)

Professor Leszek Koczanowicz (Poland)

### Published by

Aalborg University Press

### Journal website

somaesthetics.aau.dk

### Journal design

Joana Cabral Mollwitz

The Journal of Somaesthetics was founded by Richard Shusterman, Else Marie Bukdahl and Ståle Stenslie. The journal is funded by The Joint Committee for Nordic research councils in the Humanities and Social Sciences, NOS-HS and Independent Research Fund Denmark.

© Individual contributors. The moral right of the authors has been asserted.

Articles published in The Journal of Somaesthetics are following the license [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

ISSN: 2246-8498

Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License: Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivs (by-nc-nd). Further information about Creative Commons. The journal does not charge the authors for publication.

## Contents

<b>Introduction - Body First: Somaesthetics and Popular Culture</b>	4
Jozef Kovalčik & Max Rynnänen	

### Articles:

<b>Popular Culture and Wellbeing: Teamwork, Action, and Freedom</b>	6
Sue Spaid	
<b>The Plasticity of Flesh and Bone: Transforming the Body Through Somaesthetic Experience</b>	21
Scott Elliott	
<b>Artworks' Bodies</b>	37
Adam Andrzejewski	
<b>Sparks of Yoga: Reconsidering the Aesthetic in Modern Postural Yoga</b>	46
Noora-Helena Korpelainen	
<b>The Crash-Event: Repetition and Difference in J. G. Ballard's Crash</b>	61
Janne Vanhanen	
<b>Perfume, Violence and Symbolic Sacrifice</b>	75
Davide Giovanzana	
<b>Under the Skin: Notes on the Aesthetics of Distance and Visual Culture</b>	85
Max Rynnänen	

# Introduction

## Body First: Somaesthetics and Popular Culture

As the highbrowed critics of the mass culture debate (Ortega y Gasset, Adorno, Arnold) mocked popular culture audiences throughout the 1920s, 1930s and the 1940s, Hannah Arendt stepped up to defend the ‘masses’ in her essay “Crisis in Culture” (1959). Arendt reminded the intellectuals that we all need entertainment. She criticized the critics of mass culture by saying that the biggest threat for art is found in the philistines, who snobbishly take art to be only education and civilization—which is not the most fruitful way of thinking about art—and who so use to it for example to build class difference.

2019 intellectuals are not polarized in the same way as in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but an echo of the discourse of the ‘philistines’ of the debate keeps haunting us. We constantly face a rhetoric pointing to ‘active’ viewer of movies, of art projects which activate people in the suburbs and the need to be an active consumer and not to just go with the flow. Could the obsession with the active audience be considered to be one form of the neoliberal? It is definitely, at least, a philistine way of approaching culture. Where the word active is used about audiences, and when it is not pointing to works of art where audience participation is encouraged, it is also not hard to note, that in today’s society that means intellectual activity, not physical—and that often being active means that one consumes culture with some kind of connection to something we might label highbrow. It is not that we’d laugh actively or that we’d dance actively in the disco, it is that we’d for example reflect actively on the environment or the society, or that we would reflect actively on politics.

Without debasing our needs to reflect on political and environmental issues, it is hard to understand what is wrong with *just* getting entertained?

When families cue to the roller coaster in the amusement park or when teens go to watch a movie, which they assume will frighten them and make them nearly jump off their chair, they consciously want to activate their bodies. We find this interesting. The active body is central in many aesthetic inventions and it has motorized the development of countless aesthetic phenomena. Contrary to highbrow arts and the work of academic philistines, popular culture has not been shy about this. The breakbeat in rap music was developed to extend dancing in parties. Many clothes are either autoerotic or designed to arouse others. And for those who are interested in people reflecting on things actively, of course these bodily traditions have sparked and fueled also active analysis and reflection.

Discos and amusement parks are obvious examples of popular culture, where the body is really the priority, but then there are other forms of culture where the active body is if not central, then at least quintessential for the practice. Think about action films and the way you can feel tickling in your sole when Tom Cruise climbs the Burj Khalifa in *Mission Impossible—Ghost Protocol* (2011). Think about horror films where disgust and chills in the spine are central for the experience. Don’t forget how romantic novels warm up the chest and how if nothing else than at least nodding your head is an integral part of listening to live jazz music.

It is not, though, that these forms of culture would only be contemporary. In the classical debate in Indian philosophy on the *rasa* (emotive affect), the 11<sup>th</sup> century Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta notes the physical side of the experience of theatre by analyzing how sight and hearing, when well stimulated, can sublimate the audience spiritually (spiritual elevation so follows somatic stimulation). And if you think about it, Aristotle’s ‘catharsis’ nails the physical

effects of drama. Today we know that the audience of Greek spectacles came to the ‘show’ like they would arrive to football matches, often late and drunk. (One could think that his theory is as much about popular culture as it is about art with the capital A, the Greek culture was so different from ours.) Aristotle’s way of borrowing the term catharsis from the medics of his time, who talked about bodily purification, is no coincidence. And it is an allegory which is easy to understand. The way good drama, thrillers and horrors of fiction massage our stomachs is a commonplace for modern and postmodern (wo)man.

Sometimes it feels even that popular culture is mainly about the production and consumption of bodily effects. Jan Mukarovsky wrote about ‘aesthetic functions’ in his *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Fact* (1936), and discussed a lot of folk and popular art in his work. Mukarovsky’s function is of course semiotic, as Mukarovsky was a member of the Prague School, but the concept is also very appropriate (and not in dissonance with Mukarovsky’s work) for discussing bodily effects, which are produced to us in popular culture and which we seek for when we enter the realm of popular culture. What is the function of horror or circus? A lot of it is found in the realm of the body.

Anyway, whether the body really comes first, like in the amusement park, or whether it is just integral/quintessential for the practice, we’d like the reader of this volume to think for a while about the role of the body in entertainment, mass culture and the vernacular.

Walter Benjamin writes in his analysis of urban Paris and its poets, “Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism” (1939), how traffic, factory work, new media (photography, film) and Tivoli shared the same rhythm and shocking nature. The body was also central for Richard Shusterman’s theory of rap music (Shusterman 1992), where its function of ‘moving the ass’ sparked the later discourse of somaesthetics. But what we’d like to think of here, in this introduction, is the fact that the body is in so many ways involved in leisure and entertainment, that we might need a small moment for just thinking about it and nothing else. The examples mentioned earlier are just a start when one decides to accept that the body could be seen as the key for understanding the whole field of the popular. It is more like we’d need to ask: in what ways is the body important for this and that practice? The bottom of our stomach gets massaged when we watch an entertaining ice hockey game (ice hockey journalists often talk about the catharsis of the game, especially in relation to hockey fights) and sometimes we want to listen to music which resonates with our pulse. List your 10 major uses of popular culture and think of their bodily extensions. We believe you might surprise yourself.

This volume includes texts by 7 authors, who are Davide Giovanzana, Scott Elliot, Noora Korpelainen, Adam Andrzejewski, Janne Vanhanen, Sue Spaid and Max Rynnänen. Their texts touch upon issues like Ballard’s/Cronenberg’s *Crash*, the everyday practice of yoga, the bodies of popular art works, provoking images of violence, and the way media imagery distances us from the bodies of the ones who suffer. We are not describing their texts in a Reader’s Digest fashion as we believe that it is more interesting for you to go straight into their thoughts. The texts do not always follow our intuitions in this introduction, but the spark was given by some of the thoughts mentioned here. We are very happy to provide you this set of texts, which circulates around the topics explained above, and we have already learned a lot during the editing process

We hope you, as the reader, enjoy the texts of *Body First: Somaesthetics and Popular Culture* as much as we do.

*Jozef Kovalcik & Max Rynnänen, Issue Editors*

# Popular Culture and Wellbeing: Teamwork, Action, and Freedom

*Sue Spaid*

**Abstract:** *With this paper, I introduce the category “ameliorative practices,” which are collective actions that have wellbeing as their goal. Such practices include somaesthetics, everyday aesthetic practices, cultural heritage, particular kinds of popular culture, as well as ameliorative art practices. Before articulating how various forms of popular culture might also engender wellbeing, I explain why wellbeing is such a hot topic and survey philosophy’s current interest in this field, which dates from Aristotle’s notion of eudaimonia. In light of what philosophy and ameliorative art practices have taught us regarding the significance of wellbeing, it is increasingly obvious that certain forms of popular culture might also enhance well-being, a view that is either largely dismissed or has escaped philosophical inquiry. I end by assessing art historian Claire Bishop’s classic critique of art’s ameliorative claims and Grant Kester’s response.*

**Keywords:** *well-being, everyday aesthetics, artistic practice, aesthetics.*

## 1. Introduction

I first introduce the notion of ameliorative practices, which are generally collective actions enacted to achieve wellbeing. This vast category comprises somaesthetics, everyday aesthetic practices, cultural heritage, publicly-accessible popular culture, as well as ameliorative art practices. Since the notion of wellbeing described here is inspired by artists’ actions, I employ Joseph Beuys’ 1971 *Forest Action* as a case study to show step-by-step how ameliorative practices facilitate wellbeing. I next try to explain why wellbeing is currently such a hot topic and survey philosophy’s recent interest in this goal. Once a philosophical account of wellbeing is in place, I can demonstrate how popular culture arising from freely-performed, self concordant actions boost well-being. Finally, I revisit the debate concerning art’s ameliorative potential.

To hint at the relationship between popular culture and wellbeing, consider songs of rebellion, resistance, and reconciliation that have helped people (African slaves and Irish workers alike) across centuries endure their lack of freedom.<sup>1</sup> The same goes for material culture such as crafts and garments adorning indigenous people across the world, which not only enrich the senses, but affirm daily that society’s cultural achievements. One of this paper’s central claims is

---

1 Check out this amazing list of contemporary songs of rebellion. <https://x96.com/life/25-songs-of-rebellion/>. Accessed 18 December 2018.

that cultural heritage and wellbeing are so entwined that colonizers' historical efforts to remove indigenous people's everyday objects and to outlaw their rituals, dress, and language have been first and foremost demoralization strategies.

Given that popular culture is largely consumer-oriented, it's hardly surprising that scholars focused on wellbeing have overlooked its ameliorative potential. Even more confusing, the media routinely markets candles, diets, juices, retreats, smart drugs, spas, edible supplements, and vitamins to consumers eager to experience, attain, or achieve wellbeing. Although I heartily encourage wellbeing as a goal, any attempt to procure it via consumer goods is specious, if not fallacious. Obviously, particular food choices (e.g. more vegetables/fruits, fewer sugars/fats) make people feel better than others, but as this paper argues, wellbeing is more complicated than feeling good or being happy. Unlike diseases readily cured by surgery or medicine, wellbeing results from concerted efforts over time that build capacity and affirm access, not curative or preventive substances meant to compensate deficits. Teamwork and actions, not cozy environments (e.g. Denmark's *hygge* fad), arouse wellbeing.

Here, the adjective ameliorative specifies practices meant to improve, amend, or restore participants' wellbeing. By contrast, Richard Shusterman, who follows pragmatist philosophers such as William James and John Dewey, employs meliorative, melioration, and even meliorism as intermediaries between "popular art's grave flaws and abuses" and its "merits and potential" (Shusterman, 2000a, p. 177). Actions that aspire toward wellbeing are procedural (make it work), not processual (mere happenings). As briefly noted, my brand of wellbeing is derived from eight decades of ameliorative art practices dating to Le Corbusier's *Le Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau* (1925). Related historical examples include: Hélio Oiticica, *Parangolé* (1965); Yoko Ono, *Mend Piece to the World* (1966); Lygia Clark, *Relational Objects* (1967); Robert Morris, Tate Gallery actions (1971); Joseph Beuys, *Forest Action* (1971); and Teresa Murak, *Procesja* (1974) (Spaid, 2017, p. 214).

By the 1990s, ameliorative art practices were no longer outré performance art. Esteemed as participatory art, such works were appreciated because they simultaneously challenged participants' comfort levels and invigorated them, as exemplified by: Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)* (1992); Marie-Ange Guilleminot, *Emotion Conteneu* (1995) and *Paravent* (1997); Carsten Höller, *Flying Machine* (1996); Lee Mingwei, *Dining Project* (1998), *Sleeping Project* (2000), *Bodhi Tree Project* (2006), and *Mending Project* (2009); Hans Haacke, *De Bevölkerung* (since 2000); and Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project* (2003-2004) (Spaid, 2017, p. 214). Presented in the context of public exhibitions, these artworks gathered the multitudes to freely perform actions of their own accord and achieve something memorable together, decades before wellbeing became a "thing."

Just as not all painted walls are wall paintings and not every singer is recognized as a performer, not all ameliorative practices are art. And in fact, the vast majority of ameliorative practitioners perform said practices either as their profession (paid experts) or in order to improve their capabilities (paying students/volunteer strivers), rather than enact them *as* art *with* art audiences. Artists who originate ameliorative art practices tend to do so as *strivers*, rather than as experts bent on sharing their expertise. They take the opportunity of an exhibition to invite the public to try out, learn, or even permanently adopt particular skills. To distinguish artworks, I simply place "art" between "ameliorative" and "practices," since ameliorative practices' status as art is optional, rather than mandatory. Whether art or not, ameliorative practices share similar structures (teamwork), functions (capability-building actions), capabilities (survival skills/coping mechanisms/adaptive tools), and goals (wellbeing).

Although popular parlance tends to link happiness to wellbeing, these terms prove to be false friends, since neither secures the other. Wellbeing doesn't necessitate happiness, and vice versa. Positive self-assessments of wellbeing rather signal some combination of access and capacity, similar in affect to Hannah Arendt's notion of freedom, where the "I will" and "I can" coincide (Arendt, 2000, p. 451). I would argue that wellbeing reflects one's beliefs (more a disposition than a mood) that one can enact what one wants in the real world (as envisioned in the imagination, and of course within reason and guided by ethical conduct). On this level, wellbeing proves closer in effect to Foucault's notion of *power* or Arendt's concept of a *free action*. Wellbeing reflects one's sense of self-esteem owing to accomplishments coupled with the belief that it's possible to envision and enact ever more actions. I next describe the six-step process that artists and experts engaged in ameliorative practices deploy, over and over.

## 2. How Ameliorative Practices Engender Wellbeing

Visual artists, as well as theater directors and filmmakers, increasingly address wellbeing; some by employing related issues as content in their works and others by actually organizing people to remedy societal ills *as their art*, which is what I term ameliorative art practices. My research into ameliorative art practices indicates that they generally follow six action steps: "1) some actor-producer proposes an alternative mode of being, which 2) he/she publicly shares with others via an exhibition, workshop, and /or performance, 3) prompting actor-recipients to envision a better world that 4) compels them to implement specific actions, 5) indicative of their newfound capacities, skills, and values; thus 6) spawning greater cooperation and self-empowerment for all involved" (Spaid, 2017, p. 215).

Let's look at how these steps underlie Joseph Beuys' *Overcome Party Dictatorship Now*, December 1971: "1) Believing that urban forests are integral to city life, 2) Beuys invited students to sweep paths through the local forest [with brooms], 3) thus generating a public awareness concerning invaluable trees being demolished to make room for tennis courts, 4+5) inspiring artists and the general public either to initiate their own actions years later or to help Beuys plant 7000 *Eichen* in Kassel in 1982, simultaneously 6) augmenting everyone's wellbeing." As Beuys' 1973 *Save the Forest* poster declares for all to read, "Let the rich beware, we will not yield: Universal *wellbeing* [emphasis mine] is advancing" (Spaid, 2017, p. 215). My linking Beuys' healing action to wellbeing is not a just a matter of interpretation, yet he didn't necessarily envision this outcome when he earlier performed the action.

It's well documented that Beuys was highly influenced by Rudolf Steiner, who in 1894 published *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (its English title is *The Philosophy of Spiritual Action*). In 1919, Steiner published *Toward Social Renewal: Rethinking the Basis of Society*, which introduced his Fundamental Social Law: "The *wellbeing* [emphasis mine] of a community of people working together will be the greater, the less the individual claims for himself the proceeds of his work, i.e., the more of these proceeds he makes over to his fellow-workers, the more his own needs are satisfied, not out of his own work but out of the work done by others" (Steiner, 1993). Steiner adds, "Every community must have a spiritual mission, and each individual must have the will to contribute towards the fulfilling of this mission." Echoing the spiritual dimension of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, whose literal translation from Greek is good (from εὖς) spirit (from δαίμων), Steiner concluded this section with a proto-poem that some regard as his personal motto.



*The healthy social life is found  
 When in the mirror of each human soul  
 The whole community is shaped,  
 And when in the community  
 Lives the strength of each human soul* (Steiner, 1993)

Clearly, Beuys was channeling Steiner when he organized his 1971 forest action. And the rest is history. One soon recognizes that most ameliorative practices cycle through the above action steps, each with a particular function that generates some capability that enhances wellbeing. Either the cycle is repeated or it snow-balls into something unimaginable. By now, the relationship (→) between each action's function and its particular capability begins to emerge: 1) agency → doubt, 2) participation → knowledge sharing, 3) envisioning together → re-imagine alternative possibilities, 4) DIWO ethos (Do It With Others) → strategize, fundraise, plan with others, 5) action → implementation/fulfillment, and 6) self-empowerment/autarky (repeat). Artists carrying out ameliorative art practices double as “agents of perceptual change,” since such procedures reorient people's preconceptions and perspectives (Spaid, 2002).

What interests me here is the way actions originally meant as healing acts incidentally facilitate survival skills. As we shall see, Kevin Melchionne recognizes such fringe-benefits as the “valuable compensatory role” of everyday aesthetic practices (Melchionne, 2014). This rarely goes the other way around, since one's acquiring survival skills doesn't necessarily foster wellbeing. For example, being an expert marksman rarely offers “compensatory values,” since superior skills don't necessarily assuage whatever fears/concerns drive people to require self-protection. I imagine, however, that those who learn how to *envision together* also develop a sense of belonging. Those who engage *teamwork* learn to trust others. Those who achieve *wellbeing* gain confidence. Those who experience *endurance* recognize the importance of seeing goals through to completion. Those who know how to *modify/moderate* goals are equipped to conserve energy. Those who *view* their glasses as half full/empty transform their futures into opportunities/losses. Those who *treat problems as opportunities for solutions* keep moving.

Since somaesthetics is primarily focused on individual achievements, rather than teamwork, one might argue that it cannot foster the notion of wellbeing described here. Being agency-oriented, somaesthetics tends to address subjects in the process of identifying, adopting, and cultivating particular skills that they value for their ameliorative outcomes. Problem is, somaesthetics is typically considered individualistic, rather than community-oriented, as Steiner and Beuys advised. A more accurate account, however, frames somaesthetics as teamwork, since it typically involves strivers working alongside some expert, all of whom stand to influence each other, similar in effect to Hegel's master-slave narrative, such that slaves mold the master, and vice versa. This analogy addresses the mutually-beneficial relationship between the master and the slave, not that of the master-slave and the expert-student.

One of the most important features of ameliorative practices is the way actor-producers recruit and inspire actor-recipients (audience members/participants) to perform particular actions that later inspire former participants to attempt actions in the company of new recruits. In this respect, ameliorative practices are not only generative, since actions beget further actions; but they extend beyond practitioners' bodies to reach other human bodies. One imagines somaesthetics experts playing similar roles when they lead participants to perform actions that they neither imagined nor dreamed of doing. Sometimes somaesthetic exercises even inspire participants to become expert leaders who eventually recruit more participants.

As briefly noted, one point that differentiates ameliorative art practices from most ameliorative practices is that artists typically recruit audiences to perform tasks about which they know little. Being strivers, artists are keen to adopt whatever skills said actions require. Since artists carrying out ameliorative art practices are in no position to share their nonexistent expertise, they must have something entirely different in mind. They either intend to try out healing exercises or instigate self-discovery. In initiating such actions, ameliorative art practitioners aim to strengthen the bonds between human beings with the view that reinforcing such bonds generates trust, openness, confidence, and most certainly, greater capacity and access. Moreover, artists who enact ameliorative art practices with people, rather than on behalf of degraded environments, as Beuys and eco-artists have done; reinforce the view that nature includes human beings, thus eliminating the “nature-culture divide.”

Although I formulated these six steps as a result of my having experienced ameliorative art practices over three decades, my description of how participants achieve wellbeing incidentally squares with both Shusterman’s characterizing somaesthetic practitioners as constantly pushing themselves to improve their capabilities and positive psychologist Martin Seligman’s PERMA model for wellbeing (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and purpose, and accomplishment) (Seligman, 2017). If wellbeing is grounded in accomplishment, as ameliorative practices suggest, then people who lose weight feel “great” not because they feel more attractive or are lighter on their feet, as the media purports; but because accomplishments that prompt self-esteem prompt wellbeing. This also explains why it’s erroneous to associate wellbeing with spa treatments, where participants are remarkably passive. I next explore why wellbeing is currently so topical.

### 3. When Wellbeing Became a “Thing”

Why has wellbeing become such a hot topic? One explanation is that the more freedoms people enjoy, whose fluctuations Gallup polls regularly; the more they expect to attain wellbeing. Every other year, Gallup interviewers ask about 1000 people from each of 140 countries one simple question, “In your country, are you satisfied with your freedom to choose what you do with your life?” In 2017, a record-breaking 80% of the world resounded affirmatively, the highest rate ever recorded in more than a decade of tracking freedom (Clifton, 2018). Uzbekistan and Cambodia topped this list at one and two, so wealth is clearly not the main factor. Unsurprisingly, all five Nordic nations are in the top eleven (>93% satisfaction rates), whose four other members are United Arab Emirates, Canada, New Zealand, and Costa Rica. I would argue that freedom is the cornerstone of wellbeing. And in fact, philosopher Ingrid Robeyns explores this relationship in her new book *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined*, where freedom is gauged by people’s capabilities, what Martha Nussbaum defines as “what people are actually able to do and be” (Robeyn, 2017, p. 93). Robeyn further distinguishes achieved wellbeing (functionings), whereby one leads a flourishing life worth living; and the freedom to achieve wellbeing (capabilities). This approach slightly veers from mine, whose functions are capability-building actions steps that stimulate wellbeing (Robeyn, 2017, p. 26).

An alternative explanation is that people’s appetites for wellbeing increase whenever they feel particularly anxious about their future. In fact, Gallup’s 2017 “Negative Experience Index” indicates that “the world tilted more negative than it has in the past decade,” due to several nations experiencing greater discord, leaving their citizens to report upticks in “stress, anger, sadness, physical pain, and worry” (Ray, 2018). It’s important to note that only South Sudan

sits on both lists (“Least Satisfied with Freedom Worldwide” and “Highest Negative Experience Index Worldwide”), which indicates that one’s feeling a lack of freedom doesn’t always correlate with unhappiness, and vice versa. If people who report being unhappy sometimes feel free, the opposite must be true; people who are unsatisfied with their freedom also report happiness, which demonstrates this disconnect. This latter group likely represents the pool of people striving for wellbeing, since I imagine that it takes a certain amount of happiness to be able to do something about one’s sense of ill-being. By contrast, I worry that chronic depression prevents unhappy people from taking action. I return to the differences between happiness and wellbeing a bit later. But I remind the reader that this paper concerns wellbeing, and not happiness; so if you find them synonymous, my view is not nullified.

Yet another explanation for the sudden interest in wellbeing is that even as violent crime rates fall and the global economy booms, communities across the world experience ever more environmental degradation, planetary resource exploitation, and senseless hate crimes, which leaves people feeling increasingly vulnerable. Perhaps anxiety is actually aggravated by some historically novel combination of greater economic comfort across the board and falling precariousness. Until rather recently, extreme precariousness was the norm for most. As more and more people experience greater comfort, anxieties about deprivation are sure to rise.

I sometimes joke that Belgium is the “wellbeing capital” of the world, since everything seems marketed in terms of wellbeing. Even newspapers praise its importance. Its prevalence suggests that it remains out of reach for those yearning to achieve it. A little “history lesson” can explain this national obsession. On the occasion of the Battle of Waterloo’s bicentennial, journalist Pierre Havaux explained how Belgium’s multi-lingual inhabitants unified once they gained sovereignty in 1830: “The Belgian soul exists, like no other. It is recognizable by its taste in proportion and craft, individualism, the spirit of association, and the love of a comfortable life” (Havaux, 2015, p. 48). While the French bore the mantle of “Liberté, égalité, et fraternité,” their neighbors to the northeast embraced “Goût, Individualisme, et Confort,” thus securing happy people. Problem is, these values can end up displacing wellbeing, if individual will overrides the whole community. (Note: Belgium’s actual national motto is “L’union fait la force (Einigkeit macht stark)” *not* “Goût, Individualisme, et Confort.”) Suffice it to say, wellbeing becomes a “thing” whenever people’s deflated sense of capacity and/or access inspires them to do something novel that augments both. I next survey philosophy’s recent interest in this topic.

#### 4. Philosophy’s Focus on Wellbeing

One must admit, however, that human beings’ aspiration for wellbeing is as old as philosophy itself, recalling Aristotle’s notion of *eudaimonia* (human flourishing/prosperity). He defined *eudaimonia* as “doing and living well” and considered it more comprehensive (God-inspired) than mere mortal happiness (Aristotle, 1980). When asked in 1935 how people might better their world, Ludwig Wittgenstein took a cue from fellow Austrian Steiner and stressed the individual’s role in shaping his/her community: “Just improve yourself; that is the only thing you can do to better the world” (Monk, 1991, p. 213). This suggests that those who manage to change themselves generate transformations across the board and set in motion a new series of actions that are generative like sound waves. Artist Yoko Ono’s *Mend Piece* (1966) follows a similar mantra, though hers flows in the other direction, from world to self: “When you go through the process of mending, you mend something inside your soul as well.”

Nearly sixty years after Wittgenstein, Shusterman revitalized *eudaimonia* when he wrote: “Philosophy aims at right action, for which we need not only knowledge and self-knowledge, but also effective will. As embodied creatures, we can act only through the body, so our power of volition, the ability to act as we will to act depends on somatic efficacy” (Shusterman, 2000b, p. 168.). In this context, “somatic efficacy” is effectively what I earlier identified as capacity and access, whose relationship to the body is implicit in my case, though explicit in his. He continues, “this synthesis of meliorism with experimental, pluralist individualism expresses the pragmatic spirit. So does the simpler, ordinary ways we live, coupled nonetheless with a desire to live better.” (Shusterman, 2000b, p. 215). Here, Shusterman captures both the striving toward (“a desire to live better”) and teamwork (“pluralist individualism”) that typically kindle wellbeing.

It may seem odd that Shusterman mentions “wellbeing” only three times in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992), and most notably in the last chapter, which launched somaesthetics. Consider, however, that eight years later, “wellbeing” appears on only five pages of *Bowling Alone* (2000), sociologist Robert Putnam’s scathing indictment of the impact of declining societal participation on democracy (Shusterman, 2000a, pp. 261, 268, and 271). We can only surmise that wellbeing was not yet a “thing.” Shusterman stresses melioration, setting personal goals, and attaining ever higher levels of distinctions of achievement and fulfillment, in fields as diverse as martial arts, meditative practices, and cosmetology, yet barely mentions wellbeing, perhaps because it’s implicit in the “hedonic highs” he commends his readers for achieving (Paquay and Spaid, 2016, pp. 66-67). Every breakthrough to a new level incidentally confirms participants’ greater access and increased capacity.

Shusterman does, however, point out Aristotle’s ranking practical action (*praxis*) over poetic activity (*poiēsis*), since the former is “derive[d] from the agent’s inner character and reciprocally helps shape it. While art’s making has its end outside itself and its maker (its end and value being in the object made), action has its end both in itself and in its agent, who is affected by how he acts, though allegedly not by what he makes.” (Shusterman, 2000a, pp. 53-54). This point not only echoes Ono and Wittgenstein’s emphasizing the significance of ameliorating the self, but is reiterated by Melchionne who recognizes the “shift from external to internal factors or, in other words, how dispositions, inner resources, and coping tendencies support wellbeing” (Melchionne, 2014).

To my lights, the specifically philosophical interest in wellbeing has largely been developed by aestheticians working in everyday esthetics, whose ascent coincided with the rise of participatory art, public engagement practices, and socially-engaged art. Melchionne defines everyday esthetics as “the aspects of our lives marked by widely shared, daily routines or patterns to which we tend to impart an esthetic character” (Melchionne, 2013). It is the very *ordinariness* of the kinds of activities that everyday aestheticians muse over (“home-cooked meals, dining rituals, peeling oranges, packaging leftovers, packing picnics, garden[ing], homemade beer, and Japanese Tea Ceremonies”) that warrants their insistence that these kinds of activities exhibit invaluable esthetic properties, because they enhance wellbeing (Paquay and Spaid, 2016, p. 63).

In fact, Melchionne’s succinct abstract for his paper “The Point of Everyday Aesthetics” employs only eight words: “the point of everyday esthetic activity is wellbeing” (Melchionne, 2014). He goes so far as to argue that everyday esthetic activities have distinctive features that make them better suited for promoting subjective wellbeing than even the fine arts, presumably because everyday esthetic activities are readily available, comport to users’ skills and interests, and “are practiced by nearly all as a matter of everyday life” (Melchionne, 2014). He makes a second, even more important point: “Everyday esthetic practices *of our own design* [emphasis

mine] stand a much better chance of influencing wellbeing than the occasional encounter of high or popular art, such as attending museums or concerts from time to time. Fine art activities are intermittent for all but the makers and some attendant professionals.” Being “of our own design,” everyday aesthetic practices double as expressions of freedom, since they prove our capacity to enact something of value, which is why they stand a “much better chance of influencing wellbeing” than culture created by others, though selected and/or purchased by us. This coheres with both my initial claim that actions indicative of access and capacity, not lifestyle purchases, enhance wellbeing; and Shusterman’s privileging *praxis* over *poiēsis*.

I imagine that most people engaged in somaesthetic practices identify wellbeing as more or less a given, a veritable by-product of the “hedonic treadmill.” Moreover, when we aim too high, we risk *illbeing*. As Melchionne warns, “We may rise to euphoria or sink to depression because of the outcomes of our endeavors, but we typically adapt to changes in circumstances so that good and bad emotions eventually run their course....[Still], self-concordant activities often play a valuable compensatory role in our inevitably difficult lives” (Melchionne, 2014). It’s relevant that he emphasizes both “self-concordant activities” and “valuable compensatory roles,” since the former indicates capacity and access, while the latter suggests amelioration. Exemplary of their compensatory roles, he notes that they reduce “anxiety and depression while increasing focus and efficacy. In turn, the improved mood achieved through activity may help individuals face the larger challenges in their lives” (Melchionne, 2014). This is characteristic of the way healing acts occasion survival skills, an attribute of ameliorative practices discussed in Section II.

The view advocated here veers slightly from that of Melchionne, who doesn’t necessarily associate wellbeing with ameliorative outcomes. For him, wellbeing arises when individuals: “1) enjoy a steady flow of positive feelings, 2) have few negative ones, 3) are satisfied in their main pursuits, such as work and relationships; and 4) give their lives overall positive evaluations. The high incidence of positive emotion, low negative emotion, satisfaction in key domain, and positive overall assessments are four distinct factors in wellbeing.” Melchionne tends to use wellbeing and happiness interchangeably: “I use them pretty much interchangeably and don’t worry about it too much” (Melchionne, 2017). For me, wellbeing reflects people’s beliefs (more an attitude than a mood) about their personal potential (capacity) and what they deem possible (access), which is why wellbeing coheres better with freedom than happiness.

Melchionne associates everyday aesthetics with five areas: “food, wardrobe, dwelling, conviviality, and going out (running errands or commuting)” (Melchionne, 2014). Although songs of rebellion and traditional dress, mentioned at this paper’s onset, prove a fit; he likely excludes popular culture and exercises familiar to somaesthetics from everyday aesthetics. By now, however, it should be clear that all three are ameliorative practices, since they have wellbeing as their goal. He qualifies everyday aesthetic activities as:

*common but unimportant while, by contrast, works in the fine arts merit our attention because they reflect skill and insight. ...By contrast, most everyday aesthetic activities do not inspire critical reflection or arthistorical study. Rarely do they reflect great skill or insight. They are pursued in private and, when there is a public conversation, it is largely consumerist (Melchionne, 2014).*

These points apply equally to somaesthetic practices and popular culture alike.

Melchionne remarks that only when everyday aesthetic practices are displayed in a fine art context do they receive the recognition they deserve. This recalls the current debate roiling

France, where a recent government report recommends the return of all African treasures obtained via colonialism to their nations of origin. Instead of claiming that everyday aesthetic practices tend to fall under the radar until museums shine a light on them, I would counter that everyday aesthetic practices merit our attention when they garner ameliorative outcomes, and thus enhance wellbeing. With this in mind, perhaps the best reason to reconstitute objects to nations whose ancestors created them is that it is in this context that their ameliorative potential shines brightest. In other nations' museums, they are objects whose significance reflects institutional valorization, if not the glory of past conquests.

In the presence of those whose ancestors fabricated them, such objects both affirm daily that society's rich cultural heritage and manifest its autonomy. Nicholas Thomas, Director of Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, adds, "[I]t is not imaginable that peoples would surrender their heritage if they were *truly free* [emphasis mine] to retain it. Yet material culture was not always, for everyone 'heritage'" (Hunt, Dorgeloh, and Thomas, 2018). In blaming Africans for letting colonizers buy/steal/take their material culture on their lack of freedom, he disregards the firepower imbalance. His suggestion that the Africans didn't realize the value of what they let go begs the question: "Who gets to decide which material culture ranks as heritage?" and circles back to Melchionne's point about museums. Finally, Melchionne remarks that material culture arising from everyday aesthetic practices is by definition "common and unimportant," so it's rather disingenuous for Thomas to claim that Africans didn't recognize "heritage." He knows full well that the transformation of material culture into cultural heritage is a sluggish procedure. Such attributes are not immediately obvious to anyone, whether *free* or oppressed.

The clearest example of a nation deploying material culture to weave its national identity in terms of cultural heritage is the Museo Nacional de Antropología, built in 1963 in Mexico City (Vackimes, 2001, p. 30). Rather than merely shine a light on practices previously underappreciated, MNA inspires national pride in Mexico's rich history and warrants international admiration. Displace people from their material culture, and you strip them of any possibility for wellbeing, since they lose access to their history, cultural heritage, creative talent, and ingenuity. No wonder Cameroonian Prince Kum'a Ndumbe III finds the trafficking in African art so disconcerting: "This is not about the return of African art. When someone's stolen your soul, it's very difficult to *survive* [emphasis mine] as a people" (Nayeri, 2018). I have little doubt that the US government's historical efforts to limit Native Americans' ability to engage everyday aesthetic practices (crafts, rituals, ways of life) was first and foremost a strategy to defuse their capabilities, thus eroding their wellbeing (fomenting *demoralization*) and neutralizing their will. Cultural heritage exports can be a form of psychological warfare, not unlike strategies meant to destroy fighters' morales in hopes that they surrender, give up or runaway, rather than engage in physical warfare. I next develop the relationship between popular culture and wellbeing

## 5. Popular Culture's Ameliorative Potential

Given the consumerist nature of much of what is marketed as popular culture, as well as the fact that it is typically consumed in private by individuals who aren't expected to exert much effort, it's hardly surprising that aestheticians have overlooked the potential for popular culture to enhance wellbeing. Here, I lump sports and leisure in with popular culture, since town governments often have Sports, Culture and Leisure Departments, presumably because they are linked to community wellbeing. As for such activities' compensatory roles, consider the way

singing along with the radio or in a choir enhances breathing, joining a street protest promotes identity, attending rock concerts releases steam, dancing in a nightclub expends extra energy, meditating while waiting proves relaxing, practicing martial arts with experts enhances self-esteem, following yoga/pilates/T'ai chi classes builds core strength, exercising/doing sports burns calories, taking pit stops/breaks helps people refocus, while attending a coffee klatch/tea party generates feelings of connection, especially when a book read jointly is under discussion.

Applying Melchionne's prescription for everyday aesthetic practices as common and ordinary, I imagine community members participating in long-term, low-key, yet truly rewarding activities, otherwise said programs wouldn't survive year after year. Consider that Robert Putnam's millennial treatise *Bowling Alone* not only linked people's no longer participating in group activities to their increasing disconnection from family and friends, but it also claimed that democracy was in jeopardy. Years since, dozens of papers and books have challenged his assessment. Although the goal here is self-improvement, rather than mastery, let alone training for the Olympics or a college scholarship; I imagine some participants occasionally becoming experts. With community-oriented popular culture, participants need not assess some cultural event's accessibility, primarily because accessibility is presumed (typically affordable and publicly accessible), which makes it closer in kind to everyday aesthetic practices than somaesthetic practices, which tend to segregate according to skill levels. Being open to everybody, popular culture avails access and capacity in spades, yet it must require some effort for participants to achieve wellbeing.

Consider carnival parades like Mardi Gras in New Orleans, US; Le Carneval de Binche en Belgique; or Carnaval de Trinité-et-Tobago. One might not know anything about these different, though related parades, their history, or traditions underlying their vastly different costumes and rituals/festivities, let alone speak their participants' languages; but one doesn't imagine them to be inaccessible, which is why they qualify as popular culture (Spaid, 2018). Most people consume parades as bystanders, not as participants, yet parade watchers also carry out "self-concordant" activities. After all, they have had to organize their families/friends to arrive on time and everyone has walked from either the public transport or a nearby parking lot. Presumably, group members will either stay for local activities after the parade or return home for some pre-arranged get-together such as a family dinner. I imagine many more slipping back into their daily routines, which may or may not qualify as everyday aesthetic activities; as they prepare for their next day's school, work, or day off.

Not all candidates for popular culture offer ameliorative outcomes, but many do. Consider outdoor events such as fireworks, a sea of protestors sporting pink pussy cat hats, or Burning Man. Even though these lack immediately-obvious compensatory roles, participants routinely select these events for their ameliorative outcomes. Although the chemical toxicity of fireworks is quite worrisome, plenty of people find the loud booms and crackling noises relaxing (youtube's firework sound tracks suggest this) accompanied as they are by the awesomeness of massive sprawls of spirals and sprays of stars across the night sky. In this context, firework watchers are on par with parade goers, who've made a physical effort to attend some community-wide event, and are thus self-concordant consumers. By contrast, greeting the wave of like-minded supporters of women's rights connects protestors to strangers in ways that attending a symphony or even a rock concert wouldn't. Past Burning Man participants routinely comment that they really liked purchasing goods with their labor, rather than money/credit, since it lends everybody a special role in this temporary tent city.

By contrast, consider indoor activities that are not necessarily publicly accessible, but are widely accessible, such as watching stand-up comedy, being a die-hard band groupie, or binge-watching a television series; whereby repeat actions indicate participants' capacity for appreciation. As compared to singing, protesting, dancing, meditating, martial arts, doing pilates, or discussing books; laughing at comedians, attending several gigs each month, and staring at a screen for hours on end is comparatively passive and individualistic in scope. Although it may require some amount of scheduling management to perform such self-concordant actions, teamwork seems to play a greater role for those performers, whose success at engaging their audiences necessitates collective action (comedians, musicians, and actors working alongside respective stage crews).

Laughter is widely considered “the best medicine,” given its scientifically-proven benefits (lowers blood pressure, reduces stress hormones, works abs, improves cardiac health, boosts T-cells, triggers release of endorphins, and produces a general sense of wellbeing).<sup>2</sup> One's attending either a comedy show or a funny film hardly guarantees laughter. If or when one does laugh, laughing alongside others generates feelings of belonging that often augment one's overall enjoyment, transforming public laughter into a shared exercise. Like bowling alone, laughing alone indicates polarities. One suddenly feels superior to those who “don't get it” or inferior to the mob whose stares suggest that only an idiot would consider this hilarious.

Similarly, seeing oneself as a band groupie not only provides a sense of belonging, but groupies exhibit dependability and commitment, making them vital team players on par with second string athletes who mostly watch during matches. Elsewhere, I've argued that Nirvana's original fans eventually decided the band sucked because they felt shame once they realized the music's universal, rather than uniquely Seattle, appeal (Spaid 2018). I now wonder whether Nirvana's fans rather lost their sense of belonging once their access no longer seemed special. By contrast, those who endure binge-watching multiple seasons (60+ hours) of *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, or the *Americans* not only emotionally engage with complicated characters, but earn the right to retain their access, and most likely forever. All of these actions are generative, in the sense that one actively recruits people to check out those comedians, bands, and TV series one appreciates.

It thus seems that the more users double as doers, the more actions associated with popular culture trigger wellbeing. As Three Day Weekend founder and artist Dave Muller observed over two decades ago, “the alternative is the alternative to doing nothing” (Spaid 1998). The key component is thus *doing something meaningful*, which of course begs the question, “Which activities prove meaningful?” Consider bands like Fela Kuti and his Africa 70 (*Confusion*, 1975) or Queen, who spontaneously performed “Eeee ooo” at LiveAid in 1985. By engaging their fans in “call and response” schemes, they knowingly transformed listeners into necessary doers. In order to discover this, one must stop being a bystander, and “just do it.” I next review several recent criticisms of art's ameliorative potential, which I imagine apply to all practices whose aims are ameliorative.

## 6. Concluding Remarks: Fears, Foes, and Friends of Art's Ameliorative Potential

A full decade before I developed the notion of ameliorative art practices (AAPs), art historian Claire Bishop railed against artworks aiming for ameliorative outcomes. It is unlikely that the

---

<sup>2</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I consider stand-up comedy. This website lists laughter's benefits: <http://mentalfloss.com/article/539632/scientific-benefits-having-laugh> Accessed 18 February 2019.



above artists whose works I characterize as ameliorative necessarily intended such outcomes. What makes such works ameliorative is that they enhance wellbeing, so it is a property whose effect might be anticipated, though not realized until much later. Even Beuys created his poster two years after his forest action, so he too likely grasped this action's particular outcome in hindsight. Although most of the examples Bishop cites are collaborative and relational, they primarily reflect social situations, as opposed to actions. She recognizes this, since one of her main bones of contention is their focus on discourse, whose immateriality she finds aesthetically insubstantial. By contrast, ameliorative practices demand material settings and necessitate action.

Bishop's 2006 *Artforum* exposé mentions only two artists who have influenced my understanding of the relationship between AAPs and wellbeing, so her criticisms don't necessarily apply here. She names Tiravanija in passing and credits Höller for not making artistic decisions that are motivated by ethical considerations, but this shouldn't be too surprising since nowhere does this paper address ethics. Thus far, aesthetic issues have been front and center: the importance of having access to one's "heritage;" the way somaesthetic practices, everyday aesthetic practices, and popular culture enable people to freely participate in actions with aesthetic import; and finally the significance of artistic practices that challenge and reward participants. These enhance capacity, while affirming access.

Bishop frames art that is meant to heal in agonistic terms, precisely because she considers such works driven more by ethical than aesthetic considerations. She claims that the best collaborative practices need to be thought of in terms other than their *ameliorative* consequences. She adds, "The ethical imperative finds support in most of the theoretical writing on art that collaborates with 'real' people.... Emphasis is shifted away from the disruptive *specificity* of a given work and onto a *generalized* set of moral precepts" (Bishop, 2006). Following Rancière, she emphasizes, "[T]he aesthetic is the ability to think contradiction: the productive contradiction of art's relationship to social change, characterized precisely by the tension between faith in art's autonomy and belief in art as inextricably bound to the promise of a *better world to come* [emphasis mine]. For Rancière, the aesthetics doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains the ameliorative promise" (Bishop, 2006). But as noted above, the artwork's autonomy (its end and value residing outside the maker and in the object) originally inspired Shusterman to privilege *praxis* over *poiēsis*.

I actually share many of Bishop's criticism of what passed for collaborative art in the early aughties, most specifically their overly social dimension, focus on public discourse as artistic practice, immateriality, moralizing goody two-shoe attitudes, and lack of radical proposals. However, I rather admire artists who carry out projects with the view to express freedom, which alters participants' well-being and inevitably changes the world. Such impressive artworks demonstrate why works rejected by Bishop leave her feeling dissatisfied. Moreover, AAPs point to the relevant features of everyday aesthetic practices, somaesthetic practices, and popular culture that are most likely to enhance wellbeing.

At the very moment when artists were trying to find ways to bridge antinomies, Bishop was encouraging the "contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention... It is to this art—however uncomfortable, exploitative, or confusing it may first appear—that we must turn for an alternative to the well intentioned homilies that today pass for critical discourse on social collaboration" (Bishop, 2006). She claims that these kinds of works push us toward a Platonic regime in which art is valued for its *truthfulness and educational efficacy* [emphasis mine] rather than for inviting us—as *Dogville* did—to confront darker, more painfully complicated

considerations of our predicament” (Bishop, 2006).

Bishop calls for “greater darkness” in the arts, yet she fails to distinguish between live actions and virtual pictures. This matters of course, since numerous artists have explored live actions that are far darker than any film. Recall Marco Evaristti, who in 2000 invited people to turn on ten blenders housing gold fish, while Santiago Sierra has paid human beings to do all manner of inhuman things, including sitting in cardboard boxes for eight hours, bleaching their black hair blond, tattooing a horizontal line across their backs, and lying in a box in a car trunk.

Three months after Bishop fired her salvo, Grant Kester struck back, noting that the:

*normalization of paranoid knowing as a model for creative intellectual practice has entailed ‘a certain disarticulation, disavowal, and misrecognition of other ways of knowing, ways less oriented around suspicion’. Sedgwick juxtaposes paranoid knowing (in which ‘exposure in and of itself is assigned a crucial operative power’) with reparative knowing, which is driven by the desire to ameliorate [emphasis mine] or give pleasure. As she argues, this reparative attitude is intolerable to the paranoid, who views any attempt to work productively within a given system of meaning as unforgivably naive and complicit; a belief authorized by the paranoid’s ‘contemptuous assumption that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is people’s (that is, other people’s) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty, or deludedness sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious... and intolerable’ (Kester, 2006).*

At first glance, it looks like Kester is typecasting Bishop and Rancière as paranoid. To my lights, he rather means to relay gender theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s distinction between paranoid knowing and reparative knowing, which “is driven by the desire to ameliorate or give pleasure.” Moreover, the “reparative attitude is intolerable to the paranoid,” who tends to blame the lack of revolutionary progress/advancement on other people’s inability to see beyond some sense of *illbeing*. If “paranoids” really do belittle others’ pain, as Sedgwick suggests, then nothing seems more relevant than participants allied with somaesthetics, everyday aesthetics, ameliorative art, and even popular culture. Anything that people can do to get others to engage in activities that require effort, are self-concordant, and compensatory sounds exciting. As one American-TV PSA (“public service announcement”) used to say, “Don’t get under a rock, Get into action!”

## References

- Arendt, H. (2000), *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr, New York: Penguin Books.
- Aristotle (1980), *Nicomachean Ethics*, trs. David Ross and Lesley Brown, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1095a15–22.
- Bishop, C. (2006), “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” *Artforum*. 44: 6 pp. 178-183. [http://onedaysculpture.org.nz/assets/images/reading/Bishop%20 %20Kester.pdf](http://onedaysculpture.org.nz/assets/images/reading/Bishop%20%20Kester.pdf) Accessed 20 December 2018.
- Clifton, J. (2018), “Freedom Rings in Places You Might Not Expect,” Gallup Blog, June 27, 2018. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/235973/freedom-rings-places-not-expect.aspx>

- Havaux, P. (2015), "Comment la Belgique s'est inventé une Histoire," tr. Sue Spaid, *Vif Express*, No. 28, pp. 47-49.
- Hunt, T., Dorgeloh, H. and Thomas, N. (2018), "Restitution Report: Museum Directors Respond," *The Art Newspaper*. Retrieved from <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/comment/restitution-report-museums-directors-respond>
- Kester, G. (2006), "Another Turn," *Artforum*, 44: 9. Retrieved from [http://onedaysculpture.org.nz/assets/images/reading/Bishop%20 %20Kester.pdf](http://onedaysculpture.org.nz/assets/images/reading/Bishop%20%20Kester.pdf)
- Melchionne, K. (2013), "The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics*. Retrieved from <https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=663>
- Melchionne, K. (2014), "The Point of Everyday Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics*. Retrieved from <https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=700>
- Melchionne, K. (2017), Email correspondence dated 31 October 2017.
- Monk, R. (1991), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, London: Vintage Books.
- Nayeri, F. (2018), "Return of African Artifacts Sets a Tricky Precedent for Europe's Museums." Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/27/arts/design/macron-report-restitution-precedent.html>
- Paquay, J.-F. and Spaid, S. (2016), "The 0 km Movement: Everyday Eaters Enjoying Edible Environments," *The Journal of Somaesthetics*, Vol. 2 Nos. 1 and 2. Retrieved from <https://somaesthetics.aau.dk/index.php/JOS/article/view/1461/1224>
- Putnam, R. (2000), *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Ray, J. (2018), "World Took a Negative Turn in 2017," September 12 2018, Retrieved from [https://news.gallup.com/poll/242117/world-took-negative-turn-2017.aspx?g\\_source=link\\_NEWSV9&g\\_medium=TOPIC&g\\_campaign=item &g\\_content=World%2520Took%2520a%2520Negative%2520Turn%2520in%25202017](https://news.gallup.com/poll/242117/world-took-negative-turn-2017.aspx?g_source=link_NEWSV9&g_medium=TOPIC&g_campaign=item &g_content=World%2520Took%2520a%2520Negative%2520Turn%2520in%25202017)
- Robeyns, I. (2017), *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined*, Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers.
- Seligman, S. (2017), Retrieved from <https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/perma-model/>
- Shusterman, R. (2000a), *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Press.
- Shusterman, R. (2000b), *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Spaid, S. (1998), "L.A. Undercover: A Profile of Alternative Projects," *Art Papers*, Mar/Apr, pp. 14-17.
- Spaid, S. (2002), *Ecovention: Art to Transform Ecologies*, Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center.
- Spaid, S. (2017), *Ecovention Europe: Art to Transform Ecologies, 1957-2017*, Sittard, NL: Museum De Domijnen Hedendaagse Kunst.
- Spaid, S. (2018), "Bellissima!: Reassessing Access to Redress Mass Art," *Popular Inquiry*, 2:2.
- van Staveren, I. (2015), "Capabilities and wellbeing," *The Elgar Companion to Social Economics*,

eds. John B. Davis and Wilfred Dolfsma, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, pp. 165-179.

Steiner, R. (1993), "Understanding the Human Being", *Selected Writings of Rudolf Steiner*, ed. Richard Seddon, Bristol: Rudolf Steiner Press. [https://wn.rsarchive.org/Articles/FuSoLa\\_index.html](https://wn.rsarchive.org/Articles/FuSoLa_index.html) Accessed 20 December 2018.

Vackimes, S. C. (2001), "Indians in Formaldehyde-Nation of Progress: The Museo Nacional of Mexico and the Construction of National Identity," *Museum Anthropology*, 25:1, pp. 20-26.

# The Plasticity Of Flesh And Bone: Transforming The Body Through Somaesthetic Experience

*Scott Elliott*

**Abstract:** *This paper explores how the human mechanisms of gene expression may be used in novel artistic practices which use the human body as material. Examining historical examples of artists who use the body as material along with popular culture body modification practices, epigenetic transformations are put forward as a method to be explored in new forms of artistic practice. Examples of speculative fiction, works of architecture and psychotherapeutic devices are investigated towards outlining a direction for such a practice.*

**Keywords:** *architecture, genes, Orlan, Reich, Ballard, Crash, Stelarc.*

## 1. Transformative Capacities

Considering the continuing, ongoing nature of our species' evolution, any notion that our way of being or form of existence is static must be refuted. The ever-changing formation of being is carried out through adaptations. The adaptations we understand best are those that are naturally selected over generations through reproduction. But what of the changes that occur within a lifetime, or in the fleeting transience of a single event? Changes are constantly occurring towards transformations. Whether they result in improved fitness or whether they are mutations that will not be carried forwards into subsequent generations cannot be predetermined.

Accompanying our evolutionary process is a prevalent desire for physical transformations, to change our flesh and bones into something else. Such desire may be to improve in terms of popular aesthetics or criteria of beauty, or for fitness, or to develop new abilities and capacities. Some transformations occur through intentional and planned techniques, such as the physical transformations realized through cosmetic surgery. Other transformations come about in a makeshift way, taking advantage of an existing potential that one has come upon by chance encounter and carrying this potential forward into actuality. One example of a situation in which this emerges is the physical, somatic experience between body and a constructed enclosure. This essay explores architecture, cars, and Wilhelm Reich's "Orgone Accumulator" for their capacities to transform the human body, and raises questions about the sexual dimension present in a somaesthetic engagement with surroundings.

Using the body and its transformative capacity in artistic practice as well as in popular cultural aesthetics has focused greatly on using medical interventions that make physical changes to flesh and bone. This pliable material is used not only as a medium of expression, but as able to express an idea of potential through its materiality. The aesthetics of bodybuilding, for example, offer a cultural phenomenon where the mass, shape and texture of human flesh are critically measured on stage, and the practice of this culture requires ongoing transformations of this material. A counterpart to this are the unique aesthetics evidenced by those addicted to cosmetic surgery. Whereas bodybuilders and cosmetic surgery patients ostensibly seek to achieve an existing aesthetic criterion, performance-bioartists have made physical changes to their bodies to question aesthetics. The artists Stelarc and ORLAN have both experimented with surgical interventions in part to pose questions about cultural phenomena behind such desires for transformation, as well as to propose functional augmentations of the body towards realizing a new human form of existence through extended capacities.

To continue the development of these creative practices, a consideration of our adaptive mechanisms, in particular the mechanisms of gene expression known as epigenetics, may reveal existing potentials for bodily transformation that have not yet been taken advantage of. Such potentials for transformation can be found in somatic material encounters between the body and a built enclosure. Part of such somatic encounters is a sexual dimension not often discussed, and it may be this that allows for a transformation to be more readily adapted. Material fetishes and material encounters are found in works of art and literature that hint at such potential for transformation.

## 2. The Plasticity of Flesh and Bone

Bioartists have made artworks through the genetic transformations of living organisms, from rabbits and rats to butterflies.<sup>1</sup> Cybernetics have also been used to enhance human capacities for movement and sensation.<sup>2</sup> Others have sought to transform their own flesh and bone through artistic practices. Among these artists, Stelarc and ORLAN offer examples of attempts to propose and actualize possibilities for the human body through the physical transformation of their bodies. These transformations of their own bodies, however, operate within a form of creative practice that reserves the transformation for the artists, positioning themselves as objects in relation to spectators of their performances. To offer the potential of transformation beyond metaphor and symbol, alternative forms of practice should be explored.

Stelarc's "Extra Ear" (1999) and "Ear on Arm" (2007) projects aimed to grow a copy of one of his ears with his own skin cells, and have it surgically transplanted onto his body. This ear would include a microphone that would allow the public to listen online to what the ear hears. Although the project has thus far not achieved all of its goals, he is continuing the process. This project, among others Stelarc has made, seeks to increase his body's sensory capacities through a functional addition, an action that aims to be more than aesthetic. Stelarc ("Obsolete Bodies," n.d.) has stated that "It might be the height of technological folly to consider the body obsolete in form and function, yet it might be the height of human realizations. For it is only when the

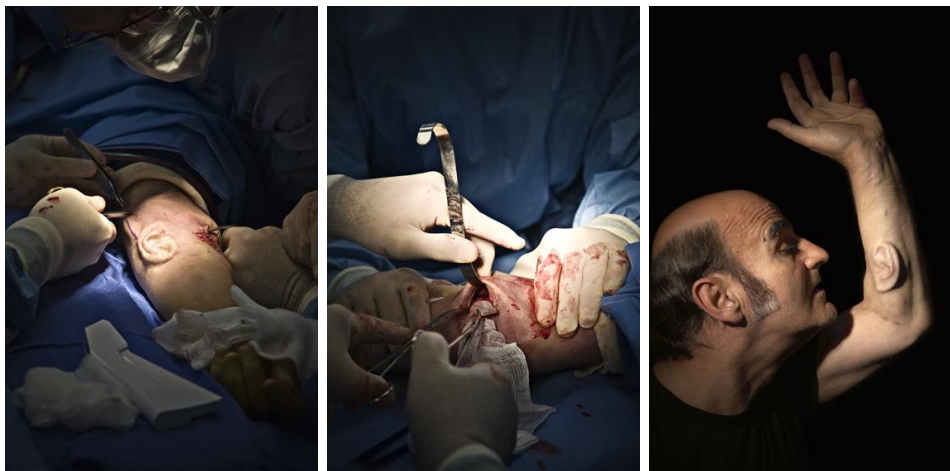
---

1 Eduardo Kac's project "GFP Bunny" (2000) involved the display of a rabbit that had been genetically modified (by Louis-Marie Houdebine) with the green fluorescent protein of the jellyfish so that it would fluoresce when exposed to blue light; Kathy Height's project "Embracing Animal" (2004-2006) genetically modified rats with human DNA and built special housing for them for public viewing; Marta de Menezes's project "Nature?" involved the genetic modification of butterfly wings to create a new wing pattern not seen before.

2 Neil Harbisson's artistic practice derives from his use of a cybernetic implant that allows him to hear color, extending his senses as he is otherwise color-blind. <https://www.cyborgarts.com/>

body becomes aware of its present position that it can map its post-evolutionary strategies.” His attempts to transform the body through biomedical and industrial technologies aims to address what he finds lacking in the human organism as well as realize potentials for new forms of being. He writes (“Redesigning the Body”, n.d.), “having confronted its image of obsolescence, the body is traumatized to split from the realm of subjectivity and consider the necessity of re-examining and possibly redesigning its very structure. ALTERING THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE BODY RESULTS IN ADJUSTING AND EXTENDING ITS AWARENESS OF THE WORLD.”

From 1990 through 1993, ORLAN made an iterative artwork in the form of a series of cosmetic surgery performances titled “The Reincarnation of Saint ORLAN.” Her position on the topic of the body as a material for art is clarified in her “Carnal Art Manifesto” (n.d.), where she states, “Carnal Art is not interested in the plastic-surgery result, but in the process of surgery, the spectacle and discourse of the modified body which has become the place of a public debate.” Through this iterative work, she sought to transform herself into a female ideal of beauty as depicted by male artists, seeking to gain the facial features of idols of female beauty in historical paintings (Mona Lisa, Venus, Psyche, Europa, among others). This embracing of the possibility for physical transformation of her flesh and bone was to counter her DNA, her innate biology, as she states, “my work is a struggle against the innate, the inexorable, the programmed, Nature, DNA (which is our direct rival as far as artists of representation are concerned), and God!” (Jeffreys, 2006).



**Figure 1:** Stelarc (2007- ongoing) *Ear on arm*. Performance/photography artwork.  
Photos © Nina Sellars. Reprinted with permission.

Both Stelarc and ORLAN evidence artistic practices that manifest physical transformations of the body, but it is particularly their (respective) bodies. Their work focuses on sensation, what is experienced through the transformation and post-transformation, but they leave no experience of sensation for us observers or spectators. We can imagine and sympathize but not sense, taking the images and videos they create as inspiration for our own potential transformations but not take part in the transformative process ourselves. In this respect their practices offer conceptual propositions and symbols of transformation that we may abstract into our own lives rather than effecting any sensation of transformation in us. As Stelarc (“Phantom Body,” n.d.) has stated, “The body now performs best as its image.” Although they (especially ORLAN) present a critique of prevailing aesthetics of the body, their work depends on body

as image, as object, and the critique they offer cannot be carried out without this focus. Body as process, as a continuing evolution that we can affect and possibly direct, requires a different perspective as well as a different form of practice.

Popular culture examples of related practices, such as the aforementioned bodybuilding or cosmetic surgery, offer us possibilities more readily accessible. Individuals (non-artists) such as Rodrigo Alves or Dennis Avner (a.k.a. Stalking Cat) may offer even more extreme versions of the potentials cosmetic surgery can offer than either Stelarc or ORLAN do. Whereas most individuals who attempt these transformations through cosmetic surgery do so through private medical systems, some attempt to perform surgery on themselves (Veale, 2000, p. 221). These DIY surgeries illustrate the overwhelming desire for self-transformation through practices of self-mutilation where aesthetics and neurosis converge. Similarly, online bodybuilding forums offer information on where to purchase steroids and cosmetic injections as well as protocols on how to use them. In recent years this practice of chemical transformation has become more acceptable, and these chemicals easier to find. Current practices range from injecting androgens and growth hormones to silicone oils and Bioplasty (derma fillers).<sup>3</sup> In these actions, flesh and bone grow and mutate while integrating with non-living materials. Aside from aesthetic transformations, the practice of ‘trepanation’ has been carried out by some individuals on their own bodies in search of increased mental capacity and psychological health.<sup>4</sup> Once a futuristic or controversial topic, even full sex reassignment surgeries have entered into public discourse. Our bodies, taken as image or objects, are now understood as more plastic in the sculptural sense, capable of being modified or shaped into new forms. The prevalence of this desire for the extremes of body image, and the normalization of both this desire for transformation and the practices through which it is carried out, has changed how such body art is perceived. Furthermore, the normalization of physical changes to the body has led to greater sensations of transformation, with bodies becoming dramatically different, that what is required from critical artistic practices is more than symbolism and image. If we are able to undergo our own surgical and chemical transformations, and to experience the changes that arise in our physiology and psychology, the affective value of symbolic propositions begins to wane.

Rather than a focus on body image, artistic practices might aim to transform one’s body schema, with the former being what others see and the latter being what one feels as a body sensorially or in regards to affect.<sup>5</sup> This parallels what has been lacking in body art practices, in their focus on the image and object of the body as symbol in an alienating ritual of object-subject spectatorship. The experience of transformation, one that is beyond cosmetic but somehow a transformation of being, may be what is desired. This begs the question of whether artistic practices could manifest this change, engendering an affective transformation not through the transformations of flesh and bone but through another medium.

---

3 A key distinction between these popular and artistic practices is that whereas Stelarc and ORLAN make their processes and practices visible to participate in a critical public discourse, these popular culture examples mostly aim to keep their transformations secret, to achieve transformations that would be accepted as natural rather than artificial.

4 20<sup>th</sup> century examples: Amanda Feilding, Bart Huges, Joseph Mellen. See also: *Trepanation: History, Discovery, Theory*. Robert Arnott, Stanley Finger, C.U.M. Smith. Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger, 2003.

5 Shaun Gallagher (2005, pp. 37-38) offers a literature review on the difference between ‘body image’ and ‘body schema.’ He puts forward the distinction as follows: “body image [is] a (sometimes conscious) system of perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions pertaining to one’s own body [...] Body schema, in contrast, is a system of sensory-motor processes that constantly regulate posture and movement—processes that function without reflective awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring [...] The body image normally involves a personal-level experience of the body that involves a sense of ownership for the body. The body schema, however, functions beneath the level of personal life [...] The body image involves an abstract and partial representation of the body in so far as one’s perception, thought, and emotional evaluation can attend to only one part or area or aspect of the body at a time.”



### 3. Phenotype as Artistic Medium

Beyond these cosmetic or skin-deep transformations, poet and architect Robert Kocik proposes that we take our human mechanisms of gene expression—epigenetics—as a novel artistic medium. The epigenome is understood to be affected by both physical and chemical environmental stressors and diet, affecting which genes are expressed. The epigenome is involved in regulating gene expression. Whereas genotype is the set of genes in our DNA responsible for a trait, phenotype is the physical expression of that trait (through RNA as it converts the genetic information so it can be used to build proteins). The genome does not change in an individual, but the epigenome can be altered by environmental conditions. Aspects present in our DNA can remain latent until particular environmental factors trigger their expression. It is accepted that environmental conditions can affect the expression of genes, particularly with environmental toxins. Yet other aspects of our somatic interaction with our architectural surroundings could still be explored towards effecting transformations. Our individual genetics may be fixed, but within that genotype exist potentials for gene expression we may not be aware of. Whereas ORLAN's above statement that DNA is the enemy of the representational artist, non-representational creative practices may find ways to explore this genetic potential.

In looking at this potential, Kocik (2014, p. 124) has proposed that we use phenotype as an artistic medium towards transformations that are either required for our continuation, or that may be beneficial for reasons of our own determination. He writes, "Phenotype is a particularly viable artistic medium. If it is not—if phenotype is not taken up as a particularly viable artistic medium and made true as such—how will we ever stay alive?"

Basing his design strategy on the science of epigenetics, Kocik proposes what he calls "evoked epigenetic architecture," a designed surrounding that has the possibility to transform an organism at an epigenetic level by regulating the expression of genes through determining environmental conditions. He writes (p. 103), "An epigenetic building places selective pressure directly upon our impending persons." To enclose the body with a built surrounding that would evoke epigenetic gene expressions—thus leading to transformations of the body—would be a way of making phenotype an artistic medium. This form of transforming the body would be markedly different from what artists have done in the past; rather than changing their own bodies through surgery or chemical intervention, the artist would create the possibility for anyone to venture into this enclosure and be transformed. This would be a doubled creative act; first the creation of the built surroundings or enclosure, and second the body's epigenetic expression in response to the surrounding. Not all bodies will respond in the same way, as a confluence of specific latent genes, environmental conditions, and timing are required.<sup>6</sup> But in that moment of perfect confluent accord, the body creatively takes up this potential through a gene expression. Kocik writes (p. 124), "So, why not architecture (as active epigenetic agent): the built environment intersecting, interrupting transfer of genetic material from DNA to RNA? As possible biotopological practices how about: Architectural Licking." Could we develop forms of artistic practice that employs somatic experience towards the evocation of epigenetic change? Such a development might allow for epigenetic expressions, and thereby effect transformations of the bodies of those who engage with the artworks rather than transformations symbolically represented in the individual bodies of the artists.

---

<sup>6</sup> Madeline Gins and Arakawa's artistic and architectural practice presents a similar ethos, aiming to build an architecture against death. Their "architectural body" project proposes the potential of architectural design to transform a body, although they do not directly discuss epigenetics. More: <http://www.reversibledestiny.org/>

This idea of licking references an important early study into epigenetics. In a study on the nurturing behaviors of rats, a direct connection between behavior, somatic engagement and gene expression was illustrated. The study showed that rat pups who were licked by their mothers grew up to be happy and calm adult rats that were able to react calmly to stress, whereas rat pups not licked by their mothers became anxious and prone to disease (Weaver et al., 2006). In this case, a somatic and social experience of connection between pup and mother effected a clear transformation. The nurturing behavior of licking led to an epigenetic gene expression, and this led to significant differences in adult rats. This may correlate with human childhood experiences as recent studies have indicated that trauma suffered during childhood can lead to changes in brain development (Bearer & Mulligan, 2018).

#### 4. Remedial Enclosures

In exploring the limits of what transformations can be expected through our engagement with designed surroundings, Wilhelm Reich's 'orgone accumulator' and the commissioned house designs of Richard Neutra present examples of built enclosures designed to transform a person that predate our contemporary understanding of epigenetics. Seeking to address both psychological and physiological ailments, both Neutra and Reich created constructions as remedies, through a reduction of the intensity or frequency of these ailments. Rather than an epigenetic transformation through phenotype as artistic medium, they propose transformation through aesthetic pleasure in connection with the libido and evidence historical precedents for creative practices aimed at transforming the body.

Although there is no record of the two being in contact, uncanny parallels exist in the lives of these two designers. Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957) and Richard Neutra (1892-1970), were both born in Austria and died in America. They also shared an interest in Freud's psychoanalytic thought. Apart from being a personal friend of Freud's son Ernst Ludwig, Neutra's connection to Freud was primarily through the concept of the libido. Neutra was interested in the relation between libido and aesthetic pleasure, and how this link offered new possibilities for architectural design. In her book *Form Follows Libido*, Sylvia Lavin (2007, p. 72) writes:

*The modernist building generally offered its form both as an object of aesthetic pleasure and as an instrument of good health. What Neutra added to this formulation was a definition of aesthetic pleasure as the source of healthful effects, and not just in general but in relation to psychological health in particular. Psychoanalysis was key to this development, because the libido offered the opportunity to link the pursuit of satisfaction and the very idea of pleasure to an environment conceived in relation to flows of energy.*

According to Lavin, Neutra's architectural designs were intended to offer a kind of therapeutic aesthetic experience. The energies that Freud describes in his definition of libido are similar to the energies that Neutra and other architects were designing their buildings around. Neutra was interested in 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophies that did not separate physiology from psychology, perhaps as psychology had yet to come into its own as a distinct field of medicine. This examination of the whole person was key to Neutra's designs, somewhat similar to Reich's perspective.

Based on Freud's theory of sublimation, meaning the transformation of repressed energy into a symptom, Neutra created his own model of energy transactions or transformations. He believed that there were energy transformations within a body, but that these could be brought

into the body from outside, from an external source. The body was a collection of energies that repeated and intensified the energy exchanges taking place elsewhere in the world. Lavin (2007, p. 70) writes, “the economy of his buildings was that, in purchasing a ‘Neutra,’ his clients acquired the promise of happiness delivered through the therapeutics of aesthetic pleasure.”



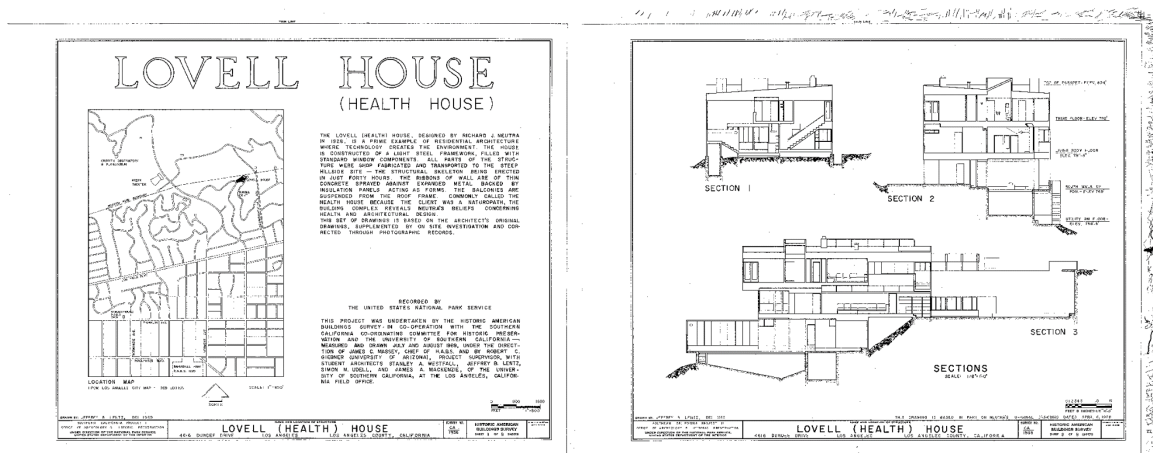
**Figures 2 and 3:** Richard Neutra (1929), Lovell (Health) House. Photo © User: LosAngeles / Wikimedia Commons. Permission for reprinting on Creative Commons license CC-BY-SA-3.0.

Examining his commissioned houses, Lavin describes how Neutra, when designing a home for a client, would conduct many hours of interviews with the client to outline their psychological neuroses. Based on this information, he would design a home that would counteract these neuroses, or act as a therapeutic element in treating them. The elements that he used to effect these therapies were based on his own aesthetic of modernist or international style architecture; large open spaces, large windows, mobile walls, reflecting pools, among others. Later in his career he began to include other elements essential to this idea of therapy, namely opening the house up to the exterior environment, creating natural air flow from outside to inside, and using natural materials such as stone and wood, and of course water in reflecting pools. The interior surfaces were reliefs built up from these materials rather than flattened into a single plane. It was these natural elements and material surfaces of the interior space of the house that were to create, according to Lavin, the therapeutic effects needed to treat his clients’ neuroses. The materials, the effect of using these varied natural materials, was to animate modernist abstract space with the currents of energy in the atmosphere.



**Figure 4:** Richard Neutra, (1932). VDL studio and residence (architect’s own studio and house). Photo © User:DavidHartwell / Wikimedia Commons. Permission for reprinting on Creative Commons license CC-BY-SA-4.0

Neutra's houses intimately connected the inhabitants to the materials and to the environment immediately surrounding the house. The house was permeable, as he saw that humans were permeable. These energies, for Neutra, flowed through all things, people, materials, environments. This holistic view also afforded him the philosophical potential to begin treating clients with his architectural designs. In connection with the libido, the aesthetic pleasure that was therapeutic had within it a sexual dimension. Lavin (2007, p. 70) writes, "the form psychology that conditioned Neutra's reception of psychoanalysis resounded with the quest for pleasure. This tradition presented the body as a registration device that through empathic exchange manifested the effect of an aesthetic object. The resonating vibration imagined between the properly perceiving subject and the properly shaped object was defined as sexually charged." It was this sexual dimension, acting on libidinal energies, that permitted a somaesthetic experience of Neutra's architectural surrounds to be therapeutic. The remedial transformations Neutra sought to effect in his residents would come about through this energetic engagement and interaction between body, material and form.



Figures 5 and 6: Richard Neutra, (1932). Lovell (Health) House. Architecture. Photo © User:DavidHartwell / Wikimedia Commons. Permission for reprinting on Creative Commons license CC-BY-SA-4.0

A psychologist rather than architect, as one of Freud's disciples Wilhelm Reich continued Freud's research into sexual dysfunction in searching for a biological basis for the metaphor of the libido (libido as energy, instincts, unconscious and part of the 'id'). The desires created by this libido, for example sexual expression, often do not fit with societal norms or expectations of behavior and must be controlled through what Freud called 'ego defenses.' Overuse of ego defenses leads to neuroses. So, for Freud, the sexual dysfunctions that result from neuroses are preventing the expression of libido and therefore of sexual desire. Reich turned this around, saying that it is rather the lack of the expression of these desires that leads to neuroses. This was controversial, as Reich was stating that the remedy for neuroses was to have a fulfilled sex life through unadulterated expression of one's sexuality.

Reich's identification of what is lacking in the organism, and the creation of a device to compensate or replace what is lacking (the 'orgone accumulator'), derives from his belief that life operated in a cycle of 'biological pulsation.' This came about through two opposing movements, one of contraction and one of expansion, which themselves came about, for contraction, through a combination of anxiety and sympathetic innervation, and for expansion, the combination of

pleasure and parasympathetic innervation.<sup>7</sup> This was the basis for a rhythm of life, a pulsation that operated across organisms (Reich, 1973, p. 4).

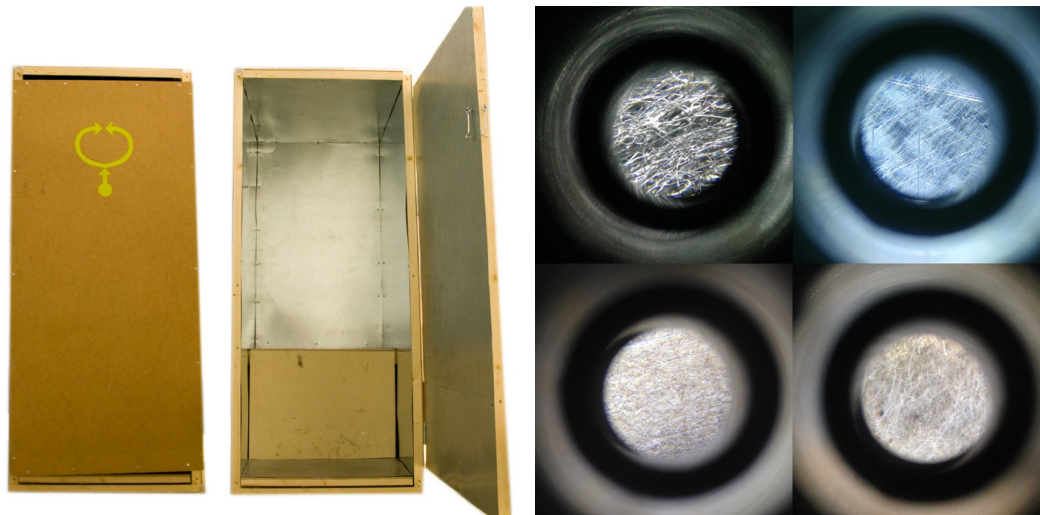
What is particularly interesting here is his extension of psychological experiences, anxiety and pleasure, in combination with parts of the autonomous nervous system (parasympathetic and sympathetic systems) towards a somatic experience. Reich (1960, p. 236) writes: “what we feel as pleasure is an expansion of our organism. In pleasure corresponding to vagotonic expansion, the autonomic nerves actually stretch out toward the world. In anxiety, on the other hand, we feel a crawling back into the self: a shrinking, a hiding, a constriction (“anguistiae,” “Angst”). In these sensations, we are experiencing the real process of contraction of the autonomic nervous system.” This is where the orgone accumulator enters the picture, as a functional, mechanistic contraption that operates to cause direct change in the organism: “the orgone accumulator charges living tissue and brings about an expansion of the plasmatic system (vago-tonia)” (Reich, 1960, p. 237). Reich believed that by sitting in this box, a person would ameliorate their health (physically and psychologically) through the accumulation of positive orgone energy that he believed was a ubiquitous life-force in the universe. Orgone energy was akin to libidinal energy, as Reich’s pseudoscientific experiments to determine a measurable biological corollary to Freud’s libido led him to this result. This perspective parallels Neutra’s belief in the capacity for the (libidinal) energies present within an individual to be transformed by that which surrounds them.

The orgone accumulator is made up of an outer layer of ‘upsom board’, something like MDF today, and then interior layers of alternating steel wool and fiberglass, finishing with an inner layer of zinc treated sheet metal. Reich’s idea was that the steel wool would attract the energy and the fiberglass would insulate it:

*The atmosphere orgone energy does not ‘seep’ through the openings, but penetrates the solid walls. In relation to the accumulator, the organism is the stronger energy system. Accordingly a potential is created from the outside toward the inside by the enclosed body. The energy fields of the two systems make contact and after some time, dependent on the bio-energetic strength of the organism within, both the living organism and the energy field of the accumulator begin to ‘lamine’ i.e. they become excited and, making contact, drive each other to higher levels of excitation. This fact becomes perceptible to the user of the accumulator through feelings of prickling, warmth, relaxation, reddening of the face, and objectively, through increased body temperature. There is no mechanical rule as to HOW LONG one should sit in the accumulator. One should continue with the organotic irradiation as long as one feels comfortable and ‘glowing.’ (Greenfield, 1974, pp. 372-373)*

---

<sup>7</sup> The human autonomic nervous system is divided into two parts, the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems. The sympathetic nervous system accelerates heart rate, raises blood pressure and also constricts blood vessels, whereas the parasympathetic nervous system slows heart rate, relaxes the sphincter muscles and increases glandular and intestinal activity.



**Figure 7:** Wilhelm Reich, *Orgone Accumulator* (author's own, built in 2012). Photo © Scott Andrew Elliott

**Figure 8:** Microscopic pictures of the materials used to build an orgone accumulator  
(clockwise from top left: steel wool, sheet metal, fiberglass, MDF). Photo © Scott Andrew Elliott

The particular qualities of the materials that construct the orgone accumulator are what, following Reich's theory, allow for the increase of energy within a person and resultantly lead to a transformation. Accepting that this theory of orgone energy is false, it is interesting that many individuals who have used the device have had significant affective experiences within them. Author William S. Burroughs, known for the censorship of his novel "Naked Lunch" due to its pornographic content, was a follower of Reich's theories and built a number of his own orgone accumulators. In an article he wrote for the pornographic magazine *OUI* (1977, p. 59) he stated, "[T]he orgone box does have a definite sexual effect. I also made a little one from an Army-style gas can covered with burlap and cotton wool and wrapped around with a gunny sack, and it was a potent sexual tool. The orgones would stream out of the nozzle of the gas can. One day I got into the big accumulator and held the little one over my joint and came right off." Without the fictional 'orgone energy,' what remains is a somaesthetic experience of the material enclosure itself. To sit inside a sheet metal enclosure just large enough for your body (as the accumulators were intended to be custom-fit for each owner) offers haptic, visual and auditory sensations that are themselves affective. Perhaps, mirroring Neutra's designs, it is the aesthetic pleasure found in the encounter with the form and materials that lead to the change in libidinal energy?

Might these examples of built surroundings from Neutra and Reich offer insight into the epigenetic potentials present in somaesthetic experiences? Could a Neutra house or the orgone accumulator perform the architectural licking that Kocik speculatively proposed? This interaction between somaesthetic experience and a transformative libidinal energy may hold clues to how phenotype could be made into an artistic material. To move from genotype to phenotype, from the possible to the actual, requires an expression that may come about through a material encounter between a body and its surroundings.

## 5. Libidinal Plasticity and the Material Encounter of the Car Crash

Following the transformations effected by the somaesthetic encounter with surrounding materials in the works of Neutra and Reich, in J. G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973) bodies are transformed through material encounters which take place in violent events. For Ballard, rather than an evolutionary

progression towards selection of traits better adapted to our automobile environments, the chance event of material encounter present in the violence of a car crash offers a transformative possibility. In such an event, the violent merging of these materials (living and non-living) as well as the transfer of energies (kinetic and libidinal) makes the possibilities present in the already ongoing material conversation accessible. These possibilities need not be speculated upon; in this instance both physiological and psychological transformations are actualized. A person is changed by such a material encounter, and whether or not they participated in the selection of the possibility towards its actualisation is questionable.

Ballard finds a sexual dimension in this encounter between body and material surroundings. When flesh, metal and plastic collide at high speed, where the transfer of energies is manifested in the physical trauma of breaking living and non-living materials, what results for Ballard's characters is a transformation of their sexual desires. He writes (1973, p. 29), "This obsession with the sexual possibilities of everything around me had been jerked loose from my mind by the crash." This small metal enclosure that we spend so much of our time in may offer possibilities for transformations through the material encounters we have with it. Similar to Reich's orgone accumulator, this device may increase libidinal energy through somatic experiences. Ballard writes (1973, p. 81), "The passenger compartment enclosed us like a machine generating from our sexual act an homunculus of blood, semen and engine coolant."

These transformations are both physical and psychological, as the violent event leaves its marks on the crash victims as well as shifts their libidinal drives through the development of a fetish for the materiality of the car. These drives, or sexual fetish, lead the characters into further crashes and sexual encounters within cars as their transformations continue. Over the course of the novel, the main character drifts towards homosexuality through his sexual experiments in and with cars. The physical changes to the human bodies are fetishized as well, as a new material representative of the new sexuality that emerges. Describing one character's changes, he writes (1973, pp. 99-100):

*The crushed body of the sports car had turned her into a creature of free and perverse sexuality, releasing within its twisted bulkheads and leaking engine coolant all the deviant possibilities of her sex. Her crippled thighs and wasted calf muscles were models for fascinating perversities [...] Her strong face with its unmatched planes seemed to mimic the deformed panels of the car, almost as if she consciously realized that these twisted instrument binnacles provided a readily accessible anthology of depraved acts, the keys to an alternative sexuality.*

According to Freud (1950, p. 252), present in a traumatic event is an inherent sexual dimension, He writes, "The mechanical violence of the trauma would liberate a quantity of sexual excitation which, owing to the lack of preparation for anxiety, would have a traumatic effect." The transformation that comes about from such a violent event as the car crash may offer an example of plasticity, where "plasticity designates the fluidity of the libido" (Malabou, 2007, p. 80) The plasticity that Freud describes in human sexuality allows for what he terms a sublimation of libidinal energy into creative impulse. He writes (1950, p. 255):

*Sexual instinctual impulses in particular are extraordinarily plastic, if I may so express it. One of them can take the place of another, one of them can take over another's intensity; if the satisfaction of one of them is frustrated by reality, the satisfaction of another can afford complete compensation. [...] Further, the*

*component instincts of sexuality, as well as the sexual current which is compounded from them, exhibit a large capacity for changing their object, for taking another in its place—and one, therefore, that is more easily attainable. [...] It consists in the sexual trend abandoning its aim of obtaining a component or a reproductive pleasure and taking on another which is related genetically to the abandoned one but is itself no longer sexual and must be described as social. We call this process ‘sublimation’.*

Monastic orders who follow a vow of chastity seek to redirect their libidinal energy towards devotion to God. A literary example is described in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (2004), where the character Gustav has a desire for an adolescent boy, and redirects this desire into writing poetry. Yet this plasticity is entirely psychological and does not address a physical transformation. Ballard’s transformation, or libidinal transmutation, occurs through a somatic experience in an event where the materials of the body and of a constructed surrounding violently interact, and result in both physiological and psychological changes. Furthermore, rather than sublimating the desire into some disconnected act, these desires that are produced by the violent material encounter of the car crash are lived out and expressed. The transformative potential present in the overlap between somaesthetic experience and libido follows through from possibility to actuality.

This marks a parallel between Freudian libidinal plasticity which is only psychological with a physiological plasticity of the flesh and of the epigenome. Perhaps the sexual plasticity that allows for a fluidity of the libido carries over into this physiological realm in a way that allows for physiological changes? The new sexuality and psychological drives of his characters come about not through a genetic adaptation, these were not evolutions that came to pass through generational selection. Rather, by taking up what is on hand through the direct material encounters, a transformation takes place. Through material encounters, Ballard’s characters find ways to adapt, mutate, or transform into new kinds of beings. The sexual dimension of somaesthetic material encounters may lend a degree of plasticity to physiological transformations, and allow for epigenetic transformations to be effected through such events of material encounter.

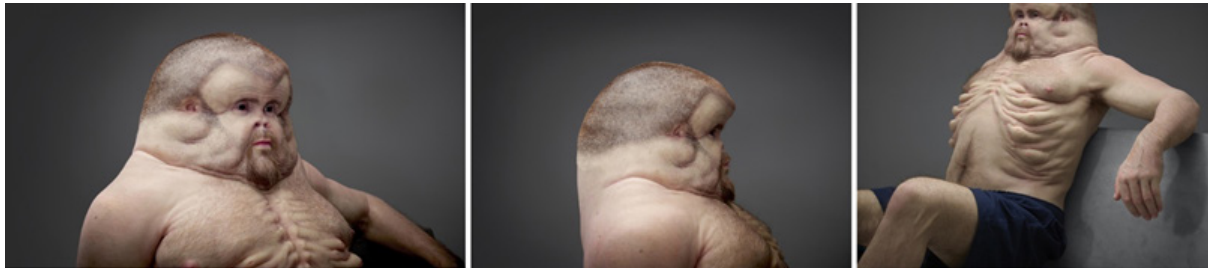
Exploring the notion of plasticity, Catherine Malabou (2012) argues that both physiological brain injuries and diseases as well as psychological traumas can result in significant transformations in affected individuals, and that such transformations express a negative plasticity inherent to our human condition. Her notion of plasticity is derived from Freud’s theory of the libido, and Malabou’s proposition of a negative plasticity runs counter to both Freud’s and contemporary science’s use of the term to describe positive adaptive mechanisms of healing. She writes (2012, p. 17):

*It is clear that wounds—traumas or catastrophes—are not “creators of form” in the positive sense of the term. We are quite far from the sculptural paradigm of “beautiful form.” If the wound, as the determining cause of the transformation of the psyche, has a plastic power, it can only be understood in terms of the third sense of plasticity: explosion and annihilation. If brain damage creates a new identity, this creation can be only creation through the destruction of form. The plasticity at stake here is thus destructive plasticity.*

Malabou present examples of individuals who have suffered traumatic events (PTSD from exposure to warfare) and traumatic brain injuries, all of which result in a loss of one identity in



exchange for a new one. This negative plasticity, we should note, also raises ethical concerns for how creative practices take up epigenetics as it is clear that there are possibilities to cause harm just as much as to find beneficial transformations.



**Figure 9:** Patricia Piccinini, *Graham*, 2016. Artwork [silicone, fibreglass, human hair, clothing, concrete].  
140 x 120 x 170cm. Photo © Patricia Piccinini. Reprinted with permission.

Patricia Piccinini's recent sculptural collaboration with the Transport Accident Commission of Victoria (Australia) led to the speculative design of a new human body more capable of withstanding a car crash.<sup>8</sup> Named 'Graham' (2016) this example offers material adaptations to the body that allow for a transfer of energy into the body without causing as much damage. Here, the flesh and bone structure has been altered in order to better absorb the violent energy of the car crash, though solely in the physical sense. In the work of Piccinini, the detail of the surface again is responsible for the evocation of imagined possibilities. In reviewing her work, Van Badham (2017) writes, "What's uncanny about Piccinini's work is not that an artist's mind can conjure such creatures. It's that the finesse of their detail make every variegated body that she crafts seem suddenly possible. But for Piccinini, the beasts she invents are the logical conclusion of what is possible within the ongoing material conversation between evolutionary forces and environmental ones." This speculative invention that follows what is made possible within the "ongoing material conversation" suggests that there may be current epigenetic opportunities in the direct somatic experience of the car to lead to significant changes in the human organism. However, this work reflects a similar ethos as does the work of Stelarc or ORLAN in the use of body as image and object to speculate on possibilities. What opportunities might we presently have for actualising these possibilities to transform ourselves more tangibly and immediately? Following the propositions outlined by Neutra, Reich and Ballard, what remains to be developed are creative practices in which the affective experience of being within a closely built surrounding—be it architectural, pseudoscientifically medicinal or automotive—leads to epigenetic transformations. It would seem that addressing the plasticity of the libido could offer a direction for such practices to follow.

## 6. Selecting For Epigenetic Change

I propose that it is through a sexual dimension of somaesthetic experience that we will find a way to use phenotype as an artistic medium. It may be that this dimension has always been an important part of our species' adaptations. Darwin's original texts outline a difference between natural and sexual selection, a difference explored by Elizabeth Grosz (2011, p. 132), as she writes:

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.meetgraham.com.au/>

*Sexual selection, as an alternative principle to natural selection, expands the world of the living into the nonfunctional, the redundant, the artistic. It enables matter to become more than it is, it enables the body to extend beyond itself into objects that entice, appeal, and function as sexual prostheses [...] Sexual selection unveils the operations of aesthetics, not as a mode of reception, but as a mode of enhancement.*

Grosz's research outlines sexual difference and sexual selection as the origin of difference, as a mechanism shared by living beings (from bacteria on up) that is the condition for all other differences. For Grosz, difference of any kind begins here.

Returning to Kocik, he suggests that our traits may direct our genetics, rather than vice versa. This might reflect the reversal Reich made of Freud's theory of the libido. Kocik writes (2014, p. 31), "Keep your eye on our 'traits'—the genome will fashion itself after our traits and behaviors and not vice versa. In this way the genome will become an advanced type of retrofection—germ cells influenced not only by somatic cells but even more directly by social forces or perhaps psychological factors (though psychosexual retrofection is clearly beyond the scope of this essay)."

Through a reconsideration of the how the body is transformed, artists may develop practices which allow us to live out transformations through material encounters that stimulate epigenetic gene expressions rather than represent the artist's body as image and symbol of experienced transformations. The sexual dimension of such encounters may be precisely this psychosexual retrofection Kocik parenthetically alludes to. By attending to the material encounters we engage in, and finding within them our own potentials of plasticity, we may find ways to effect immediate transformative adaptations and actualize our ongoing desire for change.

## References

- Arnott, R., Finger, S., and Smith, C. (2003). *Trepanation: History, Discovery, Theory*. Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger.
- Badham, V. (Friday 6 October 2017). From Graham to the Skywhale: the unsettling mutations of Patricia Piccinini. *The Guardian*.
- Ballard, J. G. (1973). *Crash*. New York: Picador.
- Bearer, E. L. & Mulligan, B. S. (2018). Spit and polish: The beauty of saliva for epigenetic studies. *Current Genomics*, Volume 19, 676 - 698.
- Burroughs, W. S. (October 1977). My Life in Orgone Boxes. *OUI magazine*, 59.
- Freud, S. (1950). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press.
- Gallagher, S. (2005). *How the Body Shapes the Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Greenfield, J. (1974). *Wilhelm Reich Vs. The U.S.A.* New York: W. W. Norton.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. (2011). *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics and Art*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- High, Kathy. (2004-2006). *Embracing Animal*. Installation. Accessed January 8th 2019. <https://www.kathyhigh.com/project-embracing-animal.html>.
- Jeffreys, S. (2005). *Beauty and misogyny: harmful cultural practices in the west*. London: Routledge.

- Kac, E. (2000). *GFP Bunny*. [Photograph]. Retrieved on January 8th 2019 from <http://www.ekac.org/gfpbunny.html>.
- Kocik, R. (2014). *Supple Science: A Robert Kocik Primer*. Oakland: On Contemporary Practice.
- Lavin, S. (2007) *Form Follows Libido. Architecture and Richard Neutra in a Psychoanalytic Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Malabou, C. (Winter, 2007). "Plasticity and Elasticity in Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'" *Diacritics* Vol. 37, No. 4, pp. 78-85.
- Malabou, C. (2012). *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*. Trans. Steven Miller. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Mann, T. (2004). *Death In Venice*. New York: Harper Collins.
- de Menezes, M. (1999-2000). *Nature?* [Installation]. Retrieved on January 8th 2019 from <http://martademenezes.com/portfolio/projects/>.
- ORLAN. (n.d.). *Carnal Art Manifesto*. [Artist statement]. Retrieved on January 8th 2019 from <http://www.orlan.eu/texts/>.
- Reich, W. (1973). *The Cancer Biopathy*. New York: Farrar, Stratus and Giroux.
- Reich, W. (1960). *Selected Writings: An Introduction to Orgonomy*. New York: Farrar, Stratus and Giroux.
- Stelarc. (2007- ongoing). *Ear on Arm*. [Performance/photography]. Retrieved on January 8th 2019 from <http://stelarc.org/?catID=20242>.
- Stelarc. (1999) *Extra Ear*. [Performance/photography]. Retrieved on January 8th 2019 from <http://stelarc.org/?catID=20229>.
- Stelarc. (n.d.) *Obsolete Bodies*. [Artist statement]. Retrieved on January 8th 2019 from <http://stelarc.org/?catID=20317>
- Stelarc. (n.d.) *Phantom Body*. [Artist statement]. Retrieved on January 8th 2019 from <http://www.stelarc.org/?catID=20317>.
- Stelarc. (n.d.) *Redesigning the Body*. [Artist statement]. Retrieved on January 8th 2019 from <http://stelarc.org/?catID=20317>.
- Veale, D. (2000). "Outcome of Cosmetic Surgery and 'DIY' Surgery in Patients with Body Dismorphic Disorder" in *Psychiatric Bulletin*, volume 24, pp. 218-221.
- Weaver et al. (February 28 2006). "Maternal care effects on the hippocampal transcriptome and anxiety-mediated behaviors in the offspring that are reversible in adulthood" in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. 103(9), pp. 3480-3485. Doi: 10.1073/pnas.0507526103

## Figures

1. Stelarc, *Ear on arm*, 2007- (ongoing). Performance/photography. Photos © Nina Sellars.
2. Richard Neutra, *Lovell (Health) House*, 1929. Architecture. Photo © User:LosAngeles / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY-SA-3.0
3. Richard Neutra, *Lovell (Health) House*, 1929. Architecture. Photo © User:MichaelJLocke /

Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY-SA-4.0

4. Richard Neutra, *VDL Studio and Residences*, 1932. Architecture. Photo © User:DavidHartwell / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY-SA-4.0

5 & 6. Richard Neutra, *Lovell (Health) House*, 1929. Architecture. Photo: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, HABS CAL,19-LOSAN,66- (Wikimedia Commons / Public domain)

7. Wilhelm Reich, *Orgone Accumulator*, 2012. Installation. Photo © Scott Andrew Elliott.

8. Materials used to make 'orgone accumulator', 2017. Photo © Scott Andrew Elliott.

9. Patricia Piccinini, *Graham*, 2016. Sculpture. Photo © Patricia Piccinini.

# Artworks' Bodies

*Adam Andrzejewski*

**Abstract:** *In this paper, I shed some light on specific kind of experiences when the appreciator takes the artwork as having a body. I shall propose a framework which allows to conceptualise artworks' bodily dimension and which says something nontrivial about artworks and our relationship to them. I argue that some artworks are able to cast a specific sort of aesthetic atmosphere connected with their physical nature as well as appreciator's somatic consciousness. The existence of such atmospheres might be a reason for shifting our understanding of artworks and human relations to them.*

**Keywords:** *materialism, aesthetics, contemporary art, exhibitions.*

## 1. A Stranger in the Room

Imagine yourself visiting an art gallery. As a passionate art lover with a distinguished taste for modern and contemporary art, you have certain habits regarding appreciating works of art. It is early Wednesday morning, and you have intentionally chosen this specific time as you prefer to meet as few other visitors as possible. In your opinion, artworks should be appreciated fully without any distractions. In such a perfect environment, you're dwelling in the gallery enjoying aesthetic and artistic features of the exhibited pieces. Eventually, you come into a room and get caught by a strange feeling. You are looking around nervously and with a surprise realise you're alone in the room. However, the odd impression remains: you *do* feel someone else's presence. A bit confused, you realise that the only candidate for "the other" is the artwork displayed in the room. That is, you *feel* the artwork's physical presence, you feel it as having a *body*.

In this article, I would like to shed some light on the unusual experience described in the above paragraph, that is, when the appreciator experiences the artwork as having a body. In order to do so, I shall propose a framework which allows to conceptualise the artworks' bodily dimension and which says something nontrivial about artworks and our relationship to them. In short, my hypothesis is the following: at least some artworks have bodies. Although it may sound quite controversial, I believe there are reasons supporting this claim if we give the term "body" a specific meaning.

## 2. Close, but Not Close Enough

In order to explore the hypothesis that (some) artworks could have bodies, I propose to start

from identifying and briefly discussing the existing issues from philosophical aesthetics which take into account (not always explicitly) materiality of artworks and the kind of experience connected with it. I would like to consider just two examples thereof: (1) the nature of portraits and their role in our everyday life, as well as, (2) the case where someone loves a piece of art, respectively. Although, neither of these examples can be translated directly into my hypothesis, analysing them will help us set up a theoretical framework supporting my intuition and will bring our attention to the aspects of works of art that make us think that some art pieces have bodies, and how we should understand such an unintuitive claim.

In my house, there is a rather special photograph given to me by a close friend of mine Kamil. The photograph (taken by our mutual friend Filip) depicts me with Kamil sitting near our favourite tree in the park close to the area where we live. We both look very happy and quite exhausted. The photo was taken at the end of a full day and night of intensive celebration honouring his acceptance at the prestigious Lodz Film School. Every time I take a look at the photograph, good, wild memories vividly come back to me, but also, and most importantly, I think of my friend. The way in which he is depicted makes me think: “That’s the *real* him!”<sup>1</sup> The photograph is a portrait of my friend.

The situation described in the previous paragraph is—certainly—quite familiar to most people. We treasure portraits (mostly photographs, both analog and digital) of our family members, loved ones and friends. Cynthia Freeland has illuminated the very special nature of portraits and the complex experience of them in her celebrated book *Portraits and Persons* (2010). In a nutshell, her philosophical account of the art of portraiture<sup>2</sup> argues that portraits “provide us with an essential revelation of persons, of their very nature” (ibid., p. 43). That is, when looking at a portrait, we get a certain sense of authenticity: the person depicted is rightly represented in terms of gesture, facial expression or individuality (ibid.). Thanks to this function of portraiture, we might maintain “contact” with persons that we love or like even if they are far away or passed away some time ago.<sup>3</sup>

More analytically, Freeland formulates three conditions that have to be met for an object to qualify as a portrait. So, the portrait needs to present “(1) a recognizable physical body along with (2) an inner life (i.e., some sort of character and/or psychological or mental states), and (3) the ability to pose or to present oneself to be depicted in representation” (ibid., p. 74).<sup>4</sup> Thus, if something is a portrait, then it gives the viewers a sense of the depicted person’s “essence”: her distinct features of character, body awareness, the way she is and/or the moral outlook of that person (ibid., p. 78 and p. 116).<sup>5</sup> For example, Leonardo da Vinci’s *Lady with Ermine* (1489-90) depicts Cecilia Gallerani who was a mistress of Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan. Gallerani is presented in a noble pose, as a wealthy and powerful woman. Without going deeply into the complex and interesting interpretation of the painting (see Pizzagalli 2006; Shell & Sironi 1992), we can easily notice that she is a bit lonely. There are no other people around her; the

1 Which is not always the case when I look at other photographs depicting him. Also, I doubt that it is the real me in the photo (or, at least, not to the same extent as my friend). In other words, I would say that the photograph is his portrait, but not mine. This raises the question of when a given photograph is a mere depiction of the person, and when it is able to become something more “serious”, that is, a portrait of that person. For the sake of simplicity, I decide not to address that question.

2 Portraiture, as a category, is a subset of depicting objects. So, it covers various art forms such as paintings, drawings or photography.

3 Ibid., p. 49. Freeland supports her claim with reference to Kendall Walton’s transparency thesis regarding photographs. It says, roughly, that when looking at a photograph, we indirectly *see* the objects depicted in it (“seeing-through-photography”). Cf. Walton (2008). However, it seems that Freeland extends this specific sense of “contact” to other forms of portraiture as well.

4 For another interesting account of portraiture, see also Maes (2015). Note, that the notion of body, as explained later, applies also to objects that are not of representational nature. I am using portraiture as a starting point for my further investigations.

5 *Nb.* Freeland claims that only persons can be portrayed. See p. 80.

background is in a minor colour, and her expression seems to be quite distanced. All of this clashes interestingly with the way she intimately strokes the ermine. Based on the painting, we might say something nontrivial about Gallerani's life.

Let me move to the second example derived from philosophical aesthetics. Undoubtedly, artworks can elicit serious emotional reactions. People like artworks, admire or contemplate them. On the other hand, some artworks evoke frustration, boredom or anxiety in their recipients. It is hard to remain neutral when it comes to art. And, because of that, art is a powerful tool that can be successfully used for social change or moral education (see e.g. Simontini 2018; Berger & Alfano 2016). There are people claiming to love particular works of art. Imagine for a moment that you are visiting the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. You have very carefully chosen a month, day and exact time for your visit to maximally limit the number of other visitors in order to enjoy the beauty of artworks there fully. While walking through the corridor, you overhear a lady saying "I return here every year. I just love Botticelli's *Primavera*! I can't take my eyes off it!" You might interpret the overheard confession as follows: the lady likes *Primavera* very much. That would not be very surprising since we often unproblematically use the phrase "I love *x*" while actually meaning "I really like *x*". We love skiing in Les Trois Vallées, drinking Priorat wine in Barcelona or eating chocolate noir in Turin in that way. However, the *Primavera* case seems to be different. What the lady actually meant was that she really loves Botticelli's masterpiece located at the Uffizi Gallery.

The issue of loving artworks seems to be an underdeveloped topic within the contemporary philosophical debate.<sup>6</sup> Luckily, Anthony Cross has recently touched upon that issue when investigating the nature of obligations to artworks (2010). Starting from assessing the moral character of obligations to (all) artworks (he is quite critical of such a possibility), he claims that people have genuine obligations to those artworks they actually love (ibid., p. 87). The concept of love that is invoked by Cross is not entirely clear; notwithstanding, he makes an interesting observation when noting that "... we value works of art in much the same way that we value other persons" (ibid., p. 91). (*Nb.* Cross critically evaluates this claim.) I think this says something true about our relationship with works of art, and I propose to treat the mentioned passage as an invitation to broaden the scope of human love to artworks.<sup>7</sup>

Without a doubt, there are a number of various kinds of love: we love our partners, friends, kids or members of the local community, but in each case "love" means something a bit different (Helm 2005/2017). Since the theme of loving artworks is almost absent in philosophical aesthetics, and its framework has not been established yet, I propose to learn something about the issue in question from real-life cases, however rare. Agnieszka Piotrowska's critically acclaimed documentary *Married to the Eiffel Tower* (2008) is—as far as I can tell—the best artistic study on that theme, showing women falling in love with objects. Types of objects vary from person to person, and they have different sizes, textures, and designs. In the film, we see evidence for loving a katana or a bow, but also for loving the Berlin Wall, the Golden Gate or the Eiffel Tower, and at least the last two objects might count as pieces of architectural art. My intention is not to analyse the documentary's content nor to judge the viewpoint stated in the movie, but merely to pick up on interesting points that are shared by all of the heroines depicted there. Firstly, objects are given full-fledged agency similar to persons. That is, objects (including artworks) can feel, have moods, intentions, thoughts and are even able to save human lives (one of the

6 For a notable exception, see Maes (2017).

7 For the sake of simplicity, I'm leaving aside the (causal) relationship between obligations to artworks and loving them.

characters claims that she did not commit suicide *because* of her love for the Twin Towers). It is especially evident when people depicted in the documentary claim that they are very much in love with some objects: the portrayed characters believe that the objects love them back.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, there is a sense of sexual appeal towards the loved objects. However, it is not always necessary and certainly goes beyond standardly understood fetishism. Lastly, the relationship with the loved object is taken very seriously. It is shown that the characters are deeply and genuinely emotionally engaged with loved objects: they can stand for them or communicate with them and feel “no difference” between them and human agents (Newman, Bartles & Smith 2016). Two of the depicted characters are even “married” to beloved objects—the Eiffel Tower and the Berlin Wall.

Now it is time for general remarks. As I mentioned earlier, the examples derived from philosophical aesthetics would help direct our attention into those aspects of artworks that support my main hypothesis, suggesting that at least some artworks could have bodies. Investigations into the nature of the art of portraiture tell us one important thing: it is not the artwork in itself that has a “body”, but rather the person that is depicted in the portrait. Or, more analytically, if we feel someone’s presence in the gallery room, it is the person depicted in the portrait, rather than the piece of art as it is. The overall—without a doubt—special and intensive experiences elicited by portraits are connected mainly with the portrayed persons. That is, if we feel a certain “mood” or “air” when experiencing an artwork, it is because we can grasp the “mood” or “air” of the portrayed person. A positive lesson learned from focusing on portraits is that we are quite sure that artworks can cause such a feeling, and we get a good explanation of that fact. The position suggested by me provides a more radical and (and surely controversial) view that it is truly possible for someone to love an artwork. It presupposes that we are interested in not *only* what is depicted by the object (for example, a person, a landscape) but also in the work itself. People love artworks in their totalities, not only what is represented/symbolized by them. Even if the story from *Married to the Eiffel Tower* is highly controversial, it says something true about loving artworks (not only as sexual objects): if we love a piece of art, we feel like it has its own body.<sup>9</sup> Returning to the *Primavera* example, it would be quite strange to love that masterpiece without admitting its autonomy (though we do not need to claim that it has any agency or personality). It is worth noting that when we love a work of art, we are likely to change our manner of thinking about it—including the vocabulary we use. That is, I bet that we are more likely to say that the work is “hurt” or “raped” rather than “damaged” or “misinterpreted”, and that shift takes place quite naturally, without one even fully noticing it.

### 3. Atmospheres

Places have atmospheres: a narrow, dark street could be frightening, a mountain view sublime, while a clearing feels peaceful and safe. Atmospheres are elusive “entities” yet powerful and irresistible: it is hard to avoid them, and they have an impact on our lives. In this section, I shall introduce the concept of “atmosphere” as an aesthetic concept described and defended by Gernot Böhme in his book *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* which has recently been published in

---

8 *Nb.* It is subject to change in due course: it is possible to “break up” with an object. In such a case, both persons and objects suffer from emotional coldness.

9 The feeling of bodily presence of the artwork is not necessarily connected with the fact that a human being is depicted by that artwork. It is true that in such cases it would be “natural” to link that feeling with the person depicted (e.g. portraits). However, in this paper an approach suggested by me is more ecumenical. That is, I suggest that some artworks have bodies and that fact is fairly independent from their representational nature (e.g. an abstract painting could have a body although it does not depict any person).



English (2017).<sup>10</sup> In the next section, I will use that concept as well as what has been established so far to support the claim concerning artworks' bodies.

According to Böhme, "Atmosphere is what relates objective factors and constellations of the environment with my bodily feeling in that environment. That is: atmosphere is what is in between, what mediates the two sides." (ibid., 20). Atmospheres are "placed" between the subject and object. Their ontological status is then quite peculiar. On the one hand, they are quasi-objective: they could be shared with other people, or at least they are inter-subjective to some extent (ibid., 70; see also Griffero 2014). For example, imagine that you intrude upon a departmental meeting without being formally invited. As a student, you might feel intimidated, and the atmosphere in the room might be quite tense. Or, when visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, you get the impression that the place you are in is very solemn and serious. At that point, it is not surprising if we note that other students or pilgrims feel the atmospheres quite similarly. Thanks to the fact that atmospheres are essentially rooted in the sharable features of the environment, e.g., a room is spacious, a landscape is vivid, a valley is cloudy, people can discuss and share their impressions with others. I would like to add one qualification: when you agree on the features of a certain atmosphere, its influence is strengthened. For example, if your companion says "That street is so dark. I don't feel safe here!", and you concur, then the street might seem even more hostile to both of you.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, atmospheres can be created. It is not something new that some places are intentionally designed to elicit a certain kind of impression. This is especially true when it comes to, for example, tourist practices (i.e. some designated spots to admire the natural surrounding like a picturesque landscape) or architecture (i.e. monuments or squares that highlight royal power) to name just a few.

On the other hand, atmospheres are extremely vague, indeterminate and intangible (Böhme 2017, p. 69).<sup>12</sup> How we perceive a particular place or object depends on who we are, what experiences we embraced throughout our lives and our general approach to the surroundings. That is, atmospheres are entirely subjective since "one must expose oneself to them" (ibid., p. 70).<sup>13</sup> It is difficult to imagine the atmosphere of the place without actually being there. What is more, we often struggle with explaining the sense of an atmosphere of a place to individuals who have not experienced it. For example, after visiting the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, you say to a friend "Giotto's frescos are truly amazing!"; but it seems unlikely that he could grasp the general aura of Giotto's artworks without seeing them. In atmospheres, we perceive not only objective features of objects, but also objects' "ekstases" that are "the expressive forms of things" (Böhme 2017, p. 95). That is, objects not only have properties (e.g., being blue) but also these properties relate "to the way in which they radiate outwards into space" (ibid.).

Another important characteristic of atmospheres is that they fill spaces. People enter a place that is filled with a certain atmosphere, and usually, its radius is limited to that place. For example, if you are at a local pub during Christmastime, you probably feel an atmosphere of joy and happiness. The atmosphere is "spatially" extended throughout the pub and, maybe, its proximate exterior. So, you cannot feel that atmosphere on the opposite side of the street. However, when you exit the pub, you might be fuelled with its atmosphere. That is, "atmospheres are apprehended as powers which affect the subject; they have the tendency to induce in the

10 Atmospheres are sometimes defined also as "half-entities". See e.g. Grant (2013, p. 21).

11 It does not mean, of course, that the street itself gets any "new" features. However, the atmosphere of danger becomes increasingly tense.

12 However, at the same time, they claimed to be as real as solid entities. See Griffero (2014, p. 10).

13 Juhani Pallasmaa (2014) notes that when someone is in an atmosphere she or he grasps its "essence" immediately. That is, she or he experience first the atmosphere as a totality, and then (if at all) its "elements".

subject a characteristic mood” (ibid., 88). It should be noted that Böhme’s proposal may be easily undermined by claiming that it lacks the critical dimension of the aesthetic.<sup>14</sup> That is, focusing on the very elusive notion of “atmospheres”, we are not able to give any objective criteria for appreciating atmospheres. I think that is quite true. However, it is not a threat to Böhme’s theory itself. He intentionally distances himself from the aesthetics concentrated on formulating aesthetic judgements and focuses instead on aesthetic experiences (Böhme 2017, pp. 43-46). The primary aim of the aesthetics of atmospheres is to describe people’s aesthetic reactions to atmospheres and their role in shaping our perception.

#### 4. Bodies

So, finally, what does it mean that some artworks have bodies? Or, what are artworks’ bodies? The most intuitive answer to these questions is to claim that “body” is nothing more than another way to say “medium”.<sup>15</sup> That is, by “body” we refer—maybe a bit metaphorically—to artworks’ materiality in general. And if so, since all artworks have mediums, then all artworks have bodies. The answer sounds elegant and straightforward as it provides a unifying solution by employing an already well-established conceptual framework for our problem. Intuitive as it is, however, it does not explain the particular situation (and experience) described in the opening section of this essay, namely, that some artworks are experienced as being *present* in a different way than other art-works. The difference is not automatically rooted in the medium itself, as two artworks made from the same sort of medium (say, marble) may be experienced entirely differently—the first one might make one feel like it has a body, whereas the second might not.

Taking into account the above, I shall propose an alternative view for artworks’ bodies. I suggest that when we say “I feel that this artwork has a body”, we really refer to the special aura of that artwork. In other words, we mean that such a piece of art casts a special atmosphere.<sup>16</sup> The key point here is that atmospheres, as aesthetic phenomena, are essentially bodily feelings. According to Böhme, “[t]o perceive aura is to absorb it into one’s bodily state of being. What is perceived is an indeterminate spatially extended quality of feeling” (Böhme 2017, p. 54). He also notes that “atmospheres are evidently what are experienced in bodily presence in relation to persons and things or in spaces” (ibid.). Böhme’s proposal renders to the fact that atmospheres emanate from objects and fill spaces around them. People are bodily aware of atmospheres thanks to objects’ ekstases and change the mood when entering a particular atmosphere. I accept this, but I think that in the case of artworks we can nuance this view a bit more. Atmospheres are bodily feelings and may be noticed by individuals only when they are aware of their bodily presence in the world. The same is true when we feel an atmosphere cast by another person. For example, when we accidentally run into our ex-partner and get an impression of discomfort or when someone is welcoming a beloved friend after a long time apart and feels happiness.<sup>17</sup> Both cases presuppose that we are bodily aware of the presence of the other person and we react (also bodily) to them because they have bodies as well. I hope it is acceptable to draw an analogical line between persons and artworks. Sometimes we react to artworks in such a way that enables us to experience *our* bodily nature, that we are engaged with the world primarily with our flesh

14 *Nb.* Sometimes taking care of that dimension in doing aesthetics is not the most important thing. See e.g. Leddy (2012).

15 I refer here to the *physical* medium and omit the issue of *artistic* medium, as the latter is not relevant for the purposes of this essay. See Davies (2001, p. 181).

16 It seems true that some artworks can cause atmospheres. See Pallasmaa (2014, p. 233); Griffero (2014, p. 83).

17 However, it should be noted that it is still hard to define when, (or, more precisely, under which circumstances), a person causes an atmosphere. This might be defined by the person of whom the atmosphere we feel *and* the recipient of that atmosphere as well.

and encountering other bodies as well. This kind of feeling—which is not automatically aesthetic appreciation—reflects, in its essence, to the same extent both on subject and object. In other words, an artwork's body is, in fact, a (specific) kind of atmosphere that is cast by that artwork. However, it is not only a matter of how the work works. We must remember that atmospheres are “placed” between subjects and objects. And if this is true, then also human reactions to objects (here, artworks) are not neutral for designing a certain kind of atmosphere. I do not want to say that people “project”<sup>18</sup> their bodies onto artworks, but rather I would like to stress that people's body consciousness is questioned in such a way by artworks that we perceive them as having bodies as well.<sup>19</sup> To sum up, artworks' bodies are their atmospheres.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, not every artwork has a body. It is rather an unusual situation when experiencing art. So, what are the criteria for obtaining/designing this kind of atmosphere? As it has been stated earlier, the aesthetics of atmospheres is not focused on formulating frameworks for critical discourse. Appreciating this standpoint, however, I hope to provide an account of some general tendencies that facilitate the existence of artworks' bodies.<sup>21</sup>

Firstly, it seems that—using Nelson Goodman's terminology (1976)—autographic works of art are more likely to cast such an atmosphere. Naturally, experiencing the majority of allographic artworks allows us to experience aesthetic atmospheres as well. For example, reading a Gothic novel in my house may create an atmosphere of horror in my shadowed living room. Notwithstanding, having just one and only one instantiation of an artwork (e.g., a painting) gives an impression that the work is located *here* and *now*, in *this* space and at that time. An artwork's uniqueness fosters the existence of its “body” because I, as a person and art appreciator, have only one body and the same (as I feel it) goes for the artwork.

Secondly, the way in which an artwork is physically present in the space also has some importance. Three-dimensional objects, such as sculptures, are more similar to our own bodies (even if they are very different) than paintings (even if they are quite similar to humans—I mean portraits, for example). This is obviously because some objects arrange space around them “better” than other artifacts. Sculptures are (usually) more “enforcing” if you compare them to drawings or landscape paintings. As a result, a place is created which means that the spatial surroundings of the artwork become meaningful (Haapala 2005).

Thirdly, artworks connected with the so-called lower senses (touch, smell and taste) also seem to favour the existence of bodies. If you extend the notion of arthood to a wide range of artifacts, such as fine clothing design, then it would be even more intuitive. Artworks, traditionally speaking, are “distanced” from appreciators due to the fact that we experience them via the so-called higher senses (sight and hearing). And these are the senses of distance which (supposedly) make them more objective and intellectual, as opposed to the lower senses that are (allegedly) proximal and subjective (see Korsmeyer 1999). Experiencing an artwork via the lower senses might reinforce the possibility of gaining the artwork's body (designing the atmosphere). For example, using your favourite piece of design, say, a Hans Wegner chair is inevitably connected with bodily involvement in its function. Naturally, this does not mean

---

18 Surely, there are a number of artworks questioning human bodily dimensions in a more direct way. For example, body performances. See Heinrich (2012).

19 Please note that neither do I claim here that artworks have the same kind of bodies as humans nor that they enjoy any full-blooded personality and/or consciousness.

20 Again, not every aura is an artwork's body. Aura is a more general and heterogeneous category, whereas bodies refer to specific artistic atmospheres that invite us to experience and understand artworks in their totalities as something autonomous and fully present in the space.

21 The list is obviously not final. It is rather a phenomenological question as to whether a given person feels the bodily presence of the work of art (its special atmosphere).

that the chair feels like having a body. However, the situation might be different if someone *else* is using your chair. It is possible for you to *feel* that your chair does not want to be used by other persons. Quite analogically, someone could have a similar impression when wearing their best friend's cardigan. It may fit very well. However, they might feel as if they “aren't in their own skin” as the cardigan is the visual signature of that friend.

In the end, it is worth considering the possible advantages (both theoretical and practical) of accepting the claim that some artworks have bodies. I think that my hypothesis, although roughly stated and clearly needing further development, is valuable for a number of reasons. First of all, it sheds light on the rather strange experience of artworks—when the appreciator feels someone's presence, but there is no other human being in the room. That experience might be not frequent, but it allows us to conceptualise artworks in terms going beyond the concept of physical medium. Artworks seen in that way are more “autonomous”.<sup>22</sup> And people are capable of appreciating that. Secondly, thanks to that, it provides another reason for postulating the genuine rights of artworks. Artistic artifacts are traditionally seen as vehicles for human intentions and emotions, and because of that, we should respect them. Genuine rights of artworks ought to be rooted in artworks, not in artists (creators). Maybe we should be able to value them not only for the aesthetic pleasures they give us but also for the works as they *are*, even if they are not original, sublime or beautiful. Thirdly, as one of the heroines depicted in *Married to the Eiffel Tower* says, “[p]eople love objects for practical purposes. This is why they don't see the soul of the object.” Perhaps the heroine is telling us a profound truth: if we would like to really get an object's (artwork's) soul, its essence, then we should treat it like one of us, and this presupposes perceiving it as if were a body. This is because we are, as humans, conscious bodies (Shusterman 2012).

\* \* \*

In this paper, I have tried to enumerate reasons supporting the hypothesis of artworks' bodily dimension. That is, I suggested that some artworks could be experienced as having *bodies*. In other words, these artworks are able to cast a specific sort of aesthetic atmosphere connected with their physical nature (going beyond “mere” medium) as well as the appreciator's somatic consciousness. The existence of such atmospheres might be a plea for shifting our understanding of art-works (not purely in objectifying terms) and human relations to them (as something intimate).

## Acknowledgment

Thanks to Karan August and Max Rynnänen for their helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this article. I am also grateful to an anonymous reviewer for interesting criticism. This work has been supported by the Foundation for Polish Science.

## References

Berger, J., Alfano, M. (2016). Virtue, Situationism, and the Cognitive Value of Art. *The Monist*, 99, pp. 144-158.

---

22 Here I mean some kind of phenomenological autonomy—that the work is really “there” and felt as independent of the spectator. I do not refer here to, for example, aesthetic autonomy (also involving the autonomy of aesthetic judgement).

- Böhme, G. (2017). *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*. Ed. by Thibaud, J-P. London: Routledge.
- Cross, A. (2017). Obligations to Artworks as Duties of Love. *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics*, 54, pp. 85-101.
- Davies, D. (2001). Medium in Art. In Levinson, J. (Ed.). *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Freeland, C. (2010). *Portraits and Persons*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goodman, N. (1976). *Languages of art: An approach to a theory of symbols*. 2nd Edition. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Grant, S. "Performing an Aesthetics of Atmospheres", *Aesthetics*, 32 (1), pp. 12-32, 21.
- Griffero, T. (2014). *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*., Trans. by S. de Sanctis, Ashgate 2014.
- Haapala, A. On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place. In *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*. Light, A., Smith, J.M. (Eds). New York: Columbia University Press. Pp. 39–55.
- Heinrich, F. (2012). Flesh as Communication – Body Art and Body Theory. *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 10.
- Helm, B. (2005/2017). Love. In Zalta, E. (Ed.). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- Korsmeyer, C. (1999). *Making Sense of Taste*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Leddy, T. (2012). Defending Everyday Aesthetics and the Concept of "Pretty". *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 10.
- Maes, H. (2015). What is a Portrait? *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 55, pp. 303-322.
- Maes, H. (2017). Truly, Madly, Deeply: on what it is to love a work of art. *The Philosopher's Magazine*.
- Newman, G., Bartles, D., Smith, R. (2015). Are Artworks More Like People Than Artifacts? Individual Concepts and Their Extensions. *Topics in Cognitive Science*, 6, pp. 647-662.
- Pallasmaa, J. (2014). Space, Place and Atmosphere. Emotion and Peripheral Perception in Architectural Experience *Lebenswelt*, 4, pp. 230-245.
- Pizzagalli, D. (2006). *Dama z gronostajem: życie Cecilli Gallerani w Mediolanie czasów Lodovica Sforzy*. Poznań: Rebis.
- Simoniti, V. (2018). Assessing Socially Engaged Art. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 76, pp. 71-82.
- Shell, J., Sironi, G. (1992). Cecilia Gallerani: Leonardo's Lady with an Ermine. *Artibus et Historiae*, 13, pp. 47-66.
- Shusterman, R. (2012). *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Walton, K. (2008). Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism. In Walden, S. (Ed.) *Photography and Philosophy: Essays on the Pencil of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Pp. 23–25.

# Sparks of Yoga: Reconsidering the Aesthetic in Modern Postural Yoga

*Noora-Helena Korpelainen*

**Abstract:** *In this article, I consider aesthetic experiences in Ashtanga Yoga practice. Yoga has become extremely popular, a part of everyday life. Yet, aesthetics and yoga are rarely considered together. Using somaesthetics and everyday aesthetics, I argue, that the aesthetic is essential in practicing yoga because of the performing body, environment-like uniting of postures, and the experiences of liminality, sacredness, liberation, and asceticism. Furthermore, I show that recognizing the aesthetic dimension in yoga doesn't require approaching yoga as an art form, and that balance and beauty can be considered parallel.*

**Keywords:** *yoga, aesthetic experience, everyday aesthetics, beauty, aesthetics.*

## 1. Introduction

Yoga is popular. There's hardly another as popular method for cultivating both body and mind. Due to its popularization, this ancient esoteric practice is prominent in our contemporary, globalized, virtually shared, and aesthetically tuned culture. In fact, the way one encounters yoga in different medias, public spaces, and everyday discussions, is often aestheticized. Modern yoga researcher Mark Singleton describes the situation aptly, though provocatively, in the following.

*Today the yoga body has become the centerpiece of a transnational tableau of personalized well-being and quotidian redemption, relentlessly embellished on the pages of glossy publications like Yoga Journal. The locus of yoga is no longer at the center of an invisible ground of being, hidden from the gaze of all but the elite initiate or the mystic; instead, the lucent skin of the yoga model becomes the ubiquitous signifier of spiritual possibility, the specular projection screen of characteristically modern and democratic religious aspirations. In the yoga body—sold back to a million consumer-practitioners as an irresistible commodity of the holistic, perfectible self—surface and anatomical structure promise ineffable depth and the dream of incarnate transcendence. (Singleton, 2010, p. 174, emphasis in the original.)*

This situation exactly motivates me to scrutinize the aesthetics of modern yoga. To expand on Singleton's notion, yoga practitioners produce numerous representations of their own practices as photos, videos, and texts with a seemingly important aesthetic tone; and social media provides an engaging platform for the circulation of these representations. It is, however, misleading to form a conception of the aesthetics of yoga approaching solely representations of yoga, although they are either intentionally emphasizing some aesthetic qualities or are easily interpreted as underlining the aesthetic dimension. I wish to show that an experienced yoga practice can be considered aesthetic, too.

Yoga is an old word: it's mentioned already in the circa fifteenth century BCE text *Rg Veda*. The so-called "classical yoga" practice has been described already in the circa third century text *Yoga Sūtra* by Patañjali. Regarding the long history, the meaning of the term "yoga" has been exhaustive (White 2012, pp. 1–6). In the contemporary situation where yoga is, besides popularized, also institutionalized by independent yoga research centers and recently also by universities, the definition of yoga is compelling. However, modern yoga researcher Suzanne Newcombe argues that yoga's nature can't be fixed with "overarching essentialist definitions" (Newcombe 2018, pp. 549–574). Having this in mind, I discuss, in this paper, yoga as a practice done by a yoga practitioner. I follow Indologist David Gordon White's understanding of yoga practice as a kind of program and a practical application of theory (White, 2012, p. 11).<sup>1</sup> A yogi, whose experience about existence arguably differs from a normal human being, and his practice, remain thus outside my scope.

Modern postural yoga is a late "invention" dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Modern yoga researcher Elizabeth de Michelis describes modern yoga as syncretic, cross-cultural, and secularized "practice and a living tradition" to which Ashtanga yoga, one of the most popular postural modern yoga practices, is also foundational (de Michelis 2008, pp. 17–35). Postures, as such, are not a modern phenomenon in yoga practice; instead, it seems to be the wide use of uniting postures in series that characterizes modernity in yoga practice (Mallinson, 2011, p. 3). Thus, although I find several aspects in yoga intriguing from the aesthetics' point of view, I focus here on Ashtanga yoga's serial posturality to reveal the essentiality of the aesthetic dimension in modern postural yoga.

Yoga and aesthetics are rarely considered together. Besides, if the concept "aesthetic" is used, it usually emphasizes some kind of incorrectness in yoga practice. For example, Benjamin Smith refers with the aesthetic to the pose being "imposed on their [practitioners'] body rather than drawn out from it" (Smith 2007, pp. 36–37, endnote 19). However, philosopher Richard Shusterman holds that yoga carries within its practices "somaesthetic knowledge" (Shusterman, 2000, p. 261; Shusterman 2012, pp. 11, 34, 43–44, 87, 337). This suggests that yoga practitioners deal with the aesthetic somehow. Through reconsidering aesthetic experiences in yoga practice, I argue that the aesthetic dimension is not only possible, but essential, in modern postural yoga.

I begin with outlining the Ashtanga yoga practice and its relation with the body and performance to form an initial understanding of yoga as a somaesthetic program. Doing so, I do not wish to negate yoga's religious or spiritual relations—and I glance at spirituality, too—but in general, I leave the discussion about spirituality in yoga outside the scope of this paper, just as I do with the discussions about yoga's health effects and political aspects. The discussion on these aspects exceed the limits of this paper.

---

<sup>1</sup> White states that "yogi practice" denotes the behavior of a yogi who has gained ability to transmit the supernatural powers into acting. "Yogi" begun to mean something else than a Tantric practitioner only during the twentieth century. (White 2012, pp. 11–15.) Indologist Georg Feuerstein's conception of yoga as a psychotechnology is in line with White's conception (Feuerstein 1990, pp. xx–xxi).

Somaesthetics focuses on our somatic being in the world as “body–minds,” underlining thus the contradiction between a living and a dead body instead of that between body and mind. Yoga practice builds up, in general, on experimenting the mind-body inclusion (e.g. White, 2012, p. 7). This conception of the body, and its use, is the base for understanding yoga as a somaesthetic program, a conception, which aids in approaching yoga practice without focusing neither on yoga’s religious relations nor its possible art-like nature.<sup>2</sup> This is especially due to the somaesthetics’ appreciation of popular phenomena and the fact that somaesthetics, as a field of studies within the aesthetics tradition, is less bound with the discussions about the Arts. Furthermore, somaesthetics’ demand for practical approach in making philosophy enables appreciating yoga as a practice empowering thus the aesthetics of yoga, which is in first place based on subjective experiences.

After pointing out that the aesthetic dimension affects yoga practices through the performing body, I continue, in the third chapter, to discuss the “everydayness” in practicing yoga. With the help of everyday aesthetics, I wish to show that the aesthetic in yoga practice has to do with experiencing environment. I assist this reading with philosopher Arnold Berleant’s concept “aesthetic field” (Berleant, 1991) to show, in the third and fourth chapter, that due to the unavoidable presence of body, the aesthetic experiences in yoga have to do with liminality, sacredness, liberation, and asceticism. This analysis pours in the significance of balance in Ashtanga yoga practice. I propose, in the fourth chapter, that in yoga practice balance parallels beauty which proves to be, in fact, no less than one key function in modern yoga practice.

My viewpoint is formed through practicing Ashtanga yoga together with reflective and analytical approaches. I do not attempt to give necessary and sufficient conditions for aesthetic experiences in practicing modern postural yoga nor in yoga as such. Instead, I wish to enlarge the almost neglected discussion about the aesthetics of yoga and bring a view outside the scope of religious studies, which holds the dominance in discussing about experiencing yoga.

## 2. Live Performance in Ashtanga

*Ashtanga Vinyāsa Yoga* is a yoga method developed by the yoga teacher Śrī K. Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009) whose teacher was the former yoga guru Śrī T. Krishnamacharya (1888–1989).<sup>3</sup> Ashtanga appears as a notably designed practice with its six series of postures and the style to perform them in a fairly rigid order (*mala*). It’s, however, based on the ancient yoga traditions, namely the eight limbs (*aṣṭa aṅga*) of yoga, presented in *Yoga Sūtra*, and the tradition of *Haṭha Yoga*, a yoga method known for the use of physical practices. Ashtanga thus forms up of physical practices (*āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *pratyāhāra*) and mental practices (*dhāraṇa*, *dhyāna*, *samādhi*) together with moral and ethical guidelines (*yama*, *niyama*) (e.g. Jois, 2002). While the other parts are stressed all the time in the Ashtanga teachings, the physical side of yoga practice dominates not only in the media representation but oftentimes also in the practice situations (see e.g. Freeman et al., 2017; Smith, 2008, p. 147). Indeed, postures like *dvipāda sīrsāsana*, in which both legs are put behind the head while sitting and holding hands together, are aesthetically pleasing when done by an advanced practitioner.

2 The aesthetics of yoga parallels easily yoga with either the Arts in general or with some art form. This happens e.g. in Newcombe’s analysis of yoga studios and in Singleton’s analysis of modern postural yoga’s history. (Newcombe, 2018; Singleton, 2010.)

3 I refer with “Ashtanga” only to Jois’s method. For a detailed description of Ashtanga from a practitioner’s point of view, see e.g. Benjamin Richard Smith’s sociocultural articles (Smith, 2004, 2007, and 2008).



Ashtanga is often described as physical, dynamic, and performance centered. When one starts the practice for the first time, it's evident to focus on the physical side, that is, in practicing posture (*āsana*) and breathing (*prāṇāyāma*). Ashtanga teachings also notice the value of physicality with the use of bodily techniques such as the special kind of audible breathing (*ujjayi*), muscle locks (*bandhas*), gazing points (*driṣṭi*), focusing attention, and the method for linking breathing to movement (*vinyāsa*). These techniques are believed to help in regulating the life force (*prāna*) enabling thus the hoped purification. For example, the capacity to control one's breathing is believed to imply the practitioner's capacity to control their mind (e.g. Jois, 2002, p. 50; Feuerstein, 1990, p. 135). Ergo, the physically bounded technique of vinyāsa is in the core of Ashtanga practice. I will come back to it later. However, despite of the physical bias, Ashtanga is a holistically engaging practice in which a practitioner must deal with their whole being, whether when practicing posture, concentration (*dhāraṇa*), meditation (*dhyaṇa*), or when working to follow the guidelines, like non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), and purity (*śauca*) (e.g. Smith, 2008; Neverin, 2008).

The immediate experience of practicing Ashtanga is somatic. According to Shusterman, in neuroscience, somatic describes especially “feelings of skin, proprioception, kinaesthesia, bodily temperature, balance, and pain” (Shusterman, 2012, p. 6). Doing the practice heats the body up until dripping sweat on a yoga mat and touch is notable when trying to push one's hands through the crossed legs in *garbhapindasāna*. Although pain is generally avoided in yoga practice, sometimes bending forward hurts the hamstrings. In the somaesthetics' point of view, somatic has, however, much wider reference emphasizing a living body in interdependence with pretty much everything. It describes all that affects the being and functioning of a body-mind, either inside or outside it, all the senses, emotions, cognition, habits, movement patterns, and ways to experience the body-mind, as well as all naturally or culturally shaped knowledge (e.g. Shusterman 2012, p. 16). It goes without saying, that the aesthetic dimension affects a yoga practitioner, too.

In yoga contexts, the aesthetic relates often only to beauty. For example, in the 46th *sūtra* of *Vibhūtipāda*,<sup>4</sup> beauty belongs to the perfections of body acquired through yoga (Broo, 2010, p. 197). Beauty seems to be promised in yoga practice. When beauty is commonly understood as a quality in objects we observe, it's easy to relate aesthetics in yoga to a yoga practitioner's changed appearance or to their exquisite practice performance. Practicing Ashtanga changes the body as I've pointed out in the introduction. Moreover, the dynamic way to perform Ashtanga suggests that a refined postural performance would be even the purpose of the practice. Visually focused understanding of the aesthetics of yoga is, however, not comprehensive when considering somatically experienced modern yoga.

Aesthetic, as a concept, derives from the ancient Greek word *aisthesis* meaning roughly perception. The somaesthetic view emphasizes perception as a phenomenon dealing with the whole body-mind. To Shusterman perception is “embodied” and the aesthetic refers then to feeling, consciousness, and sensory appreciation, as well; the aesthetic is an unavoidable feature of normal human existence and a part of everyday life (Shusterman 2012, pp. 3, 103, 111, 140–141, 182–183, 188, 288–314). In yoga practice, however, the nature of our everyday perception is generally considered dysfunctional, forming a source to our suffering which a practitioner seeks to overcome with yoga (White 2012, pp. 6–8). Yoga practice is ought to make one feel better. Shusterman points out that in somaesthetics this “feel better” refers both to cultivating the

---

4 Yoga Sūtra 3.46.: rūpa-lāvanya-bala-vajra-saṃhanantvāni kāya-sampat.

present experience and to the consciousness about the cultivation (Shusterman, 2012, p. 111). Practicing yoga develops perception and enhances skills to experience. I leave to be pondered, if the inner experience of a somatic practice like yoga, in fact, cultivates the aesthetic.

Performances have always had their place at least in modern postural yoga. Already Krisnamacarya arranged spectacle-like yoga demonstrations (Singleton 2010, pp. 190–196). In a typical practice situation, it would be, however, odd to speak about performance because the practice is not aimed at the audience's enjoyment. Audience, in the literal meaning, is rarely present when Ashtanga is practiced, but, practitioners pause sometimes to contemplate fellow practitioners' performing. It can be an aesthetic experience to watch bodies performing movement sometimes simultaneously and with a concentrate manner while listening to the steady sound of breathing and the occasional thumps on a wooden floor in a sweaty yoga studio, which even without practitioners often praises many senses with colorful yoga mats, candles, incense, borduna-like silence, and images from mythology (like *Gaṇeśa* and *Om*) and recent history (like teachers' photos). One's own practice performance may also provide aesthetic experiences. While observing their "inner body" during the practice, a yoga practitioner may experience ecstatic sensations like, for example, bright light seen with eyes shut (Bernard 1960, pp. 90, 94–95).

The performance is a part of Ashtanga, but, it is better to understand live with which Shusterman means unavoidable, conscious and developed, controlled and pleasurable everyday being (Shusterman, 2000, p. ix; Shusterman 2012, pp. 17, 27, 288–314). In fact, many Ashtanga practitioners attempt "to make the practice a part of everyday life" and "transform their quotidian selves" with the help of the practice (Smith, 2004, note 4).

In a general Ashtanga experience, novelties and exciting exotic experiences play a small role. More often a practitioner is occupied with repetition, familiarity, and perseverance. This is highlighted with Ashtanga teachings, which prefers regularity and values the most the daily practice done early in the morning. The practice is usually modified little according to each practitioner and even the individual practice program stays basically the same, sometimes for years. Every time the practice starts with opening a yoga mat, taking a straight standing pose (*samastitiḥ*) and chanting a mantra. Each practice consists of sun salutations (*sūryanamaskāra*), fundamental poses, poses of the series under practice, and the finishing sequence. The practice ends with a mantra, relaxation, and rolling up the mat. Experientially each practice is still different.

Ashtanga's live performance denotes the skillful and enjoyable practice performance and points to the transformed existence. Following Shusterman, performing Ashtanga is then living in a "waking state," the "Art of Living," which to Shusterman is a potential source for aesthetic enrichment and "spiritual enlightenment" (Shusterman 2012, pp. 26, 288–314). Within yoga discourse, the ideal purpose of the yoga practice is commonly to renounce the attachment to the world. When the aesthetic is understood as deepening our attachment through perception, senses, and emotions, thus enriching and complexifying our experience, it follows that the aesthetic challenges a yoga practitioner. In Ashtanga practice this challenge appears as the dramatization of the everyday.

Shusterman grounds his understanding of dramatization in "the act of framing" which functions as a maintaining mechanism for the dialectics between the immediately perceived surface of the experience and its deeper cultural frame (Shusterman 2002, pp. 10, 226–238).<sup>5</sup> In

---

<sup>5</sup> The reading in this paragraph bases strongly on the Shusterman's explanation found in the same place.

Ashtanga, a practitioner observes everyday mundane actions, like breathing, moving the body, and being present through participating attentively into the practice, that is, into the frame. “The act of framing” describes the twofold function in which continuous directing of attention both intensifies the experience of everyday being during the practice and helps to experience better the everyday in general. A practitioner becomes thus always more powerfully engaged to the immediately perceived surface of the experience during the practice. At the same time “the act of framing” instills Ashtanga’s cultural value.

### 3. Pleasure in (The) Practice

Ashtanga is practiced in various environments, though yoga studios, with their often ascetic (and in my experience also kitschy) style, provide the ideal surroundings for the practice. The built-in practice space is a yoga mat, a portable space separator providing a secure chassis for the bodily movement and privacy to the practice experience. As Newcombe says, the limits of a personal yoga mat, “a ritual space,” “are often experienced as a deeply personal location,” and practitioners guard its sacredness (Newcombe 2018, pp. 566–567). However, for a frequent practitioner, the practice itself remains a place, a somatically engaging significant set-up, through which one wonders—as one would in an environment like nearby woods or a home town—participating somatically in encountering at times something new but most of the time “the same old thing.”

A yoga practice, as the body-mind, can be understood as a place for experiment and experience through the already discussed “act of framing.”<sup>6</sup> In Ashtanga practice, framing means directing somatic attention, in general. Concentrating in breathing and proprioception directs the attention to the experiences of the “inner body” withdrawing attention from the surroundings. Framing heightens the significance of the “inner body” giving a familiar sense of the situation due to previous practice experiences. A yoga practice is thus a place in a way philosopher Arto Haapala understands place.

*It is interpretation in the hermeneutic sense of living in an environment and making sense of it by acting there, by doing various things in the environment, by creating different kinds of connections between matters seen and encountered. In this sense interpretation is very much a matter of action [. . .] it is something that we are engaged in all the time while engaged in our daily practices. (Haapala 2005, 46–47.)*

An Ashtanga practitioner refines the posture into the body-mind and observes the effects dwelling somatically within nested frames; the quotidian life, a yoga studio, a yoga mat, mantras, *vinyāsa*, a posture, the body-mind, and the body-mind’s functions and directions.

According to philosopher Ossi Naukkarinen, popular phenomena should be approached as environments, that is, instead of objects, as ever-changing event-like situations and processes in time and space demanding multi-sensory engagement (Naukkarinen, 2017). I find this view appropriate also in the case of popular Ashtanga practice. Instead of art works or forms, the practice parallels everyday environments and belongs thus to the same category with places where we brush our teeth, commute, and shop grocery, for example. One may ask, how does the aesthetic relate to these environments? *Yoga Sūtra*, which Ashtanga practitioners tend to read, might give one answer with its underlying metaphysical duality.

---

<sup>6</sup> Richard Shusterman discusses also about a scene (*skene*) in understanding the body-mind as a place (Shusterman 2002, pp. 233–235).

The metaphysics of yoga philosophy holds that the two entities, Nature (*prakṛti*) and “the seer” (*puruṣa*), connect and thus form up the existence. All perceivable belongs to essentially creative *prakṛti* and its entangling three qualities (*guṇa*); *sattva* (e.g. bliss), *rajas* (e.g. activity), and *tamas* (e.g. dense). A yoga practitioner is a result of this entanglement and therefore unable to perceive the reality as it is. Only *puruṣa*, existing behind all, sees the truth. (Broo 2010, pp. 19, 183–184, 207–208; Ruzsa, 2019.) In my reading, with *aesthesis* in mind, the existence itself seems an aesthetic experience, only that a yoga practitioner may not receive it so. Yoga, like any everyday environment, belongs to the aesthetic dimension when perceived. Of course, this reading simplifies the presented metaphysics, but my point is to illustrate with it the necessity to base the aesthetics of yoga on engagement instead of distance.

When trying to understand the aesthetic dimension of an everyday environment like a yoga practice, Berleant’s concept “aesthetic field” is enlightening. It emphasizes an unavoidable engagement in the field, which consists of inseparable though recognizable material, appreciative, creative, and performative dimensions, forces, and phenomena instead of objects (Berleant, 1991). I discussed the performative dimension already in the preceding chapter and I revisit it in the next chapter together with discussing the creative dimension. Here the examples of practicing posture and the way to unite postures illustrate Ashtanga’s material and appreciative dimensions.

In practicing posture, the pervasiveness of materiality, brought up with yoga’s metaphysics, becomes experiential. A practitioner experiences not only “flesh and bones” but also emotions, thoughts, sensations, and energy flows as something to be directed and modified. An example of materiality in Ashtanga practice is e.g. *Utthitahastapādaāṅgusthāsana* (UHP), a posture practiced in the beginning of the first series (*Yoga Chikitsa*). It is a typical balancing posture in which one stretches a leg up in front of the body supporting the posture with a strong leg, holding big toe with fingers and waist with another hand. It takes time to learn to stand without shaking in it and the balance vanishes easily. A practitioner supports, strengthens, lengthens, realigns, releases, and opens the body in relation to a set fulcrum while working to receive, accept, and let go of the thoughts and emotions like fear, judgement, anxiety, or problem solving. A practitioner modifies the breath and nervous system and directs the sensations of focus along the body. When practicing in a group of other practitioners, a practitioner also directs the somatic attention in haptic communication with others (Smith, 2007, p. 35). A practitioner participates this way in directing other’s “energy flows” as well. In UHP the balancing of *prakṛti*’s qualities is palpable. When *tamas* prevails, laziness, pain, or anxiety obstruct a posture. When *rajas* dominates, a practitioner overemphasizes the performance. But, when a practitioner experiences the place with no need to move and no need to stay still either, the pose happens.

Every posture done for the first time is a “foreign land” with unknown places and borders opening a new “window” to the reality. The postures bring up the body-mind’s essence with new somatic experiences enabling a practitioner to realize and scrutinize their limitedness. The appreciative participation to the postures’ and the body-mind’s transformation may mean new ways to think and experience. Besides postures change the physical point of view due to body’s position and gazing points, the point of view to the body-mind, gravity, and the environment changes after practicing a posture some time. Indeed, a posture is a “living metaphor.” As Berleant says, a “living metaphor’s” force “does not lie principally in what it means but what it does” (Berleant 1991, pp. 125–126). At one point, the posture manifests familiar, comprehensible, own, easy, and pleasant.

Pleasure is mainly discussed, in the traditions that relate to Ashtanga, either in relation to

the understanding of yoga body as a “sealed hydraulic system” or in relation to experiencing emptiness. The former discussion deals with the esoteric practice of transforming the essential fluids to the “ambrosia of life” with the help of “the feminine principle” (*kundalinī*) and “the heat of asceticism” (White, 2012, p. 16; Jois, 2002, p. 31).<sup>7</sup> In some forms of this practice, pleasure (*bhukti*) values even higher than liberation (*mukti*) (Dehejia, 1986, p. 185). The discussion about emptiness, instead, relates enjoyment to developing consciousness, one of the core principles of yoga practice, in general. It is understood that an advanced yoga practitioner’s “one-pointed awareness” (*samādhi*) develops through “empirical, rational, sensorial, and subjective” levels including both object-bound and objectless awareness; “Bliss (*ānanda*) and joy (*hlāda*)” are related to the sensorial or aesthetic level of awareness in which the focus of a practitioner is the aesthetic cognizing itself, either in the “blissful apprehension” or in “the indescribable intentional flow of awareness” (White 2012, pp. 6–12; Larson 2012, pp. 84–88). In my opinion postural practice provides the third, and more relevant, way to grasp pleasure in popular Ashtanga practice.

Modern yoga manuals discuss in detail about the correct way to perform postures. Ashtanga practitioners, however, often refer to Patañjali’s only words about posture: “steady and pleasant” (Broo 2010, pp. 134–136).<sup>8</sup> I find these words echoing Haapala’s understanding of the everydayness. According to him, familiarity characterizes our everyday experience, instead of distance and strangeness, and this he relates especially to the experience of place. Everyday environment gives a homey background for our everyday experiences disappearing itself at the same time into its functionality, into just being present. It is our attachment to the environment that characterizes the everydayness. (Haapala, 2005, p. 41.) Following Haapala, the everydayness of Ashtanga practice is in its “being there,” as a part of life and its functions. A practitioner may, however, look forward to the next time to practice as one would look forward to going home.

The everydayness manifests in Ashtanga practice especially due to *vinyāsa*-technique.<sup>9</sup> *Vinyāsa* frames each pose (*sthiti*) of a posture and unites specially arranged postures together. Thus, *vinyāsa* heightens the experience of settling down to a posture and makes the practice a continuous wholeness. In the immediate experience, *vinyāsa*, however, means matching one’s inner rhythm to the movement guided by the breathing. As such, *vinyāsa* backs postures, gives an environment for happenings, and helps to immerse in experiencing the practice. *Vinyāsa* is thus both a tool to experience present situation and a manifestation of being present. It helps a practitioner to realize the presence altogether.

Due to *vinyāsa*, Ashtanga is also characterized by alternation, structured by stillness and movement. The body-mind’s inner movement manifests while a practitioner is settled in a stillness of a pose, and the experiential stillness, instead, manifests while a practitioner is moved by *vinyāsa*. One might experience an alternating “landscape” where momentariness mingles with continuity alternating endlessly like the movements of waves approaching the shore. In my understanding, *vinyāsa* is a somatically experienced representation of the attempt to still the fluctuation of the mind, the famous Patañjali’s description of yoga (Broo, 2010, p. 32).<sup>10</sup>

7 In Ashtanga practice this is especially related to practicing inverted poses.

8 *Yoga Sūtra* 2.46.: “sthira-sukham āsanam |”. Philipp A. Maas argues, that sūtras 2.46. and 2.47. are to read together, when the meaning of *āsana* underlines two types of practices in classical Yoga: “slackening of effort” and “merging meditatively into infinity” (Maas, 2018, pp. 49–100).

9 Ashtanga community often states that the destroyed book *Yoga Korunta* by Rishi Vamana is the source for the method. For sure Krishnamacharya taught it during his years in Mysore palace yoga school. Singleton argues that the western bodily traditions influenced the method (Singleton, 2010, pp. 175–210).

10 *Yoga Sūtra* 1.2.: “yogaś citta-vṛitti nirodhah |”.

When a practitioner experiences consciously a pause between thoughts, between the happenings, between moving and settling down, the place may become experienced liminal by which I mean meaningful being in between. A practitioner drills stretching this experienced pause. Encountering the background environment from this position helps the practitioner to redefine the body-mind's construction. This may mean experiencing the body more as a blissful "non-place" as Shusterman describes his own Zen-experience (Shusterman 2012, p. 314). According to Neverin, even novice yoga practitioners may describe their practice experience as merging into "a whole different world," and with a long-lasting practice the liberating experience can provide a long-lasting continuous flow-experience (Neverin 2008, pp. 125, 123–128). The experience of flow is close to Berleant's conception of sacredness which he describes as a sensation of strong, participative, significant, and personal connection enabled with a holistic engagement. It is "a magical moment" in which the experience of reciprocity intensifies, concentration strengthens, and one is more perceptive. One may feel as merging together with the surroundings; the place becomes an environment. (Berleant 1997, pp. 171–172.)<sup>11</sup> In these moments, the whole sequence of postures may suddenly "open" through a posture-in-hand giving a feeling of beginning the practice from the middle. One might realize what it is all about.

In practicing Ashtanga, the experiences of sacredness may mean everyday openings of connection with the environment while the everydayness characterizes the aesthetics of Ashtanga practice. The aesthetics of yoga can therefore be understood without approaching yoga as an art form.

#### 4. Balance and Beauty

Asceticism has characterized yoga practice for centuries. Contemporary yoga practitioners are, however, hardly ascetics with their "super cool" yoga pants trying to combine hectic modern lifestyle, career, and family life together. For many, Ashtanga means something like exercising at gym. The purpose of the practice is rarely to renounce the worldly life in search for final liberation. It may be that only a frequent practitioner experiences the everydayness as discussed in the previous chapter, since familiarizing oneself with the environment takes time. There are, however, other views to the everydayness. The everyday experiences may differ depending on person's character, habits, and skills to deal with the environment (Puolakka 2018). I believe that aesthetic experiences in modern postural yoga practice are available for each practitioner, and that this may be through the parallel character of balance and beauty.

In Ashtanga practice, asceticism relates to self-discipline (*tapas*), the Yoga Sūtra's moral guideline, which promises perfection of the body and senses (Broo, 2010, p. 132).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, maintaining the daily practice calls for self-discipline, but sometimes appearance beats practicing also in the case of a frequent practitioner. This is well illustrated by JP Sears, the internet comedian who ironizes the life around yoga practice in his project *AwakenWithJP*. His video "How to take yoga photos for Instagram" (*AwakenWithJP*, 2016), is a felicitous show of the tendency to link the visuality of a yoga practice representation to practitioner's status: the more beautiful, powerful, or expressive representation, the more advanced a practitioner is believed to be. This raises a question, if modern postural yoga practitioners, in fact, seek the aesthetic with their practice?

11 Berleant argues, that in the experience of environment, sacred can be aesthetic without religious preferences (Berleant 1997, pp. 171–172).

12 *Yoga Sūtra* 2.43: "kāyendriya-siddhir aśuddhi-kṣayāt tapasah |". *Tapas* (to heat) has several meanings and it is practiced in various ways.

According to Klas Neverin, “beautism,” the extreme quest for beauty, may be empowered by neglecting language in modern yoga practice (Neverin 2008, pp. 131–135). I agree, to the extent that, since the meaning of beauty is neglected in modern yoga contexts, beauty becomes understood in the most common way our contemporary culture understands it, that is, as a sensuously biased concept. In modern yoga contexts, beauty describes almost purely a person or a deity—and most of all, a female yoga practitioner (also a theme, which JP Sears ironizes). The transcultural contemporary yoga scene is, however, an arena for the many culturally dependent beauty conceptions. One ought to recognize, for example, the typically eastern conception, which relates beauty to such phenomena as everyday life, learning processes, limitedness of human being, ideal expression, intuitiveness, metaphors, nature, and aestheticization of death (Eväsoja 2011, pp. 15–22).

In Shusterman’s understanding, ascesis has to do with beauty. For him, ascesis means “a special quality of attentive consciousness or receptive, caring mindfulness that discloses a vast domain of extraordinary beauty in the ordinary objects and events of everyday experience that are transfigured by such mindful attention” (Shusterman, 2012, p. 305). Beauty is thus found in the everyday life. Ascesis, which has an etymological root in the ancient Greek word *áskēsis* meaning exercise, relates to disciplined developing of consciousness. It is noteworthy, that the aesthetic contradicts anesthetic, not ascetic (Shusterman, 2012, p. 3). Ascesis characterizes person’s relation to the daily-life. Based on this understanding, ascetic could be valued as a style of an Ashtanga practitioner.

Style, as a concept, expresses the reflective connection between the form and the content. Style means expressing experientiality developed through somatic processes, and as Shusterman says, sometimes style manifests the whole being of a person and seems to “shine” out from them (Shusterman 2012, pp. 46, 332, 333–337).<sup>13</sup> In any case, style is unavoidable. A yoga practitioner performs either consciously or unconsciously their experiential reality. In modern postural yoga practice, a practitioner’s “mindful attention,” the ascetic style, is based on balance. A practitioner balances the body-mind and its functions, a posture and postures relation to *vinyāsa*; and balancing captures also the relation between the self and the others, the teacher and the student, as well as the relation between purpose and method, liberation and renouncement of liberation. At some point, a practitioner may even need to balance yoga and non-yoga.

The style of a modern postural yoga practitioner evolves through practicing. Although, already one’s first Ashtanga practice may highlight the both meanings of “feel better”—one may both feel energized and realize enhanced perception—a first-timer and an advanced yoga practitioner undoubtedly experience their yoga practice differently. Somaesthetics, as an ameliorative framework, suggests that an advanced yoga practitioner is advanced also in experiencing aesthetically. Neverin seems to agree, when stating that experiential skills, such as perception, sensing, and interpretation, but also memory, emotions, and imagination steer modern postural yoga practitioner’s many experiences and sensitize them to perceive both the body-mind and its surroundings (Neverin 2008, pp. 125–126, 127).

Cultivating the body-mind changes experiencing. Therefore, a yoga practitioner’s task is creative. Within Ashtanga context, creativity of each practitioner follows from *prakṛti*’s essentially creative nature. Berleant illustrates creation with the idea of generation, a process of growth and development referring both to unfolding potentialities and to the reciprocity between different factors. According to him, creativity demands developed skills to be aware,

---

13 Klas Neverin notices that practitioners and their practices may be evaluated in relation to the volume of “shining (emotional) energy” formed by experienced empowerment and its reinforcement through gained attention with performing (Neverin 2008, pp. 128–135).

as well as skills to enter the experience and work with it. (Berleant 1991, pp. 132–150.) The continuously changing experientiality in Ashtanga is very much about unfolding skillfully expanding possibilities from one's being and about encountering with manifold factors in the manner of reciprocity. It is an effect of encountering the body-mind and discussing continuously with the body-mind, that one finds the possibility to put one's head between legs from behind and the mind behind the thoughts. But practitioner's experiential development relies also on the reciprocity with the sociocultural context. Alter and Neverin point out the relation between performing and empowerment in modern postural yoga: Others practice performances affect emotionally and motivationally practice experiences while performing empower existentially and socially, a situation, which may result in an emotionally "positive spiral" strengthened by a sense of belonging to the community (Alter, 2008, p. 46; Neverin 2008, pp. 128–135).

An experiential space that opens through creativity, be it inside the body-mind, around it, or between body-minds, may give a sense of liberation. However, Neverin argues, that yoga's power to change people has limits due to our interdependence with our material, social, and discursive environments (Neverin 2008, pp. 130–132). In my opinion, neglecting such concepts as beauty and aesthetic in modern yoga may hinder a yoga practitioner's process of cultivation.

When yoga is understood as a technology based on balancing the aspects of one's existence, yoga can bring forth, at least by analogy, experiences of beauty. The conception of beauty follows then the Pythagoreans' seminal "proportion-based theory," in which beauty consists of fit, right, or balanced proportions. According to philosopher Władysław Tatarkiewicz, this theory dominated the European aesthetics' conception of beauty for over two thousand years (Tatarkiewicz 1972, pp. 165–180). Also Shusterman seems to follow the theory when stating that somaesthetic programs, like yoga, aim at experiencing beauty and developing harmony in the body-mind. The many ways experiential proportions that become balanced are the different facets of one's own being. They manifest in between reflective and pre-reflective, between appearances, cognitive and affective, between internal and outer experiences, and between the experiencer and the experienced. Beauty is thus understood in the broadest sense including the ethical dimension. (Shusterman 2012, pp. 3, 5, 14, 22, 34–45, 87, 133, 305–306; Shusterman, 2000b, p. 142.)

Experiencing balance means being in the process, for balance is an active condition. It needs continuous maintenance and, at times, complete restoration. This is highlighted in *Bhagavad-Gītā*, in which Kṛṣṇa teaches the talent of equanimity to the depressed war hero Arjuna while persuading him to act instead of non-acting (Tapasyananda, 2003, p. 181).<sup>14</sup> The dynamic character of balance manifests in the belief-system prominent in *Haṭha Yoga* tradition and discussed also in modern yoga contexts. The system's esoteric and metaphoric dualities such as sun and moon, life and death, heat and coolness, feminine and masculine are somatically experiential to a yoga practitioner (see e.g. White 2012, pp. 15–17; Mallinson 2012, pp. 258–262). Perhaps the clearest symbol of both balance and beauty can be found in the Hindu God Śiva, the lord of yogis, and his eternal dance. Śiva, whose image may be found also in a modern yoga studio, is a paragon of holding balance in whatsoever pose, and as a God the ultimate beauty. Indeed, succeeding in holding balance may feel like encountering beauty, the potential dimension of the process, face to face.

*Such balance is the result of controlling the mind, or attention, which seems naturally disposed to flit hither and thither. Yoga is centering—the center being the*

---

<sup>14</sup> *Bhagavad-Gītā* is valued also in Ashtanga yoga community.



*transcendental Being, whether it be called God or higher Self. Thus the word yoga signifies both the state of harmony and the means of realizing it.* (Feuerstein, 1990, p. xx, emphasis in the original.)

Recognizing only extreme yoga experiences beautiful would imply that beauty in yoga practice is only for advanced practitioners. Balance, however, due to its dynamic character, can be experienced from the very first moment one starts to practice. In these experiences—in the sparks of yoga—a modern postural yoga practitioner may behold “extraordinary beauty.” With this analysis, it follows that without experiences of beauty, advancing in modern postural yoga practice is impossible.

## 5. Conclusion

The aesthetic is an unavoidable dimension of modern postural yoga, a practice for the millions. Although the aesthetic is rarely discussed within yoga contexts, modern postural yoga has elements that call for aesthetic consideration. Perception, senses, emotions, different kinds of materials, and developing consciousness, which form a part of a yoga practitioner’s project, are all critical to the aesthetic analysis and experiences. When approaching yoga practice through the material, appreciative, creative, and performative dimensions of the aesthetic field, also a yoga practitioner’s experiences of liminality, sacredness, liberation, and asceticism can be considered aesthetic.

Beauty, wellbeing, and success—the culturally trendy possible outcomes of yoga—are often favored in popular culture’s presentations of yoga. The popularization boosts the overall tendency to practice yoga, but, it often neglects yoga as a practice. I have tried to show how the aesthetics of yoga goes beyond appearance and how representations of yoga practices offer only a partial, nay fallacious, subject for analyzing the aesthetics in modern yoga. Following my argument, others practice performances in general, should be discussed rather as re-representations of yoga practice. Through explicating the experience of the Ashtanga yoga’s technique to unite postures, I have tried to show, that the live experience of performing yoga practice is already one kind of representation.

A picture of a half-naked film star-like woman in a yoga pose manifests the misleading dichotomy of the aesthetic and the ascetic, which can be, instead, considered interconnected. The fundamental practice of balancing consciously different aspects in order to maintain the yoga practice extends to balancing ascetic and aesthetic tendencies and experiences. In this process, philosophical works, such as *Yoga Sūtra*, are helpful as they equip a practitioner with the initial knowledge of the many aspects that need to be taken into account in the practice. I have tried to show that philosophical aesthetics may also support yoga practices further. Through discussing everyday experiences and experiences of beauty in yoga, it is apparent, that in yoga practice one may also have to balance consciously between different kinds of aesthetic experiences. Balancing a heart-beat-like momentary aesthetic experiences and a breath-like continuous everydayness may well be “Art of Living.” For a yoga practitioner, it is a somaesthetic beginning.

Through bringing the aesthetics into discussions about modern yoga, I wish to appreciate the contemporary situation where the ancient echoes in the aesthetically colorful present. Considering yoga practice as a somaesthetic program and as an everyday environment enable us to approach the aesthetics of yoga without understanding yoga as an art form. The aesthetic consideration thus brings a refreshed, if not a completely new, view to practicing yoga. Furthermore, the aesthetics of yoga provides a view to a technology as an experiential environment—be it that the

technology is one of the oldest—illustrating thus the “man-madness” of a human being.

Why practicing yoga keeps attracting people instead of just using it as an entertainment? I propose, that through practicing yoga, one gets heightened everyday presence and satisfyingly intensified experiences of the everyday. Although, the aesthetic might not be the fundamental reason for practicing yoga in general, aesthetic experiences—sparks of yoga—empower the repetition of the practice—the fundamental premise of practice, in general. This way the aesthetic proves to be one of the key functions in modern postural yoga. I think that yoga’s popularization calls for reconsidering the aesthetics of yoga.

## Acknowledgements

I thank yoga instructor Eddie Stern of the initial encouragement to contemplate aesthetics and yoga together as well as giving me the metaphor “sparks of yoga.” I also thank Niko Jääskeläinen, Jussi Sainio, and Oili Sainio for the overwhelming support in this process.

## References

- AwakenWithJP. (2016). How to take yoga photos for Instagram. YouTube (Apr 26, 2016, last visited Jan 12, 2019): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9bmvQFtOHk>.
- Alter, J. S. (2008). Yoga Shivar: Performativity and the Study of Modern Yoga. In Singleton, M. and Byrne, J. (Eds.), *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge Hindu Studies Series. Pp. 36–48.
- Berleant, A. (1997). *Living in a Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas.
- Berleant, A. (1991). *Art and Engagement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Bernard, T. (1960). *Hatha Yoga: The Report of a Personal Experience*. London: Rider and Company.
- Broo, M. (Ed.). (2010). *Joogan filosofia: Patañjalin jooga-sūtra*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus Helsinki University Press.
- Dehejia, V. (1986). *Yogini Cult and Temples: A Tantric tradition*. New Delhi: National Museum.
- de Michelis, E. (2008). Modern Yoga: History and Forms. In Singleton, M. and Byrne, J. (Eds.), *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge Hindu Studies Series. Pp. 17–35.
- Eväsoja, M. (Ed.). (2011). *Itämainen estetiikka*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus Helsinki University Press Oy. Pp. 15–22.
- Feuerstein, G. (1990). *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Yoga*. New York: Paragon House.
- Freeman, H. et al. (2017). Yoga in Print Media: Missing the Heart of the Practice. *International Journal of Yoga*, Vol. 10 (No. 3), pp. 160–166 (accessed Nov 23, 2018): <http://www.ijoy.org.in/article.asp?issn=0973-6131;year=2017;volume=10;issue=3;spage=160;epage=166;aulast=Freeman>.
- Haapala, A. (2005). On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place. In Light, A. and Smith, J. M. (Eds.), *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*. New York: Columbia

University Press. Pp. 46–47.

Jois, P. (2002). *Yoga Mala*. Javanainen J. (Trans.). Helsinki: Sri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Community, Astanga Joogakoulu.

Larson, G. J. (2012). Patañjala Yoga in Practice. In White, D. G. (Ed.), *Yoga in Practice*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. Pp. 73–96.

Maas, P. A. (2018). Sthirasukham Asanam: Posture and Performance in Classical Yoga and Beyond. In Baier, K., Maas, P. A. and Preisendanz, K. (Eds.), *Yoga in Transformation*. Göttingen: Vienna University Press. Pp. 49–100 (accessed Nov 9, 2018): [https://www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com/downloads/openAccess/OA\\_978-3-8471-0862-7.pdf](https://www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com/downloads/openAccess/OA_978-3-8471-0862-7.pdf).

Mallinson, J. (2011). A Response to Mark Singleton's Yoga Body by James Mallinson. *Academia. Edu* (Dec 9, 2011, last visited Dec 29, 2018): [https://www.academia.edu/1146607/A\\_Response\\_to\\_Mark\\_Singletons\\_Yoga\\_Body](https://www.academia.edu/1146607/A_Response_to_Mark_Singletons_Yoga_Body).

Mallinson, J. (2012). The Original Gorakṣastaka. In White D. G. (Ed.), *Yoga in Practice*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. Pp. 257–272.

Naukkarinen, O. (2017). Aesthetics of Popular Culture as Environmental Aesthetics. *Popular Inquiry*, Vol. 1 (First published in Finnish in *Niin & Näin*, Vol. 1/1999, pp. 52–57), (accessed Nov 20, 2018): [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58763ec0c534a5e7e2b65fe2/t/59a2aa7d6f4ca3e5e082d751/1503832708587/Popular+inquiry\\_Vol1\\_Naukkarinen.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58763ec0c534a5e7e2b65fe2/t/59a2aa7d6f4ca3e5e082d751/1503832708587/Popular+inquiry_Vol1_Naukkarinen.pdf).

Neverin, K. (2008). Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga. In Singleton, M. and Byrne, J. (Eds.), *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge Hindu Studies Series. Pp. 119–139.

Newcombe, S. (2018). Spaces of Yoga: Towards a Non-Essentialist Understanding of Yoga. In Baier, K., Maas, P. A. and Preisendanz, K. (Eds.), *Yoga in Transformation*. Göttingen: Vienna University Press. Pp. 549–574 (accessed Nov 9, 2018): [https://www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com/downloads/openAccess/OA\\_978-3-8471-0862-7.pdf](https://www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com/downloads/openAccess/OA_978-3-8471-0862-7.pdf).

Puolakka, K. (2018). On habits and Functions in Everyday Aesthetics. *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 16. (Oct 2, 2018, last visited Jan 1, 2019): <https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=846>.

Ruzsa, F. (2019). Sankhya. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002 (Last visited Jan 4, 2019): <http://www.iep.utm.edu/sankhya/>.

Singleton, M. (2010). *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Shusterman, R. (2000a). *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Shusterman, R. (2000b). *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Shusterman, R. (2002). *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Shusterman, R. (2012). *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Smith, B. R. (2004). Adjusting the Quotidian: Ashtanga Yoga as Everyday Practice. (Last visited Jan 13, 2019): <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.459.4583&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

Smith, B. R. (2007). *Body, Mind, and Spirit? Towards an Analysis of the Practice of Yoga*. Sage. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, and Singapore: Sage Publications (Jun 1, 2007): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1357034X07077771>.

Smith, B. R. (2008). 'With Heat Even Iron Will Bend': Discipline and Authority in Ashtanga Yoga. In Singleton, M. and Byrne J. (Eds.), *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge Hindu Studies Series. Pp. 140–160.

Tapasyananda, S. (Trans.). (2003). *Srimad Bhagavad-Gita: The Scripture of Mankind*. Chennai: Sri Ramakrisna Math.

Tatarkiewicz, W. (1972). The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 31 (No 2, winter), pp. 165–180.

White, D. G. (2012). Yoga, Brief History of an Idea. In White, D. G. (Ed.), *Yoga in Practice*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. Pp. 1–23.

## The Crash-Event: Repetition and Difference in J. G. Ballard's *Crash*

*Janne Vanhanen*

**Abstract:** *The article examines and interprets British science fiction writer J. G. Ballard's controversial 1973 novel Crash from the perspective of the philosophical concept of the event. The protagonists of Crash eroticize automobile collisions and their repercussions in human bodies, striving to increase the intensity of their existence via pornographic quest of the perfect, final crash. In Vanhanen's analysis, Crash brings together the pornographic emphasis of repetition with the singularity of the life-changing crash-event that the novel's characters encounter. Vanhanen considers Freudian interpretations of the novel's crash fantasies as traumatic compulsion to repeat—which itself is a manifestation of the death instinct. This shall be compared with philosopher Gilles Deleuze's conception of the death instinct being a "neutral" metaphysical primary drive rather than part of the Freudian duality between Eros and Thanatos. Via this conception, it becomes possible to approach Crash not only as a "cautionary tale," as Ballard has described it, but also as an affirmative "psychopathic hymn" to the potential of self-differentiation released by the event.*

**Keywords:** *Deleuze, Crash, cars, desire.*

Driving along the highway, how would it feel like to let go of the steering wheel and push the accelerator pedal to maximum? As your own control of the car diminishes, other factors step in: the inherently oblique geometry of the driving lane begins to guide the trajectory of the vehicle; traffic statistics calculate the density of incoming traffic, increasing or decreasing the probability of head-on collision; minute variations of road temperature, air humidity and wind speed add their own influence to the swerve of the car, now starting to spin around; material qualities of the shattering windshield decide the pattern of glass shard wounds on your face; chemical composition of the driver seat's upholstery determines the flash point of the car's interior getting into contact with flaming fuel...

The simple act of relinquishing control sweeps you away from your safe zone to face the inhuman agency whose influence is in normal conditions minimized. An interruption into regulated flow of things appears out of imperceptible potentialities, an *event* that has already happened, as if slipped straight out of the future tense into the past, skipping the present—a

point of indeterminacy that becomes apparent only after its passing.

In what follows I shall focus on the British science fiction writer J. G. Ballard's controversial novel *Crash* (1973) and interpret it from the point of view of an event that is life changing. *Crash* is a story of a group of people who have developed a sort of fetishistic relation to car crashes, being sexually aroused by images related to collisions, wounds and scars resulting from impacts, re-enactments of crashes and fantasies of different kinds of automobile disasters. From the perspective of event-ness, the novel's titular crash represents a quintessential example of event where different ontological levels of existence (ranging from semiotic to material) are synthesized together, producing unforeseeable mixtures. Also, the temporality of an actual collision, with its anticipation and after-effects, can be seen to be as complicated in Ballard's text as in many philosophical accounts of the concept of event.

In my analysis of *Crash* I turn to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, for whom an event is an ontologically primary concept that precedes substance and empirical states of affairs. In Deleuze's theory, the event is a change of pattern, a coming-together of relations that produces something new in empirical reality, but which also alters its conditions of existence: the event thus not only modifies the future, but also the past so that we cannot view our conditions in the old manner anymore (1994, pp. 189–90).<sup>1</sup> Approaching Ballard's work from a Deleuzian perspective is thus not arbitrary, since I propose that this critical reconsideration of the conditions underlying one's current state of normality is what Ballard's *Crash* and his other works of speculative fiction strive to bring to the fore. As the author Zadie Smith interprets it, Ballard's method is "taking what seems 'natural'—what seems normal, familiar and rational—and revealing its psychopathology" (2014, para. 5). In *Crash*'s case the state of normality under dissection is the ever-increasing technological dependence and communications landscape forming "an almost infantile world, where any demand, any possibility, whether for life-styles, travel, sexual roles and identities, can be satisfied instantly," as Ballard (1995, p. 4) describes the post-war world in his later preface to the French edition of the novel.<sup>2</sup> This description seems even more relevant in our current times.

*Crash* can thus be seen as a speculative study of what kind of extremes this possibility of instant and infinite satisfaction can lead to and, as such, a reaction to the ethos of liberation of sexual and violent desires and freeing of social restrictions by the 1960's generation. Samuel Francis considers *Crash* as "[p]arodying the post-Freudian 1960s ideal of healthy, guilt-free polyperversity" (2011, p. 110). As Roger Luckhurst in his introduction to *Crash* states, "[i]t is a book that flags the end of the New Wave [science fiction of 1960's and 70's] avant-garde by pushing its logic of violent transformation to exorbitant ends" (2008, p. 519). *Crash* can thus be read as a hyperbolic description of the collective transformative event of 1960's societal liberation, placing a magnifying glass upon its latent tendencies actualizing in the lives of the crash-fixated characters.

Even though widespread social and technological changes—at least in the post-war Western world—form *Crash*'s background, the book depicts events mainly in personal focus. The crash-event that becomes an object of desire for the novel's characters is conditioned by increasingly technological and mediated world, but takes place on the level of individual subjectivities. The principal question seems to be: can we desire our own annihilation? This personal dilemma mirrors the Cold War world's nuclear doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction, the retaliation-capacity assuring the total annihilation of not only the target nation but also the aggressor in the

1 Event, for Deleuze (1994), introduces a change in a structure, i.e. in a series of things both material and immaterial. A basic example of an event would be that it is a *singular* point, as in change of direction of an infinite series of ordinary points in a geometrical line (pp. 189–90).

2 The French edition's introduction is republished in the 1995 English edition of *Crash*.

event of intercontinental missile exchange. This precarious balance formed a “bomb culture,” as writer, artist and countercultural activist Jeff Nuttall's 1968 book of the same title (2018) aptly nominates it. When the “sane” state of normality is founded upon such nihilistic ideology, what might seem as insanity becomes a legitimate reaction to impossible situations, as 1960's thinkers such as Gregory Bateson, Michel Foucault and R. D. Laing theorized.

So, according to this logic, even though the actions of the novel's characters might be diagnosed as displaying aberrant paraphilia towards eroticized crash-scenarios, they may be interpreted as manifestation of deeper-level culture-wide structures. It can be argued that while the technological progress of automobile culture denotes increased individual freedom of mobility and hence of possibilities to actualize personal desires (see e.g. D'Costa, 2013), a contrary fascination with the idea of annihilating collision runs deep within the contemporary culture. Just think of the dark collective allure of disasters such as Princess Diana's fatal crash in a Parisian underpass.<sup>3</sup> What if instead of controlled, predictable movement we somehow secretly yearned for a crash? And what if this crash-desire was essentially of libidinal, erotic nature? This is the premise of Ballard's novel *Crash*.

### The Serial Crashes

*Crash's* themes have been interpreted in multiple and often conflicting fashions, but some common notions can be agreed by all.<sup>4</sup> *Crash* depicts a world where the link between the car and sexuality, arguably prevalent in 20<sup>th</sup> century popular culture, has been taken to the extreme. The novel's narrator, advertising film producer 'James Ballard',<sup>5</sup> becomes acquainted with a sinister figure, Dr Robert Vaughan, after 'Ballard' has had a head-on collision with an oncoming car on a freeway exit ramp. When 'Ballard' is recuperating in an almost-empty airport casualty hospital ward after the crash, Vaughan shows acute interest in his crash wounds. Eventually 'Ballard' and his wife Catherine get to know and become embroiled in Vaughan's coterie of car crash enthusiasts, entering various sexual liaisons with them—these encounters all have to do with crashed cars and the various wounds and scars resulting from such collisions. Vaughan's obsession seems to unfold in the other characters “the mysterious eroticism of wounds: the perverse logic of blood-soaked instrument panels, seat-belts smeared with excrement, sun-visors lined with brain tissue” and awakens them to car crashes' liberation of “tremor[s] of excitement, in the complex geometries of a dented fender, in the unexpected variations of crushed radiator grilles, in the grotesque overhang of an instrument panel forced on to a driver's crotch as if in some calibrated act of machine fellatio” (Ballard, 1995, p. 12).

Vaughan's stated mission is to explore the “benevolent psychopathology” that he and his co-conspirators are trying to actualize out of the virtual potentiality of a culture “ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography,” according to Ballard's preface (1995, pp. 138, 4). In practice, Vaughan's exploration entails looking for accident sites and photographing the scenes, mimicking the postures of the victims with his sexual partners, as well as studying research films of calibrated test crashes and arranging recreations of spectacular accidents with stunt drivers.

It is no coincidence that Vaughan, a photographer, is described as “TV scientist” and “computer specialist” as the world of *Crash* is essentially a semiotic mediascape of information

3 Just a quick internet search will produce a number of websites devoted to car crashes of famous people. There is even a Wikipedia list of “notable people” killed in traffic collisions: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_people\\_who\\_died\\_in\\_traffic\\_collisions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_who_died_in_traffic_collisions).

4 Florian Cord (2017) provides a good overview of differences in critical reception of *Crash* (pp. 18–80).

5 Single quotation marks are used to distinguish the novel's character 'Ballard' from the author Ballard.

and circulating images. From this point of departure, the author studies, and the novel's protagonists follow, the "pornographic logic" of a world obsessed with representations, finding pleasure in transgressing the supposed control of consensual normality that is at the same time invested with repressed desires. As Lauren Langman observes, "pornography obeys certain rules, and its primary rule is transgression [...] its greatest pleasure is to locate each and every society's taboos, prohibitions and proprieties, and systematically transgress them, one by one" (2018, p. 669).

This pornographic logic compels to seek ever-changing variations of relations between various objects of desire in order to find the ever-fleeting, ultimate transgressive pleasure, resulting in the novel's characters devising imaginary scenarios of car disasters combined with sex, as well as dwelling on the minutest details of the fatal crashes of celebrity figures such as Albert Camus, James Dean, Jayne Mansfield—and even John F. Kennedy, the assassination of whom is considered as a special kind of car crash by Vaughan (Ballard, 1995, p. 130). In these constant rearrangements of objects and signs, both imaginary and those realized by the protagonists, concrete physical, corporeal and technological facts are collided with the semiotic sphere of images, fantasies and meanings. Consider the following passage from the beginning page of *Crash* as a demonstration of this:

*In his vision of a car-crash with the actress [Elizabeth Taylor], Vaughan was obsessed by many wounds and impacts—by the dying chromium and collapsing bulkheads of their two cars meeting head-on in complex collisions endlessly repeated in slow-motion films, by the identical wounds inflicted on their bodies, by the image of windshield glass frosting around her face as she broke its tinted surface like a death-born Aphrodite, by the compound fractures of their thighs impacted against their handbrake mountings, and above all by the wounds to their genitalia, her uterus pierced by the heraldic beak of the manufacturer's medallion, his semen emptying across the luminescent dials that registered for ever the last temperature and fuel levels of the engine. (Ballard, 1995, p. 8)*

In their obsession to actualize every potential combination of crash-altered automobiles and human bodies, *Crash*'s protagonists resemble the fictional libertines of Marquis de Sade's novels, who as men of status and resources have the means to satisfy their own desires almost without limit. However, from this freedom opens a vortex of the pornographic logic's perpetual demand to transgress repeatedly, to an absurd degree, resulting in numbness of repetition instead of pleasure. As Timo Airaksinen notes, "what is originally supposed to be supremely stimulating reappears now as something so boring that one wonders why the Sadean heroes bother" (1995, p. 141). Therefore, the libertines cannot truly create an event, a singular point in the series of combinations of desired objects and effects.

*Crash* adopts the pornographic quest of the perfect transgression against repressed desire, which remains, however, perpetually unattainable namely because of the pornographic logic's constant supply of ever new combinations of desire. These combinations appear as fantasy images and, after their enactment, as *tableaux vivants* lingering in the post-orgasmic calm after the crash, ready to be appreciated in erotico-aesthetic terms by the crash enthusiasts. Yet these imaginary and real scenarios never provide a closure but compel one to devise further combinations. Ballard supplies the reader with extended lists of Vaughan's dream couplings of:



*The lungs of elderly men punctured by door handles, the chests of young women impaled by steering-columns, the cheeks of handsome youths pierced by the chromium latches of quarter-light [...] ambassadorial limousines crashing into jack-knifing butane tankers [...] taxis filled with celebrating children colliding head-on below the bright display windows of deserted supermarkets [...] alienated brothers and sisters, by chance meeting each other on collision courses on the access roads of petrochemical plants [...] massive rear-end collisions of sworn enemies [...] specialized crashes of escaping criminals [etc. etc. ad nauseam].* (Ballard, 1995, pp. 13–14)

This seriality cannot but bring to mind Andy Warhol's serial works, which similarly combine different pictorial elements, usually of famous people or other popular media content, with visual distortions introduced by his silkscreen and painting techniques. During 1962–1964 Warhol produced his own "Death and Disaster" series of silkscreen paintings based on newsprint pictures of car crashes among other disasters. These graphic images, often depicting bloodied and mangled crash victims, were silkscreened, often multiple times, on vibrantly coloured canvases and named accordingly, such as *Green Disaster #2 (Green Disaster Ten Times)* or *Silver Car Crash (Double Disaster)*. This impassive shuffling of different disaster motifs, colour schemes and descriptive names combined with the often shocking imagery provides a close predecessor in the visual arts to Ballard's literary vision of the alluring immediacy and brutality of post-war media landscape.

*Crash's* constant rearrangements of eroticized details of violent events—delivered not without a touch of absurdity and black humour, as in a fantasy image of "luckless paranoids driving at full speed into the brick walls at the ends of known culs-de-sac" (Ballard, 1995, p. 15)—suggest that the author's implication is that the technological advance of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has increased the possibility of these combinations, multiplying the range of areas of life that can be sexualized or turned into pornography. As such, Ballard's perspective comes very close to those anti-humanist tendencies of poststructuralist philosophy which emphasize the non-voluntary, irrational and pre- or unconscious elements of subjectivity. It is technology that shapes us, not the other way around, and *Crash* describes the adaptation of human sexuality to the technological reality of "tens of thousands of vehicles moving down the highways, [...] giant jetliners lifting over our heads, [...] the most humble machined structures and commercial laminates" (Ballard, 1995, p. 138).

Following the poststructuralist bias of structure-before-subject, the milieu of *Crash* is as impersonal and abstract as possible: the narrative circles West London surroundings, the ring roads, junctions, under- and overpasses near Heathrow airport and Shepperton film studios, "the endless landscape of concrete and structural steel that extended from the motorways to the south of the airport, across its vast runways to the new apartment systems" (Ballard, 1995, p. 48). After being released back home from the hospital following his initial crash, 'Ballard' notices his new sensitivity to his once-indifferent surroundings: "I realized that the entire zone which defined the landscape of my life was now bounded by a continuous artificial horizon, formed by the raised parapets and embankments of the motorways and their access roads and interchanges" (Ballard, 1995, p. 53).

These perpetually halfway spaces can be called "nonplaces" (*non-lieux*), to use the terminology of anthropologist Marc Augé (1995) referring to anonymous places of transience, or "any-spaces-whatever" (*espaces quelconques*), to quote Gilles Deleuze's term denoting either

disconnected or empty environments that are unable to provide any overarching principles of connection between their different elements (1986, p. 120). Therefore these spaces can engender pure potentiality that in *Crash* is used by the protagonists to break down any barriers inhibiting exchange between different ontological categories. That the expanses of these post-modern nonplaces turn out to enable violent sexual encounters between technological and anatomical parts speaks—to Ballard—of the implicit potentiality of modern technology to “provide us with hitherto undreamed-of means for tapping our own psychopathologies” (1995, p. 6).

### Death Drive and Crash-Trauma

Deleuze’s any-space-whatever is a space of freedom, of an open future, but Ballard seems to consider this liberation, heralded by 1960’s counterculture’s eroding of conservative values, as leading potentially to atrocity. *The death drive always wins*. And in *Crash* the death drive, a psychic entity theorized by Sigmund Freud,<sup>6</sup> assumes a very literal manifestation on the highways and streets of the novel’s world. Roger Luckhurst writes that *Crash* “neatly literalizes Freud’s later speculations about the existence of a ‘death drive,’ a primitive human instinct that might actively wish for the quiescent state of death” (2008, p. 517). As Ballard himself states, “[a]fter Freud’s exploration within the psyche it is now the outer world of reality which must be quantified and eroticised” (1968, back cover). As Ballard is effectively likening his project of speculative fiction to Freud’s work of revealing the hidden conditions of human volition, a look into Freud’s theory of the death drive vis-à-vis *Crash* is a necessary endeavor.

The initial reception of the novel—mirroring the way David Cronenberg’s 1996 film adaptation was later received—certainly made evident the fact that Ballard’s anti-humanist view was picked up by the commentators. Both *Crash* the novel and *Crash* the film were at the time of their release vilified exactly as nihilistic and pornographic. An often-quoted anecdote has one publisher’s reviewer writing in his or her assessment of the book and the writer: “This man is beyond psychiatric help” (Tighe, 2005, p. 80). This, and other moral condemnations in subsequent critical evaluations of the book, have doubtlessly resulted in part from the cool, detached and neutral style of the prose, describing various technological, medical and sexual atrocities in the same clinical tone, as if in some scientific article. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

*I felt the warm vinyl of the seat beside me, and then stroked the damp aisle of Helen’s perineum. Her hand pressed against my right testicle. The plastic laminates around me, the colour of washed anthracite, were the same tones as her pubic hairs parted at the vestibule of her vulva.* (Ballard, 1995, p. 81)

The pornographic detail is there, but the clinical, abstracted diction negates any possible excitement for most readers. As Victor Sage comments on Ballard’s style, “[h]orror and laughter both arise in Ballard out of his deadpan tone and this fact complicates the schematic nature of his effects” (2008, p. 38).

In a science fiction fanzine interview, Ballard says that he situated the novel in his own contemporary environment and used his own name for the narrator character in order to “achieve complete honesty [...] complete realism [...] and] complete authenticity” and that *Crash* is “an investigatory book” with “all the neutrality of a scientific investigation” (Ballard

---

6 Freud’s original German term *Todestrieb* is translated also as death instinct.

interviewed in Goddard, 1973, p. 53). This neutral tone with its lack of perceptible authorial voice and decipherable intention seemed to leave a moral void into which the reader had to take a plunge and, in the opinion of the critics, was in danger of getting lost. Ballard himself responded that his tone reflects a “terminal irony, where not even the writer knows where he stands” (1976, p. 51).

As the abstract, anonymous nonplace that *Crash* depicts no longer imposes any limitations—once one has got rid of one's own internalized patterns of control, such as safe driving and healthy living—the flows of desire of the novel's characters become paradoxically aimless, as they are fixated on devising endless variables of collision between automobile disasters and sexual pleasure. As the pornographic logic of increasing intensification demands ever-new combinations of metal against flesh and bone, what is there to do but to devise more and more crash-fantasies?

*Crash's* protagonists quite literally circle around the same abstract geometry of ring roads and ramps, repeatedly devising novel combinations of crash-fantasy components. What is left other than constant rearrangement of these images? Only a final, fatal crash would seem to offer a way out of the fantasy loop, a movement intensive enough to detach them from the gravitational equilibrium of the pleasure-seeking orbit, and to point a flaring trajectory towards a terminal point: death.

*Crash's* perverse fetish for eroticized car crashes and their repercussions in the form of wounds, abrasions and scars would thus seem to bring forth the perspective of the interplay between repetition and singularity. Obsessive repetition displayed by the novel's characters, the book's structure and its language seems to call for a psychoanalytical interpretation, where the compulsion to repeat would denote an indication of the Freudian death drive. Freud's claim is that the death drive represents a fundamental urge possessed by all organic life: an urge to fall back into an earlier state of things, meaning the inorganic state from which life emerged. Within life, then, exists a deep-seated will to its own annihilation (Freud, 1961, p. 32).

Freud admits that the proposition of the reality of a primal negative drive is speculative (1961, p. 18), even though he initially deducted its existence from observations gained in his practice. If Freud's basic assumption of the human psyche was that it was fundamentally oriented towards increasing pleasure, either by avoiding displeasure or producing pleasure itself, the observance of compulsory need of traumatic patients to repeat negative experiences suggested that the pleasure principle cannot be the only driving force of mental events. Something else drives us towards manifest behaviour that is harmful to us as individuals and the death drive would thus offer an explanation of seemingly incomprehensible self-destructive actions. Notably in our present context—the eroticized car crash—Freud refers to the traumatic effects of events such as “severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life” as being indicators of the death drive and assumed causes of the traumatic repetition compulsion (1961, p. 6).

In his later work, Freud (1962) detaches his theory of the death drive from merely individual psychopathologies to apply it to the whole of the social world, where in his view the drive is inherent in all human relations, manifesting as aggression and thus posing a problem of controlling this drive on societal level.

Whether situated within the individual or the social, the notion of positive life force against negative death drive continues the Freudian tradition of dualities between, e.g., the ego and the id or reality principle and pleasure principle. Under the light of this dualism the paraphiliac

behaviour of the characters in *Crash* would appear as classic example of the influence of the death drive. Because of some originary event that threatens the very unity of the subject—a car crash, in this case—Vaughan, ‘Ballard,’ Catherine *et al.* are traumatically compelled to repeat this event of such intensity that it has surpassed their psychic capacity to respond to it.

Yet, as I propose, it would seem that according to the logic of *Crash*, the compulsion to repeat the fantasizing and actualizing of crash-sex scenarios is for the novel’s characters a peculiar route to affirmation and creation rather than a paradoxical clash of positive and negative drives. They are acting according to the emerging “benevolent psychopathology” prophesized by Vaughan. Ballard the author has himself vacillated between the warning tones of his French edition introduction (“a warning against that brutal, erotic and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape” [1995, p. 6]) and later more affirmative pronouncements (“*Crash* is not a cautionary tale. *Crash* is what it appears to be. It is a psychopathic hymn” [Ballard interviewed in *Self*, 2006, p. 32]).

Rather than depicting activity related to traumatic neurosis, could *Crash* be considered in terms of the production of something new—a production of event? Emma Whiting (2012) notes perceptively that despite Ballard’s works of early 1970’s (*The Atrocity Exhibition* [1970] and *Crash*) treating subjects that might seem to situate the books in the tradition of “abject literature,” as nominated by Julia Kristeva, these novels do not bring the reader into a direct and disturbing contact with the abject content, as our culture already circulates images of abjection at such rate that their challenging, as well as psychically restorative force is numbed (pp. 92–93). Despite the photographic-level of detailing of visceral aftermaths of disasters, the texts do not traumatize, but rather “seem strangely devoid of horror. The crashes and crashed bodies provoke little affect either within or without the text and are often presented as merely elaborate, stylistic poses” (Whiting, 2012, p. 92). An analysis of *Crash* by Jean Baudrillard (1991) would agree, as Baudrillard sees the novel as an emblem of the postmodern condition of hyperreality where reality and image cannot be separated and signs make evident their nature as effects. In *Crash* everything is mediated, circulated through representations, so that even the most grotesque automobile disaster or sexual act (or their combination) is devoid of affect, both for the novel’s character and the reader. There will be no real trauma in the world of *Crash*.

### The Speculative Drive – Deleuze and the Event

Based on the above observations, do Whiting’s and Baudrillard’s interpretations of *Crash*’s affectless quality undermine the possibility of any trauma-based interpretation of the novel? Approaching the death drive through Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation of the Freudian concept might provide us with grounds for understanding *Crash*’s defusing of the traumatic structure despite its repetition compulsion. For Deleuze, the Freudian death drive is, indeed, a speculative concept—and rightly so. Freud’s speculations on the death drive cannot be deducted in any straightforward manner from the observations made in his clinical work, as the drive necessarily remains beyond empirical reality. The speculative work, then, is to construct the drive and in his own work on the death drive Deleuze detaches it from Freud’s dualistic model of the libido versus death drive. This desexualized drive—besides death drive Deleuze calls it “neutral energy”<sup>7</sup>—is not dependent on pleasure as its antithesis and is a matter of the “metaphysical surface” rather than the physical body (Deleuze, 1990, p. 208).

---

7 As Deleuze (1990) states: “We must interpret the expression ‘neutral energy’ in the following manner: ‘neutral’ means pre-individual and impersonal” (p. 213).

The metaphysical surface is, for Deleuze, a pre-individual, “virtual,” field of radically open potentiality and it forms the transcendental condition for any individuals’ emergence in the extended, physical world. As the empirical surface, our everyday world consists of individuated things, which are restricted by already actualized or determined relations between them. “Counter-actualization” is a process where the individual’s actualized relations are dissolved and distributed anew, as if gaining access to the conditions of the individual’s actual existence (Deleuze, 1990, p. 178).

In this Deleuzian context, counter-actualization requires a taking hold of, or even a creation of, the *event*. From the perspective of the actual—a given present that is populated by “states-of-affairs”—the event appears always as virtual and untimely: a passage out of the orderly state towards a chaos that cannot ever be fully lived. Events arise from the interactions of things as their logical attributes. As in Deleuze’s example, the virtual event “to cut” can be actualized in many different positions, for instance in active “I cut” and passive “I am being cut.” The virtual event is “neutral” with respect to these different actualizations, and is as such impersonal and pre-individual and should be thought of as infinitive expression “to cut” (Deleuze, 1990, pp. 5–6). From the perspective of the actualized world, events are occurrences that are happening to me. From the perspective of the virtual and metaphysical field, events subsist out of chronological time and are not voided in their accidental actualizations. The infinitive hovers over the actual states-of-affairs.

At this stage it is necessary to ask: what is the connection between Deleuze’s interpretation of the death drive, his metaphysical concept of the event and the activities and ideas depicted in Ballard’s novel *Crash*? Let us take repetition into consideration. Freud speculated death drive as a fundamental drive towards the end of individual life; death drive was at the bottom of the neurotic compulsion to repeat harmful patterns. In this case repetition is repetition of the same. Again and again, the subject finds him- or herself in a position that is negative in valence. At first glance we could psychoanalyse *Crash*’s protagonists as displaying the exact symptoms of repetition compulsion. Yet, for Deleuze there is another, more constitutive level of repetition—not of the same, but of difference. Deleuze sees the history of philosophy from Plato to Heidegger being dominated by difference understood as secondary in relation to identity. The terms (x and y) of any relation of difference (between x and y) are thought to have primary identity, the relation itself being a secondary type of occurrence between them (Deleuze, 1994, p. 30). Against this understanding Deleuze posits difference as the primary transcendental principle, which creates the now-secondary order identities by the way of the *event* constituting a sufficient reason for empirical phenomena—to take a relatively simple physical example, a cloud is formed because of its preceding differential conditions between air temperature and moisture, differentials that come together in an cloud-event.

In Deleuze’s philosophy difference is no longer subordinated to identity. Difference as prioritized ontological principle acts as the genesis of variation; repetition makes possible the continuation of this variation. Repetition can now be considered as a fundamentally creative process. This view orients also Deleuze’s reading of the death drive: it becomes Freud’s great discovery of speculative metaphysics, asserting primary repetition that is not in Deleuze’s interpretation an inclination of the organic matter to return to a previous inorganic state but a process of continuous self-differentiation—perpetual change and adaptation of the constitution of the self (1994, p. 113). From the subjective point of view of an individual, this self-differentiation may appear as dissolution of subjectivity and as such appears as a harbinger of impending death. In *Crash*’s case the characters’ physical merging with automobiles in the violent intercourse

of the crash-event and the psychological melding of body parts with car parts in their crash-fantasies speaks of the allure of this self-differentiation as self-negation.

Freud already provides a model for this as he postulates a same tendency towards release of tension both in drives of pleasure and death: “to keep constant, or to remove internal tension due to stimuli,” calling this tendency the “Nirvana principle,” an orientation towards zero excitation (1961, pp. 49–50). This is apparent in the pleasure principle’s function:

*to free the mental apparatus entirely from excitation [...] but it is clear that the function thus described would be concerned with the most universal endeavour of all living substance—namely to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world. We have all experienced how the greatest pleasure attainable by us, that of the sexual act, is associated with momentary extinction of a highly intensified excitation. The binding of an instinctual impulse would be a preliminary function designed to prepare the excitation for its final elimination in the pleasure of discharge. (Freud, 1961, p. 56)*

Freud, then, effectively describes the orgasmic sex-death in the ultimate crash, so desired by *Crash*’s characters. Yet, in *Crash*, the crash-event that the novel’s protagonists are continuously circling around and sometimes enacting is portrayed—perhaps scandalously—as life-changing and affirmative process from the perspective of those who have undergone the transformation through collision. In the novel, ‘Ballard’ looks at Vaughan’s extensive collections of photographs of crash victims, extracting from their myriad details a whole new world of meanings. Looking at the photo dossier of “the crash, hospitalization and post-recuperative romance” (Ballard, 1995, p. 99) of Vaughan’s acquaintance, Gabrielle, who was left crippled after her car accident, ‘Ballard’ can grasp the depth of her collision’s transformative power:

*I realized the extent to which this tragically injured young woman had been transformed during her recovery from the accident. The first photographs of her lying in the crashed car showed a conventional young woman whose symmetrical face and unstretched skin spelled out the whole economy of a cozy and passive life, of minor flirtations in the backs of cheap cars enjoyed without any sense of the real possibilities of her body. [...] This agreeable young woman, with her pleasant sexual dreams, had been reborn within the breaking contours of her crushed sports car. [...] The crushed body of the sports car had turned her into a creature of free and perverse sexuality, releasing within its twisted bulkheads and leaking engine coolant all the deviant possibilities of her sex. (Ballard, 1995, p. 99)*

Through observing the effects of the collision on the young woman, the incorporeal sense of the event becomes manifest to ‘Ballard.’ The crash-event is transformative both in the empirical, corporeal world of bodies bearing the marks of their encounters with crumpling metal and shattering glass, and in the metaphysical meaning of making visible the conditions of psychological, vocational and sexual normality that formerly bound the characters and are now seen as obsolete once one has crashed with reality itself and understood it as continuous self-differentiation – at the limit of which lies the death of the Self or the “I.”

## ***Crash's* psychopathic hymn**

Do we have the resources to consider the death of the self as something other than traumatic? In order to read *Crash* ultimately not as “cautionary [tale], a warning” but “a psychopathic hymn” (Ballard, 1995, p. 6; Self, 2006, p. 32) we must pinpoint what this hymn is sung in praise of. I would propose that in this matter we should focus on the “beyond” in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. What lies beyond the organic orientation towards pleasure is, as we have discussed above, drive towards death, i.e. the organism's instinct to return to a state of zero excitation. In Deleuze's analysis this instinct—Freud's death drive—becomes an affirmative force of self-differentiation. Especially in his writings with Félix Guattari the locus of this differentiation, from the point of view of the organism, is nominated as the Body without Organs (*Corps-sans-Organes*, often used in the abbreviated form BwO/CsO).

As Deleuze and Guattari state, the BwO is the “limit of the lived body” (1987, p. 150) and the term refers to the ontological understanding of the body as assemblage of affects—pre-individual relations of increasing and decreasing intensity. Hence, the BwO undermines the traditional notion of the organism as self-enclosed unity of determined configuration of organs. “The enemy is the organism. The BwO is opposed not to the organs but to that organization of the organs called the organism” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 158). The BwO denotes a body considered not as a self-enclosed unity, but rather a “plane” that collides together heterogeneous elements on the basis of which phenomenological experience of the lived body emerges. *Crash's* hymnal quality emerges especially in its monomaniacal descriptions of syntheses of these heterogeneous elements, of metal, glass, flesh and fluids: “this automobile marked with mucus from every orifice of the human body [...] layout of the instrument panel, like the profile of the steering wheel bruised into my chest, was inset on my knees and shinbones [...] the car-crash, a fierce marriage pivoting on the fleshy points of her knees and pubis [*etc. etc.*]” (Ballard, 1995, pp. 137, 28, 99). Also, as *Crash's* world is that of Baudrillardian hyperreality, the heterogenous elements include also incorporeal elements—images, ideas, fantasies—which are no less real than corporeal things.

As the transcendental condition of subjective experience, the BwO is evident to the experiencing subject only in the most ambiguous states that disturb the normality of the body. Deleuze and Guattari refer to the drugged or the masochistic body in relation to these intensive states and quote William Burroughs in *Naked Lunch* as depicting the drugged body's revolt against the organized organism:

*The human body is scandalously inefficient. Instead of a mouth and an anus to get out of order why not have one all-purpose hole to eat and eliminate? We could seal up nose and mouth, fill in the stomach, make an air hole direct into the lungs where it should have been in the first place.* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 150)

Compare this with *Crash*:

*I visualized my wife injured in a high-impact collision, her mouth and face destroyed, and a new and exciting orifice opened in her perineum by the splintering steering column, neither vagina nor rectum, an orifice we could dress with all our deepest affections. I visualized the injuries of film actresses and television personalities, whose bodies would flower into dozens of auxiliary orifices, points of sexual conjunction with their audiences formed by the swerving technology of the automobile.* (Ballard, 1995, pp. 179–80)

'Ballard,' after he has had intercourse with a deep, indented scar in the thigh of Gabrielle, envisions a future sexuality of mobile erogenous zones. The crash-event that the protagonists of the novel have all encountered has become a harbinger of new fluidity of desire that can be conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari's *Body without Organs*. The Deleuzian conception of event means not only the production of something genuinely new in the experiential world (here: the crash-sex interface of automobiles and their human drivers and passengers, a previously unthinkable proposition) but also the altering of the past in a way that the latent, virtual potentialities enabling the empirical emergence of the event become understood (here: various elements of the post-war technological and mediated landscape that produce the possibility of the crash-event).

The event itself eludes presence in its actualization, which concerns both the future and the past, with the virtual event remaining in the infinite mode. As I see it, the literary devices of *Crash* reflect this: the crash-event remains undescribed in the novel, at least in any substantial manner that would be comparable to the exquisitely detailed descriptions of crash fantasies or the tableaux of altered metal and flesh after the crashes. For instance, Vaughan's terminal crash has already happened in the beginning of the novel.<sup>8</sup>

What about trauma? Is it not the case that *Crash* depicts a textbook example of the libidinal conflict between the erotic drive towards increasing of excitation and the thanatic counter-movement towards the oblivion of zero intensity? Would the result of this oscillation between Eros and Thanatos be the traumatic compulsion to repeat the crash-event that originally presented a threat to one's organic unity? We can turn this Freudian analysis around, as Deleuze does, and by this interpret *Crash*'s protagonists' quest as not negative but affirmative. For Deleuze, what is primary is not some originary lack that desire would be oriented towards in the hope of fulfilling the lack, but rather the metaphysical difference-in-itself that lacks nothing. The question becomes that of perspective: from the point of view of organic normality that the social control seeks to keep intact, becoming-other is aberration, perversity, negativity—even death of the Self. From the perspective of the *Body without Organs*, intensive differences do not recognize negativity, only variation. Yet, the state of death as zero intensity (cf. Freud's Nirvana principle) is always present in the BwO as the condition from which relations emerge and recede into. "It is in the very nature of every intensity to invest within itself the zero intensity starting from which it is produced, in one moment, as that which grows or diminishes according to an infinity of degrees" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 330).

As the intensive body of differential relations of varying intensity, the BwO is not otherworldly, however. Deleuze and Guattari's criticism of Freud concerns his way of universalizing the drives and the subsequent subject formation—hence Deleuze and Guattari's figure of Anti-Oedipus as criticism of the Western familial/Oedipal situation taken as a universal model for the development of subjectivity, as well as their usage of the concept of machine instead of structure. Rather, Deleuze and Guattari see the BwO, with its substratum of the neutral energy of zero intensity (i.e. the death drive), as necessarily historical. This means that the BwO exists bound in certain organization, but as an enemy of it (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 158), providing potentiality for change in order to devise escape routes towards alternate modes of existence. Following Deleuze and Guattari, one can ask: if life is understood in the most general terms as transmission of intensities, why limit life to the activity of the organism? Organism, as self-enclosed and self-maintaining system is oriented towards habituation as the repetition of the same. The event, as

---

8 *Crash* begins in the end – or after the end of Vaughan, as 'Ballard' recounts how Vaughan has died in his ultimate crash, finally enacting his obsession of colliding with the actress Elizabeth Taylor (however missing his target and plunging through the roof of a tourist bus instead).



the repetition of preceding elements in a way that produces difference, “escapes” the traumatic model of repetition of the same.

Claire Colebrook (2011) emphasizes the need in philosophical thinking to move beyond the model of the organism, a traumatic body bounded between desire for expansion and fear of obliteration, in order to approach that which is truly yet unthinkable. J. G. Ballard, in speculating an assemblage of various elements of different modes of existence, both organic and inorganic, opens up a trajectory towards thinking our current social and technological situation in novel terms. Therefore, *Crash* offers itself not only as an object of literary analysis, but also as a source of philosophical thinking in itself. The question of whether *Crash* is a moral, cautionary tale or immoral pornography is now beside the point. By constructing a literary world where the characters are swept up with the erotic allure of technology, media and self-modification via auto-erotic crashes, the crash-event in the book and the crash-event of the book reveal heretofore hidden genealogies leading to this speculative modern moment of the “autogeddon” (Ballard, 1995, p. 50) to come.

*The writing of this article was funded by Alfred Kordelin Foundation.*

## References

- Airaksinen, T. (1995). *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade*. London, Routledge
- Augé, M. (1995). *Non-Places – Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (J. Howe, trans.). London & New York, Verso
- Ballard, J. G. (1968). A Neural Interval. *Ambit* 36 (Summer), back cover
- Ballard, J. G. (1976). Two Letters. *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* 10, 50–52
- Ballard, J. G. (1995). *Crash*. London, Vintage
- Baudrillard, J. (1991). Ballard's *Crash*. *Science Fiction Studies* 18(55), 309–19
- Colebrook, C. (2011). Time and Autopoiesis: The Organism Has No Future. In L. Guillaume & J. Hughes (Eds.). *Deleuze and the Body* (pp. 9–28). Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press
- Cord, F. (2017). *J. G. Ballard's Politics: Late Capitalism, Power, and the Pataphysics of Resistance*. Berlin & Boston, Walter de Gruyter
- Deleuze, G. (1986). *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (H. Tomlinson & B. Habberjam, trans.). London, The Athlone Press
- Deleuze, G. (1990). *The Logic of Sense* (M. Lester & C. Stivale, trans.). London, The Athlone Press
- Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and Repetition* (P. Patton, trans.). New York, Columbia University Press
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1983). *Anti-Oedipus* (R. Hurley, M. Seem & H. R. Lane, trans.). Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus* (B. Massumi, trans.). Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press
- D'Costa, K. (2013, April 22). Choice, Control, Freedom and Car Ownership. *Scientific American*.

Retrieved from <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/anthropology-in-practice/choice-control-freedom-and-car-ownership/?redirect=1>

- Francis, S. (2011). *The Psychological Fictions of J. G. Ballard*. London & New York, Continuum
- Freud, S. (1961). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (J. Strachey, trans.). New York & London, W. W. Norton & Co
- Freud, S. (1962). *Civilization and Its Discontents* (J. Strachey, trans.). New York & London, W. W. Norton & Co
- Goddard, J. (1973). Ballard on *Crash* – Answers to Some Questions. *Cypher 10* (October), 53–54
- Langman, L. (2018). Punk, Porn and Resistance: Carnivalization and the Body in Popular Culture. *Current Sociology* 56 (4), 657–677
- Luckhurst, R. (2008). J. G. Ballard: *Crash*. In D. Seed (Ed.). *A Companion to Science Fiction* (pp. 512–521). Malden, MA & Oxford, Blackwell Publishing
- Nuttall, J. (2018). *Bomb Culture – 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. London, Strange Attractor Press
- Sage, V. (2008). The Gothic, The Body, and the Failed Homeopathy Argument: Reading *Crash*. In J. Baxter (Ed.). *J. G. Ballard: Contemporary Literary Perspectives* (pp. 34–49). London, Continuum
- Self, W. (2006). *Junk Mail*. New York, Black Cat
- Smith, Z. (2014, July 4). Sex and wheels: Zadie Smith on JG Ballard's *Crash*. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/04/zadie-smith-jg-ballard-crash>
- Tighe, C. (2005). *Writing and Responsibility*. London, Routledge
- Whiting, E. (2012). Disaffection and Abjection in J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*. In J. Baxter & R. Wymer (Eds.). *J. G. Ballard: Visions and Revisions* (pp. 88–104). Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan

## Perfume, Violence, and Symbolic Sacrifice

*Davide Giovanzana*

**Abstract:** *This article firstly analyzes a practical exercise of re-staging iconic violent images through actors and discusses the bodily reactions to being exposed to violent images. The article then presents a theoretical framework to understand the notion of the body as symbolic sacrifice. The text brings together these two notions (effects of violent images and symbolic sacrifice) and discusses the violence inherent in advertising images. Lastly, it claim that the clothing and perfume advertising industry, through the display of violence, attempts to commodify the sacrificed body.*

**Keywords:** *violence, visual culture, theater*

I remember in 2010 when Jean-Luc Nancy gave a lecture at the contemporary art museum of Helsinki, Kiasma, at a conference entitled “Body as Theatre” (Elo & Luoto, 2018). He started the lecture by examining the moment of waking up, especially the instant when he became conscious of seeing. And then he wondered where this seen image finds its location in the body: “Where do I perceive this image in me?” “Strangely enough,” he reported, “the image finds its placement not in front of me, not in my eyes or in the center of my head, but somewhere at the back of my skull, almost behind me. The encounter with the world happens behind me.” And later during the lecture, referring to his own book, *Corpus*, he stated: “the body always forces us to think further” (Nancy, 2008). I could add, not only further, but even outside the body. When you think about what your own body has experienced, you have to place yourself inside and at the same time outside yourself. This idea, or better to say, this image appearing at the back of the skull, finding its location in the body, almost outside the body, has haunted me ever since I attended Jean-Luc Nancy’s lecture. And probably this is also one of the reasons that initiated an exercise which consisted in re-staging pictures that I discuss in this article. For I was interested not only to find where an image (the image of the world) finds its location in the body, but also how images affect the body. How they can “modify” it.

When I started this investigation, it was 2015. Paris was struck by several terrorist attacks. After these attacks in Paris, I was affected by several videos posted on the internet by Isis. The intensity, the determination, and the violence present in these videos captivated me. Something repulsed me yet at the same time intrigued me. I founded this ambivalence in me problematic. And then I thought that probably this problematic ambivalence is an important problem that needs to be examined. Therefore, this investigation led me to focus on images that represent an

experience on the limit: images that are considered violent. Michel Foucault wrote extensively on how violence, and by extension a power system, expresses itself mainly on the body. The structural repression of a power system imposes its violence on the bodies of its citizens and displays this violence on their bodies as theatrical images (i.e. public executions, decapitations, or hanging), which contribute to a precise staging of fear (Foucault, 1977). In this sense, violent images could be examined as a theatrical communication of a power system. But here I am more interested in examining violence as a manifestation per se (which creates phenomena of closeness and trauma or distance and consciousness) rather than its use as instrument by a power structure (for terror and control).

This article is divided into two parts. The first part discusses a practical exercise that aimed to re-stage violent images. This exercise led to an examination of the violence hidden in the advertising industry. The second part presents a theoretical framework discussing the notion of the body as symbolic sacrifice. Lastly, the article examines if the advertising industry and especially perfume advertising, through the display of violence, attempt to commodify a kind of “longing” for the body.

The “symbolic sacrifice” defined by the Italian psychologist Massimo Recalcati, is a psychological and anthropological understanding of the paradoxical relationship that humans have towards their own bodies (Recalcati, 2017). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western thinking has seen an attempt to overcome the so-called mind–body division that is often epitomized by the Christian concept of the soul as “pure” and of the body as “corruptible.” In this sense, the phenomenological school, which focuses on the body experience in order to develop rational thinking, is a clear example of this attempt. This school proved that the body is an important area of philosophical investigation. By referring to the notion of symbolic sacrifice, I would like instead to suggest another approach to this “division” between the body and mind, which proposes that human beings have to “sacrifice” their body in order to become “human.” Humans, unlike animals, can reflect on their own death. Language contributes to this process of “consciousness,” but this “consciousness” demands a “symbolic” sacrifice. Humans sacrifice their being part of nature in order to access humanity (animals-conscious-of-death). And this element of “nature” that is “sacrificed” is inscribed in the body. However, the sacrificed body is not simply something removed or denied, it is a constant negotiation that humans have to make between “language” and “nature” (the body, the beast, or the dark side). This constant negotiation is not easy and can be explosive. It also constitutes a great source of desire that the advertising industry tries to exploit. In fact, the violence present in the images of the advertising industry is not supposed to repulse the observer but on the contrary to arouse desire. In this sense, “buying” a perfume represents the promise to restore the body that has been sacrificed. The advertisement therefore tries to commodify the beast, the nature, and the dark side that symbolically humans have killed (or removed) within themselves.

My initial question was why some images are considered violent? And especially what kind of knowledge we can acquire by watching violent images? In addition, as a theater director, I was curious to examine an aspect of human behavior that we could consider “extreme”: I was wondering how to represent violence. I was wondering how actors can understand a violent situation and how they can “embody” such a situation. The immediate and usual way to perform “violent behavior” on stage would be to ask one actor to embody an aggressive character that performs violent acts towards other characters. However, I was wondering if it would be possible to examine alternative ways to explore performing violence and especially, to explore a situation that is far from their everyday life experience, a situation that could be considered an

experience on the limit, something that is unfamiliar. With the photographer Keme Pellicer, we were researching many violent images that can be seen in the media. With Keme, we decided to propose ten different violent images and let the students<sup>1</sup> choose according to their spontaneous gut-feelings. Four images were selected. These images were iconic violent images, very far from our reality, and at the same time, because we have seen them over and over, almost familiar. They were so extreme: the moment when a Vietcong insurgent is shot in the street by a general, a woman held as a trophy by a group of male French Resistance fighters, an American soldier pulling a naked Iraqi prisoner with a dog lash, a woman being buried alive. These images are common for their ubiquitous replication in the media, and at the same time they are remarkable. The most problematic aspect is that these images are so haunting because we don't know what to do with the emotions that such repellent images create. We are familiar with them and the vision of them is unsustainable, we want to stop the images, for them to not exist. The difficulty is what to do with the emotion generated by these images. Some people simply deny them. Some prefer to release the tension either through jokes or through actions. Some individuals decide to view these images as a test, to prove a personal resistance to these frightful pictures. I believe that most of us, however, need to create a "distance" from these images. The notion of distance developed by Kant and re-proposed by Max Ryyänen considers "distance" geographically. The observer is in a safe place, far from the terrible event, allowing the observer to appreciate the view (Ryyänen 2019). But I would like to decline this notion of "distance," of being safe, to something more intangible, something related to ethics, or to the emotion of the observer: something like a theoretical framework placing the observer in a "safe" position, allowing him or her to cope with the violence present in the world. For these images do not produce knowledge, but as Susan Sontag wrote, they simply haunt us (Sontag, 2003, 126). This "distance" could then be understood as a theoretical frame that rationalizes these emotions. I will come back to this notion.

The idea of the exercise was to re-stage these iconic violent images with the help of the student actors and re-photograph them. After having re-staged and re-photographed them, the students made several theater improvisations based on the re-staging. These improvisations pushed the students to explore these images from different angles; from the position of the perpetrators, from the position of the victims, from the point of view of the photographer. During these improvisations, the students developed monologues of what the characters they embodied could have said, thought, or felt in that particular situation. Our aim was not to be "documentary" in the sense of being as realistic as possible. The work was purely fictional. The actors were encouraged to invent what they felt. Naturally, it is logical to wonder if fiction can provide knowledge starting from a historical image. I do believe that this exercise is fruitful but it is important to clearly define what exactly is examined. Two main points were under scrutiny during these improvisations: 1) Could the students make such an effort of imagination to be able to portray themselves in such an extreme situation? 2) Can we understand something more that the picture does not say? And if yes, what? Regarding the first question, some students were able to explore the violence of these images, others were struggling. And for the second question, all the improvisations indicated that the image presented a reduced vision of what was probably happening. When we look at an image, it seems that as the viewer, we understand what is happening: we see an armed person shooting at a defenseless person. We immediately label who is the perpetrator and who is the victim. But the "reality" is far more complex. The

---

<sup>1</sup> This research was done in collaboration with the BA students of the Swedish acting department of the Theater Academy of Helsinki, Finland.

improvisation opened up the complexity that the image could not do. To go back to Susan Sontag, the improvisation managed to introduce a narrative that helped to “understand” the situation instead of “haunting” us. After this experience, with Keme and with the students, we were exploring how it would be possible to shoot these images that we re-staged again, but with a “twist” so that these images can relieve us instead of haunting us. Something about distance is at stake in these images: they disturb us, they come too close on an emotional level. We need to create a “mental” or “emotional” screen to put them a bit further away so that we are not disturbed, so that we can look at them. At the same time, in order to achieve something productive, something that can trigger knowledge (and not only haunting), they need to come even closer to us; in the sense, not closer to our skin, but closer to our reality, of being familiar to us, so that as viewers, we can decipher what is not in the frame. The whole idea was to find ways to introduce everyday life objects or elements from our everyday life that could bring these violent situations closer to our reality. And especially, to find ways to make them “less” haunting (less dangerous or traumatizing) and still retain the importance (the brutality, the violence) of the image. This “twist” is a bizarre turn that we aimed to apply onto the images.

At this point, before I continue with the description of the process, I would like to share a peculiar, and at the same time revealing, experience which brings us back to Susan Sontag’s statement. I was invited to the Aalto University, to an MA seminar about visual culture and contemporary art to share this research process conducted with the acting students of the Theater Academy of Helsinki. When I presented the images, which were only one step among a larger process, some students from the MA program reacted aggressively towards what I was presenting. These students, without knowing about the whole process conducted with the acting students, stated that the method was wrong, that ethically speaking the process was questionable, and anyway why on Earth would we want to produce more violent images, there are already enough of them. I was surprised because the criticisms that the students were making about the work were exactly the same reasons that led me to initiate this work. I wanted to offer an alternative discourse to the presence of violent images in our everyday life. I tried to develop a process of thinking through practice. And I was sharing the practical research that was carried out, so I could develop a discussion on violence. But this reaction was unexpected, and somehow it confirmed the statement of Susan Sontag: the images triggered an explosive reaction among the students, and the debate was closed. Students were entrenched in their opinions and their judgments were fixed. No discussion. It was surprising that even in an academic environment, the images worked in the same way: they simply haunted the viewer. The discussion eventually became polarized: on the one hand some students argued that violent images create more violence and on the other hand other students argued that violent images help to understand violence. What appeared to me was that the polarization of arguments simplified the complexity of the violence: it is good or it is bad. Violence is a multi-layered and indistinct experience that it is difficult to accept. It seemed that the students needed an answer for what they were seeing and, especially, feeling. Probably this incident exemplifies the problem related to the representation of violence. The key to resolving this problem would be to understand what has happened, to try to deconstruct the progression of the reaction, in that precise moment when the view of the images hits their bodies and their bodies needed to sublimate this “hit,” this tension, into a discourse. Then, the discourse polarized the position of the students and nullified any attempt to contextualize or to integrate a broader dialogue about these images. This situation reminded me of the intense debate about the video *My Way, a Work in Progress* by the Finnish artist Teemu Mäki made in 1995. In this video we can see Teemu Mäki killing a cat. The video lasts 30 minutes and the scene

where the cat is killed lasts 6 seconds. The video contains video footage of wars, sadomasochistic sex, battery chickens, famine in Africa, views from slaughterhouses, ecological catastrophes, and garbage dumps. The video tried to examine forms of structural and mental violence. With this video, the artist wanted to instigate empathy towards people suffering from wars, to give voice to those who are economically exploited, and to make the Western audience more conscious of their implication in global war. However, the scene of the cat provoked a vehement reaction among the viewers. Teemu Mäki received many threatening emails explaining that he deserved to die like the cat in the video and the video has been censored in Finland (Mäki, 2005, 74-76). All the other 29 minutes and 54 seconds of the video were obliterated by the cat scene. This art piece, which was supposed to develop a debate about the Western attitude towards violence in the world, generated only violent reactions. I don't want here to defend the work of Teemu Mäki. I am more interested in the reactions that the video created. I will come back to these "reactions." There is already a long tradition that goes back to the Renaissance, where artists, like for instance Michelangelo, considered their artwork as a form of creation and destruction. Michelangelo considered sculpting as a form of violence where the artist hammers, removes, and eliminates the stone. For him, this act of destruction is the very act that supports the art. And the art historian Scott Nethersole points out that a medieval exegetical tradition compares the violence suffered by the martyrs with the art of sculpting, especially sculpting ivory (Nethersole, 2018, 209). But here, rather than examining how artists considered their work (whether destructive or cathartic), I am more interested in the reactions and how the concept of violence creates new consciousness or knowledge. And, as in the case of Teemu Mäki or in the Aalto University incident, the debate remained conflictual. Of course, we could say that violence, because it is about violence, can lead only to conflict. But this position leads to a dead end. I would like to suggest that maybe in these discussions, the wrong questions about violence were asked. I will come back to this issue later in the article.

But let us return to the process of "twisting" the images and to the results of this second step. The image of the woman held by the French Resistance was "reversed" in the sense of having a group of women (dressed in clothes of the same time period) holding a man. The gender reversal did not produce any effect. Probably the reason was that the group of women remained unclear. When it was the men, it was not only men, but also the "heroes" who liberated France. In this sense, in the reverse picture, the group of women could not be connected with any existing group. Maybe we would have needed to go a step further and, for instance, have a group of "MeToo" women holding a man who had harassed them and on whose forehead was written the word "pervert." The persons in the image of the buried woman were replaced by Moomin characters<sup>2</sup>: Moomin was buried by Little My, Snufkin, and Too-Ticky. In this situation, the clash between familiar, childhood imagery and this brutal action managed to disrupt the initial image. The image of the American soldier holding the Iraqi prisoner was replaced by a woman wearing a niqab holding a naked European man with a leash. By reversing nationalities, the so-often condescending attitude of the West towards other cultures was opened up. And finally in the image of the shooting, the gun was replaced by a very harmless object: a perfume bottle. A perfume was sprayed and the woman, the "victim," with her hands fastened behind her back, received the "shot" of perfume as if it were a bullet. At first in this image, the "twist" seemed a failure. The image looked like a typical perfume advertisement. But then at a second thought, this process revealed how the perfume advertising industry relies on violence to sell its products.

<sup>2</sup> The Moomins are the central characters of a comic strip for children created by the Finnish artist Tove Jansson. This comic strip is extremely famous and almost all the Finns know their adventures. They are a family of white, round fairy tale characters with large snouts that make them resemble cute and inoffensive hippopotamuses.

When this reflection became clear, the initial reaction was to blame this type of advertisement. How is it possible that images portraying male domination, sexual domination, rape, even gang rape are used to sell perfume or clothes? For instance, the Dolce & Gabbana 2007 advertisement displayed a woman held to the floor by a man. Three other men are standing by and looking at the woman. By the contortions of the woman's body, she seems to be fighting and trying to get out from the grip of the men. Later Calvin Klein made a similar advertisement, which also portrayed a woman assaulted by a man while two others are complacently watching the scene. It is very hard not to think of these images as a glamorization of gang rape. Or for instance, a Gucci 2015 advertisement portrayed an adult woman lying over the lap of a man and the man slapping the ass of the woman as if she was a child. Or the Sisley 2016 advertisement where a woman is sitting on the floor in the middle of a bull fighting arena, her legs spread out with a red dress and a bull looking at the woman. As spectators, we suppose that the bull will soon charge directly on the sex of the woman. And again, a Relish 2009 advertisement displayed two young women arrested by two police officers in Rio de Janeiro. The two police officers are not only arresting the women, but they are abusing their authority and the image suggests that they assault them sexually. One of them is holding one of the women on the car while grabbing her ass, the other one is gripping her hands behind her back and pulling her. The woman's facial expression could be read either as discomfort from being pulled or as pleasure from being "dominated." Or again, Alexander Wang's 2016 advertisement, displaying two young girls (who look like minors) with cadaverous faces (as if they are sick or drug users) in the trunk of a car. And so on. Women's organizations opposing the objectification of women are constantly attacking this industry (The Guardian, 2016); the brands regularly apologize, but nevertheless new images with the same violence are produced. These images are obviously shameful. Should we consider that the key to attracting the attention of potential buyers is a strategy of relying on shock value (the violent images)? Or do these violent images reveal something else?

The Italian psychologist Massimo Recalcati, following Freud and Lacan's analysis, points out that humans are the only "animals" able to think and discuss their own death (Recalcati, 2017). This "consciousness" is made possible through the acquisition of language. But this acquisition of language also brings a loss: it banishes humans from the sphere of Nature. A series of symbolic barriers, of cultural limitations, of prohibition imposed by civilization's program, demands the removal of the animality in the human (27). Becoming "human" requires a separation, a cut from a form of excess. According to Recalcati, an animal cannot experience nakedness, being naked, because the animal is never really naked, in the sense that the animal does not wear clothes. To be naked or to dress up are actions that are possible for an existence that relies on the filter of language (28). What differentiates the existence of the human from that of the animal is that the life of the animal and its death can only be present, immediate, it cannot become an object of interrogation, of examination. In the animal, everything is fully "present," regulated by the rule of instinct. In other words, the human being, in order to become human, needs to sacrifice the animal part of her, to detach herself from nature, and submit herself to the filter of language. I am well aware that the terminology employed by Recalcati stands on a slippery slope. It is easy to accuse Recalcati of an anthropocentric, condescending attitude towards animals. Post-human thinking has already pierced this animal-human dichotomy. However, even if it seems antiquated, I consider his notion of language regulating body interesting. The sacrifice that language operates, is a symbolic sacrifice of the "excess" allowing to access the realm of humanity. And whoever does not accept the symbolic sacrifice imposed by language, becomes a creature that embodies the monstrous excess of life, of life that scares life, of life



that is not controlled. It is the terrifying, unknown, dangerous beast that scares children: the black wolf, the venomous snake, the shark, the crocodile (31). These figures which populate the folktale imagery are the symbolic transposition of the danger of falling back into “animality.” What threatens humans is the possibility of losing their “humanity,” forgetting their symbolic sacrifice, and letting the “beast” rule, in other words to fall into barbarianism. The notion of symbolic sacrifice replaces here the body–mind division and proposes a dialectic mediation between “human” and “Nature.” The excess embodied by the body needs to be “regulated,” to be “cut” away, and language operates this regulation. It is possible to infer then that in order to access the status of humans, people have to “cut” away what connects them to the realm of the animals, to Nature. The excess that is “sacrificed,” the animal inside, Nature, is what resides in the body. The body represents then the memory of the animal, of Nature, that language has to control. To some extent, a similar idea can be found in Dante. In the *Divine Comedy*, Canto XI depicts the sinners punished for using violence. These sinners are divided into three categories: those who used force against others (homicide, tyrants, and thieves), those who used violence against themselves (suicide and spendthrifts), and those who used force against God. The Canto also explains that there are three types of violent nature: those that cannot contain themselves (cannot stop their impulses), those that use malice (use intellect wrongly), and those that are mad beasts (not following virtue). Dante’s division is taken directly from Aristotle’s *Ethics*, he also considered “bestiality” the worse condition for a human being (Aristotle, 1934).

Scott Nethersole, studying violent imagery in early Renaissance Florence, pointed to a distinction between sacred violent images and secular violent images (Nethersole, 2018). Sacred art, as for instance the flagellation of Christ, is meant to evoke empathy in the viewer, while secular art portraying violence perpetrated by a brute or beasts were meant to “repel” the viewer (92). What is interesting in this observation is that violent images have two specific statuses: one is supposed to emotionally touch the spectator, the other to stimulate consciousness in the spectator’s eye. Nethersole lengthily described the tradition in Florence to paint the flagellation of Christ, where the perpetrators are in full action but the skin of Christ remains intact. Such a clash between the “text” of the story (Christ being flagellated) and the “image” (Christ not being wounded) pushes Nethersole to suggest that the “flagellation,” or the violence, was imagined by the watchers. By doing so, the spectators participated actively in the Passion of Christ (91), the viewers become flagellators wounding Christ. The intention is to bring the viewer closer to the suffering of the scene. The viewer is summoned to feel, and to respond emotionally to the implicit violence in the image. Secular images of violence instead did not have the intention to make the spectators feel the violence. Nethersole, among the various terrible secular images he analyzes, discusses widely the particular extensive stucco decoration (48 meters long) that surrounds the entrance of Palazzo Scala from Borgo Pinti in Florence. The stucco presents numerous violent scenes between humans and beasts, and beasts against beasts, Centaurus being drunk, and various killings. What struck the author is why someone would place scenes of violence in his house? These are not sacred images supposed to arouse empathy, they are a long listing of brutalities. The author suggests that, in order to understand these images, we should not forget Dante’s text. When the humans progressed away from animality, they progressed away from violence (123). These violent images were not there to impress or to create an emotional response to violence, but they were a fable instigating the spectator’s perception. The observers took pleasure in watching these violent scenes because the viewers considered themselves civilized and thus far from being “animal” (or brutal). They considered themselves to be distant and could “enjoy” these violent depictions. These images, according to Nethersole,

were placed in such a central place of the house because they were a social definition of the owner of the house (141). The sacred images, in which the violence was invisible, invited the viewer to meditate on Christ's pain and on their own sinfulness. While in secular violent images, in which violence was visible, viewers rejected this violence as alien to them (237). Even though Nethersole's research dwells on Renaissance paintings (another time period and another medium than the pictures discussed in the exercise), I consider his arguments convincing and applicable to today's context. However his final conclusion is disputable and I will discuss it here because it reconnects with the "incident" at the university. Nethersole discusses the jubilatory description that Giorgio Vasari<sup>3</sup> gives of *The Massacre of the Innocents* (1485-1490), painted by the Italian painter Domenico Ghirlandaio (1448-1494). The description outlines the beauty of the lines and the skillful composition of this massacre: "*con giudizio, con ingegno et arte grande*" – made with judgment, intelligence, and great skill (238). The extensive praise by Vasari and especially the pleasure that this art piece provokes in Vasari is challenging. This strong connection of violence with pleasure seems to compromise the discourse about the sacred or secular that Nethersole developed. In his interpretation, there was a moral learning from these violent images (either empathy or consciousness), but never an aspect of joy or pleasure. This leads Nethersole to wonder what could be the reason for violent images to be displayed in homes. Nethersole seems to find the answer to this question in Aristotle's *Poetic*, when he discusses mimesis and especially the definition of the catharsis effect, which claims that the viewing of horrific images creates the sense of wonder and pity that helps to purge the observer from committing similar actions. This statement is a direct response to Plato's criticism of mimesis which, according to Plato, prompted emotions in the spectators that were problematic and ethically dubious. We can perceive in the opposition of the two Greek philosophers a similar opposition in arguments in the university incident. However, in both cases, and here is my reservation regarding Nethersole's conclusion, the arguments are based on a theory for theater, meaning for something that develops a narrative. The problem with images, as we have seen, is that they do not create any narrative. This leads me to wonder, as I mentioned earlier, if the wrong questions about violence are being asked. It seems that the debate about violence is concerned with moral issues: good or bad. But as I examine below, this moralistic approach to violence might impede the perception of a broader implication connected to violence.

To return to the perfume advertisements using violence, in which category would they fall? What is the purpose of the violence in these images? Is it to summon empathy, like in sacred art described by Nethersole? Or is it to stimulate consciousness among the buyers, like in the secular art? I doubt the first option and also the second one seems unlikely. What is it then?

The symbolic "sacrifice" implies a constant negotiation between "humanity" and "beast," which is dealt with in the subject: the outburst of vitality or the desire to let the "animal" emerge are continuous temptations that humans face. This desire to "connect" with the animal inside is probably, as Recalcati suggests, a frustration from the fact of living a "lesser" life: a life that is regulated by the filter of language. According to him, a life that is constantly under scrutiny (by language) cannot be an existence fully lived (Recalcati, 2017, 27-29). The animal, unlike the human, can instead live "fully." It is thus possible to understand this ambivalent attitude of the human wanting to become human and at the same time longing for the primeval state that has been sacrificed: the body, the animal, the life fully lived. This is why, there are situations in which "civilization" is suspended, and humans are allowed to let the beast, the Nature, the "body"

---

3 Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) was an Italian painter, architect, writer, and historian, most famous for his "Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects," considered the ideological foundation of Western art history.

speak; like in the act of making love. In this moment of intimacy, language is dispossessed and humans can regain the primeval status of being fully present. Or in its opposite, during a conflict either ritualized, like a sports game, or lethal, like war. The ritualized conflict is limited in time: when the game is over, the players regain their “humanity.” And similarly, when the war is over, the soldiers should regain their civil life and return to their “humanity.”<sup>4</sup> Games and wars, where civilization is suspended, are exceptional moments; they are not supposed to be the norm.<sup>5</sup> The subject who has agreed to the symbolic sacrifice is nevertheless in tension within herself: for the body is present and reclaims her attention. It is possible to understand here the longing of the body, of the fully lived life. The body makes itself present, palpable, in various ways. The subject is thus in constant tension and needs to negotiate the “emergence” of the body while remaining “civilized,” remaining in the symbolic sacrifice. The sublimation of such tension, of such desire, is therefore captured by the advertising industry which seems to offer a release for it. The excess of the body, the desire to live fully, is packaged in a bottle or in clothes that are accepted by the civilization program. The subject can purchase this accepted part of herself. What the advertisement offers is the promise to reconnect with the lost body, with the beast, with Nature. It is a perfume, a sense that does not create knowledge, but stimulate memories and arousals. In this view, the longing of the body is commodified. In such case, the violence depicted in the advertisement, is not necessarily an incitement to implement violence, but is a way to touch the “soft” spot of humans: what they had to give away to become humans. In this situation, violence is instrumentalized, and used to sell products. The potential buyer hopes by buying clothes to reconnect with her “lost” body. I would suggest that these ads should not be condemned for objectivizing women or for portraying violence, but for instrumentalizing violence itself. Violence, the mystery of violence, is denatured and trivialized. The danger of such operation is that we might then fail to address the right questions about violence. As in the case described at the university or with Teemu Mäki. The anthropologist Anton Blok argues that violence in the West has been monopolized by the state. This created a sense of pacified humans and society. However, such condition makes us consider violence (and its so-called unauthorized form) as something anomalous, disruptive, irrational, senseless; the reverse of social order. Violence is considered the antithesis of civilization, something that needs to be brought under control. The danger in this, concludes Blok, is that we might fail to ask what violence signifies and how (Blok, 2000, 23-24). We are inclined to look only at the expression of it and judge it from a moralistic standpoint. Bringing the discussion of violence into a moralistic point of view is again an attempt to come to terms with a complicated phenomenon, to provide a simplified answer to an ambiguous phenomenon. By either considering it as good or bad is to reduce the mystery of violence and to consider it through the lens of utilitarianism.

In this article, two arguments were examined: the tension between the body and language and the effects of violent images. The body is the depository of the excess that humans have to sacrifice in order to reach the status of humanity. This symbolic sacrifice is operated and consolidated by language that “prevents” the body from falling back into animality, into barbarianism, into Nature. As I mentioned, this tension between the body and language is a constant negotiation, a tension that is sublimated into a morbid desire or longing for the lost ability to fully live life. The body is thus the container of the excess and the temptation of this excess. The clothing and perfume advertising industry instrumentalizes this desire by offering a commodified version of

4 An example of the ritualistic bath for the soldier coming back from war can be found in the Greek tragedy *Oresteia* by Euripides, when Clytemnestra prepares the bath for her husband, Agamemnon coming back from the Trojan war.

5 Of course, this claim is debatable and Giorgio Agamben in his work *Homo Sacer*, examined the ambiguity of Western societies proclaiming democratic values and at the same time promoting continuous states of emergency diminishing the state of law.

it. The violence that is so often blatantly displayed in such advertisements becomes a promise to the potential consumer to re-connect with the sacrificed “animality,” with Nature, with the excess. As discussed above, violence is a complex phenomenon and exposure to violent images affects the viewer’s body. In order to release the tension generated by the vision of violence, the viewer needs to create some kind of “distance.” A theoretical framework, a moral judgment, a polarized position (is it good or bad) are ways to establish a safe distance and thus to “protect” the body. But as examined above, violence is not only an external phenomenon that humans want to get rid of. It is a part of the “animality,” of the “Nature” that is sacrificed, and which is longed for. The use of violence in an advertisement in order to sell products is a way to arouse such an emotional response and at the same time to offer a channel to sublimate this tension. The problem is that “violence” is put into a sellable package (either accepted or banned), but the important questions about violence and about our relationship towards violence are avoided.

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio (1995) *Homo Sacer*. Milano: Einaudi editore.
- Alighieri, Dante (1966) *La Divina Commedia*. Milan: Mondadori.
- Aristotle (1934) *Nichomachean Ethics*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Blok, Anton (2000) *The Enigma of Senseless Violence*, in *Meanings of Violence*. Oxford: Berg.
- Elo, Mika and Luoto, Miika. (Eds.) (2018.) “*Figures of Touch*”. Helsinki: The Academy of Fine Arts at the University of the Arts Helsinki.
- Eschilo. (1995.) *Oresteia*. Roma: Rizzoli.
- Foucault, Michel. (1977.) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Vintage Books.
- Matine, Alexandra. (2016.) “The Next Step in Marketing to Women is to Stop Marketing to Women.” *The Guardian* 2.3.2019. Link (last access 25.7.2019): <https://www.theguardian.com/media-network/2016/mar/02/marketing-women-advertising-gender-equality>
- Mäki, Teemu. (2005.) *Darkness Visible*. Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Fine Arts.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. (2008.) *Corpus*. Fordham University Press, New York
- Nethersole, Scott. (2018.) *Art and Violence in Early Renaissance Florence*. London: Yale University Press.
- Recalcati, Massimo. (2017.) *Contro il sacrificio*. Milan: Raffaello Cortina.
- Ryynänen, Max. (2019.) “Under the Skin: Notes on the Aesthetics of Distance and Visual Culture.” *The Journal of Somaesthetics* 2019: 1.
- Sontag, Susan. (2003.) *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador.

## Under the Skin: Notes on the Aesthetics of Distance and Visual Culture

*Max Rynnänen*

**Abstract:** *Distance has from time to time been discussed in aesthetics, e.g. as a necessary component in the experience of the sublime (Kant) and the aura (Benjamin). It looks like photographs/films are able to cut distance physically and time-wise, but that this does not necessarily lead to emphatic engagement (Sontag, Butler). Thinking about the amount of news images we see, it is interesting how little we discuss this phenomenon. Artists sometimes aspire to cut this distance by searching for new ways of representing e.g. war. In my text I will try to analyze distance as an aesthetic topic. I also discuss Anssi Pulkkinen's project Streetview (Reassembled), where a ruined house was imported from Syria to Europe, to make the war more comprehensible. I believe reflecting on distance could have both aesthetic and political significance.*

**Keywords:** *ethics, aesthetics, war, visual culture.*

Although Walter Benjamin (2008) was enthusiastic about the way photographs cut distance to objects both place-wise and time-wise, we mostly keep our moral and emphatic distance when we see things happening faraway through the media of photography and/or documentary film footage. How otherwise could we who view catastrophes only through media survive seeing war footage and continue living our lives, as if nothing had happened?

To get to grips with this topic, I will take a small leap into the history of the philosophy of art. I will take a look at the thoughts of Immanuel Kant and Walter Benjamin on distance, and will then continue by discussing everyday media from this perspective. I will discuss Anssi Pulkkinen's art work *Streetview (Reassembled)*, a work based on an appropriation of a ruin in Syria, which was exhibited in a variety of exhibition spaces in Northern Europe—and how it cut distance also experience-wise.

It seems that most visual culture, even when we know that we do not encounter fictional reality, stays morally and emphatically distanced for us. On the other hand, when you move horrifying physical remains from war zones to e.g. Helsinki Finland, like in the case of *Streetview (Reassembled)*, this presence of a distant catastrophe can make things more concrete and cut distance in surprising ways.

## 1. Kant, Benjamin and Some Philosophical Remarks on Distance

In the *Analytic of the Sublime*, the second book of *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), and in particular in its passage on the dynamically sublime, Immanuel Kant embraces impressive but hard-to-grasp encounters with nature.

Kant spent his whole life in (probably boring) Königsberg and its environs. We have no reason to believe that he was doing anything else other than just imagining what it means to see “volcanoes” and “high waterfalls,” based on what he read and on depictions of nature, but it is highly probable that he had experienced “threatening rocks,” “thunderclouds” and (relatively) “mighty rivers.” (Kant 1952, 110)

*Provided our own position is secure, their [i.e. encounters with impressive natural entities] aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.* (Kant 1952, 110-111)

It is not hard to imagine how in the end (Kant does not go into detail here), one does not just have to be far enough away to feel safe, but one must also be close enough to be impressed by these natural entities. Although we are sometimes able to imagine how an impressive natural site or object could look threatening when looked at from the right distance, it remains merely an analytic fact if we do not perceive it correctly.

Imagine that you are heading toward a small waterfall. Although it does not show any impressive features as you are approaching it, when you are at the site it suddenly strikes you with its massive aquatic nature and the rocks surrounding it. But when you are too close, you cannot grasp the whole.

Sometimes we actually need not to be too close, as is the case with mountains: seen at the site they do not show their contours. Mountains are impressive when you are able to see their shapes and/or silhouettes, but when you are on the mountain itself, you encounter just small rocks, bushes and trails.

Kant writes: “Nature considered is an aesthetic judgment as might that has no dominion over us, is dynamically sublime.” (Kant 1952, 109) He emphasizes how even if we are talking about frightful issues, one cannot himself/herself be frightened when one reflects upon the sublime. Fear is central, yet we cannot be afraid of what we see. (Kant 1952, 109-110)

If we think about the problematics of right distance, and also of Kant’s most classical example of beauty in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, the second part of *The Critique of Judgement*, the rose looks interesting. In Kant’s analytic of the beautiful, the rose (or any other beautiful object) is an object of “taste” and of “restful contemplation”. (Kant 1952, 94) Although Kant does not say it, when enjoying a rose there is a certain amount of distance we need to have. My intuition is that our distance from the rose should be from a little less than one feet to maximum of three feet, otherwise we are somewhat gazing at a landscape with a rose in it.

Again, in the text on the dynamically sublime (which is something we do not use our taste for, but to which we simply react), Kant himself is aware of the problematics of rationality and

perception. Visual perception, in the experience of the sublime, becomes overwhelmed by the hard-to-digest size and the formally hard-to-grab nature of the event which we perceive as sublime—or, to be precise, the reflection of it, as the aesthetic is not “presupposing either a judgment of sense or one logically determinant, but one of reflection.” (Ibid.)

Kant and Benjamin, two German classics which discuss distance, have interestingly a very different touch on the topic. As Benjamin mainly discusses cutting distance as an issue of aesthetic de-sacralization, Kant’s conception of the sublime is about fear.

The 9/11 attacks in the United States in 2001 accumulated reflection on Kant’s philosophy of the sublime by philosophers and journalists, when hundreds of millions of people watched the apocalyptic theater of terror which took over Manhattan, where skyscrapers melted and a titanic cloud of smoke veiled the city.

In the analyses of the sublime in both philosophy and the press, what stood out was simply the scale of the events (and their seductive appearance), although once again distance was a key for experiencing the sublime. Hearing bystanders’ experiences, it all seemed to be far from visual, but those of us who gazed at the event from our couches, and who did not have close-up experiences at the site, were visually shocked, following our safety (distance from the event) and the disturbingly breath-taking views offered by TV, which showed footage from helicopters.

Samuel Weber’s (2013) essay “Clouds: On a Possible Relation of Terror and Terrorism to Aesthetics” (2013), shows how even the inhabitants of New York enjoyed the content of their lunch-boxes while watching the event, just far enough on the other side of Hudson River that they could feel safe, though visually and geographically (one could say geopolitically) surprisingly close to the terrifying things happening on the other side of the water.

If you did not have a friend or family member in the area of the Twin Towers, you, together with the visual distance, went through an aestheticizing process: sometimes, even if you did not want to, you just enjoyed the moving images, which passed in front of you by way of the TV. Those of us with no reality connection to the seen, would have needed close-ups of the horrors in order to lose at least some moral / emphatic distance, which kept the images safely away. For those who had a close-up experience at the site or a relative living in houses nearby, the aesthetics of terrorism crept under the skin. For the rest of us, it often felt embarrassing or just ethically and aesthetically problematic. Watching it all, I sometimes forgot what I really was watching, and I felt embarrassed when I ‘woke up’ to the fact that I was enjoying it like a film, while real people were dying. But how would we survive global news coverage, if all images touched us?

Walter Benjamin, in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (written 1936), emphasizes how a photograph or film bridges both the temporal and geographical distance to the photographed / filmed subject. Interpretations of this seminal work underscore how reproduction erodes the aura of unique artifacts and places, but in the text itself, the philosopher also pondered how our relationship to distances changes through reproduction. The examples in the text range from distant mountains to classical architecture (Benjamin 2008). As artworks were suddenly not just in a place, which one needed to travel to, but were also accessible through reproduction, Benjamin thought that this cutting of distance would destroy their auratic nature.

Benjamin thought of a metaphysical change in our relationship to (besides historical, also) distant (and original) art objects. One can ask, if one wants to think side by side with him, if media cuts distances, but at the same time keeps them ethically distant? Maybe the aura, the glow of the classics (for Benjamin, a glow that was both negative and theological) was broken following modern reproduction techniques, and while our interest was sometimes raised by

someone in a photograph, who touched us, mostly—this is something which might have become more and more of a reality after the increased repetition and overflow of images in which we live—people in pictures are not that meaningful for us.<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not one wants to go into Benjamin's famous conception of the aura, Mona Lisa surely lost something when she became easier to access through pictorial representation. But a corpse lying on the ground on a street in Iraq did not gain much presence in the lives of us who were not there by coming closer to us through the images shown during the Second Gulf War.

I believe Benjamin might have been right about early photography. Maybe people felt that it was incredible to see a picture, which was a decade older or to witness a place they had never visited. But the number of images, their repetition and our need to become immune to them has exceeded all possibilities of staying in close touch with most of them. The repetition and the amount of images we see today is devastating to the meaning and weight of images.

It is interesting that we see things happening somewhere far away through images, which cut the distance, and yet at the same time keep things far away enough to not let them get under our skin. A typical example of this is fresh documentary footage on a particular war, where we see horrible things happening, but are able to keep fear, heavy empathy and engagement from leaking into our experience, if not on a level which could be close to watching fiction, at least on a level where one is detached and attached at the same time. It is just that here one is not enjoying the same kind of control as a viewer of fiction, as the viewer of war footage 'knows' (or believes) that s/he has access to reality through the image, at least in some way.

In the following, I will discuss this tension, not just through analyzing these relationships, but also through discussing art, which erodes distance. I will start with some concrete examples from the media to make the point clear. In a way, this is an essay where, after laying out some of the problematic contours of the topic, I offer another way of thinking about the topic, a way, which stresses in what ways the arts can in the end disturb the geographically and time-wise anti-distancing but emotionally and ethically distancing power of images, through finding new ways of coping with distance.

## 2. Media, Art, and Distance

I calculated how many people I come across through media. The amount was a couple of hundred per day—fifty just by reading the morning paper—and close to 100 000 per year, and counted in millions during a decade. What did these mediated people do? Besides playing tennis, driving cars, making love and cooking—some of them fictional, some not—I also witnessed "real" (or rather images of real) victims of wars and catastrophes.

How amazing it is that I have this surface connection to all these people. And how amazing it is that we see people from faraway places in danger and bad situations, and that we are able to continue our lives as if nothing has happened to us.

Like in the case of the viewers of 911 imagery who had a concrete attachment to the event (a friend living in Manhattan, etc.), sometimes we cannot stand everyday images which are about issues which connect to us. I cannot but think about our systematic mistreatment of animals. We hug dogs, and if we see a wounded bird, we are expected to save it, but at the same time we have an incredibly cruel system of producing meat, dairy products and fur. The images produced

---

<sup>1</sup> Here one should maybe mention Kendall Walton's thoughts on the transparency of photographs. Walton's point is that we can see through them, i.e. that we, in a way, see the original objects (it is so just a technical matter that we are watching an image). Walton does not touch our reactions to the images, but just the way we still feel we are watching the objects themselves. See Walton 2008.



at the sites of meat and dairy production are images people do not want to see. To be able to continue not caring, people do not want to see documentaries about animal mistreatment.

Of course the material produced by organizations for animal rights is edited to really disturb us, and not just to package a relatively challenging TV dinner for us, which is mostly the case with documentaries. Newspaper photo editors and the editors of documentaries (and sometimes also their producers) take away those images which are too much for us, thus producing a safe texture of pictures and moving images, which make it possible for us to experience a little horror, but which in the end neither hurts us, nor gets under our skin. (I will never forget the pictures one of my students, a photo editor of a large newspaper, showed me from one of Africa's recent wars: those she decided were too much and which consequently were never published.) The people who produce animal rights material attempt to do the opposite, to wake us up ethically, so they really go over the boundary of what we can take. And we resist the images which would creep under our skin.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes even 'relatively soft' (visually symbolic) news images can actually touch us, of course, as we know from the case of autumn of 2015, when we saw the body of a small boy, lying dead, washed ashore in Turkey, his face turned against the sand; or in the autumn of 2016, when the video of the little boy, Omran Daqneesh, wiping dirt and dried blood from his face in a hospital in Aleppo spread like wildfire through social media and raised a wave of responses. These images shared an experience of a crisis of humanity and helplessness, weirdly so through their nearly kitsch nature, if one can use the word here by stressing the style of the images.

In the 1990s, there were many public discussions on the way people were able to watch footage of wars without drowning in empathy.<sup>3</sup> The Rwanda War raised some of them, the footage raising our comfort zone a little higher than it had been in the 1980s. But on the other hand, it is also natural that people protect themselves, and we might have not just the right, but the duty to do that, to keep ourselves in mental shape. If we were not able to detach ourselves from what we see, it would be impossible to pair modern media with a healthy life. The whole world would be a mental wreck. The number of people on sick leave would become incredibly high every time a war broke out which our media was interested in showing to us.

From depictions of war, we learn that empathy is not present when one has to focus on mere survival: many emotions and attitudes are hard to keep up when one's life is at stake. From a safe distance, people can then later construe what they are experiencing. (This is what I know myself from my two car accidents, which gained experiential maturity only afterwards.)

In literature, Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929), which takes place during the First World War, exemplifies the nature of this oscillation. During the war, the rare moments when the going gets tough are somewhat emotionless for the protagonists, while in the trenches, and even more in hospitals and back home, there is time and emotional space for reflection. This is the classic theme where the young boys of war books and movies return home, and are then suddenly more traumatized than they ever were at the site of the horrors. (Timely distance is a huge factor in how we experience things.)

Judith Butler writes in her *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009) about precarious lives, and the way they sometimes do and sometimes do not touch the Americans who see them "framed" (presented) by media. As America's own wars have produced a lot of suffering, it looks,

2 I express my gratitude here to Pinja Mustajoki, who's doctoral thesis I am advising. As her doctoral work is about the animal mistreatment images nobody wants to see, I have learned a lot about defensive attitudes towards documentary images.

3 This boundary is of course broken once in a while, and published images have become more raw with time. To what extent will they keep leaning in an increasingly shocking direction?

like Butler shows, like there would be a nearly systematic selection of what to grieve. Cases like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo (see e.g. p. 64–65) show the political interest to regulate the visual field and the work done by the US government to contextualize what Americans see in the ‘proper’ political manner. While Butler’s book, which mainly focuses on the media audiences of the US, a country which seems to endlessly produce new wars, does not really in the end touch upon the aesthetic process of distancing, it shows how aesthetics can easily be overshadowed by politics. While the book’s message is not in the focus of this aesthetic inquiry it is a good reminder that images are also manipulated (or as Butler says ‘framed’) politically.

Also Susan Sontag has come close to Butler’s position (Butler actually often works on her heritage) by discussing our relationship to the sufferings of others. In her *Regarding the Pains of Others* (2003), a follow-up to her work on photography, Sontag accentuates the need to have images on the painful life of others, although she points out that if one has not experienced what the people in the images have lived through, one cannot in the end really understand the experiences at stake. The book is about ethical relationships, but interestingly, neither Sontag really works on an aesthetic framework on how things happen when we see e.g. images of war.

Armies are well aware of the potential and problems of distance. Aki Mauri Huhtinen’s book *Keinosota (Artificial War, 2004)*, a book published by Finland’s National Defence University, is a depiction of contemporary technological warfare which deals with the modern possibilities of detaching soldiers from their victims. The book discusses how computerization and observing events through monitors makes it emotionally less disturbing to carry out strikes, as empathy grows, along with a decrease in the distance to the experience. Visual and spatial distance is intentionally increased so it becomes easier for people to follow orders, to fire a missile into an unknown village, for instance, when one does it through a computerized image (and not at the site). One can note in Huhtinen’s book that this relationship to visibility is becoming methodological, as there are so many notes on how to create a fruitful distance to war through media.<sup>4</sup>

Could the closing up of visually digestible but ethically problematic distances in fact be the most significant thing that can be done through images, art in general or media, from a political point of view? Can art tear people out of their personal safety nets, and bring humanity closer to us? Could some practices even make us see images differently? And do we want that?

Mira Kallio-Tavin (2013) has pointed out how ethically present a person’s face is when it is given respectful space, allowing it to come close to the viewer. Only then can we truly encounter another individual through an image. Giving a real face to someone, a face that is close, and human and touching (this can also be done to an animal), can break much ice from the relationship between us and the objects of photography or painting.

Encountering otherness visually or even artistically is not an uncomplicated task, of course, and many projects that aim to reduce the ethical distance between viewers and images have been criticized as being social pornography. It is also quite common to portray the problems of some group defined as fragile by making up representations of them on stage, instead of finding a way of giving them a voice of their own.

I was involved in the process of presenting a special kind of art work, Anssi Pulkkinen’s *Street View (Reassembled)* (2017), to a Finnish audience, after the work had already toured various countries in Central Europe. The idea of the work was simple: the artist took a destroyed house from Syria, and recreated it on a truck, which, like the refugees of the late 2010s, traveled around

---

<sup>4</sup> The book features, for example, ideas on how to scare people with noise.

Europe. As money for public sculpture usually goes for celebrating dead national male heroes and national wars, it was hard, from this point of view, to be critical of the use of money in this alternative way, as the “sculpture” won the Mobile Home competition for sculptural work.<sup>5</sup>

I could have felt uneasy with the way the sculpture could have been seen as abusing real war for artistic purposes (some people did interpret it in this way), but I started leaning in another direction as I noticed that Syrian intellectuals, such as Issa Touma, were positive about the work. I also heard that the people living in the area had commented on it being a good idea to bring it to Europe so that people would understand what the war was about.

In addition, my refugee godson, whom I semi-adopted with my wife two years ago when he came to Finland as a refugee from Afganistan, thought this was a good idea, and in the end I did not have the conviction that I (a middle aged European man) should have the last word here.<sup>6</sup>

In an old text on how to keep messages alive, Umberto Eco reminds the reader about the fact that it is not particularly effective always to have the same sign about the dangers of putting one’s head out of the train window. It would be more effective to, for example, tell the story of what happened to someone who did stick their head out of the window.<sup>7</sup> (As Mr. Johnson last week put his head out from the train, a branch...)

This is exactly what art does when it follows one of its main traits in modern culture. It searches for unseen ways of discussing, taking care and analyzing issues. It goes without saying that Anssi Pulkkinen’s *Street View (Reassembled)* strikes at the very core of this ethos by building a material bridge to a war that would otherwise only be present to us as a flat media spectacle, but the main thing about it was that the artist created a new form of expression in which the issue could come close to us. In a way this readymade, the appropriation of a ruin, challenged the idea of (2D) documentation.

There the walls were: partly bombed, possible to sense, smell and feel, so rendering them material, but not just that. They were rendered somatic for us. Like the stones of the Australian indigenous people to whom the tribe tell their secrets, and our gravestones that we experience as being a little alive and that stand out from other stone material, the ruins of a real war spoke to our whole bodies, based on our knowledge of the walls being real, and not reproductions.

By creating new practices of presentation, *Street View (Reassembled)* forced us to see something differently through its novel approach. If projects like these were the norm, their effect would soon lose their power and become like news footage, but what we are dealing with here is one of the age-old tasks of art, to find new ways for expression, to recycle the sensory—the ways in which we experience and interpret things. It can help us stay alert so that the true essence of things will not be overshadowed by practices that increase experiential distance.

And there are other pieces like this. In the early 2000s, Amel Ibrahimovic beautifully exhibited a jacket he got from his best friend before he ran over a bridge and was never seen again as the Yugoslavian war broke out the next day.<sup>8</sup> Gazing at the jacket, the story and life crept under my skin. Jake and Dinos Chapman bought Hitler’s paintings (2008) and “pimped” them,

5 More on the work and its commissioning (last visited May 24, 2019): <http://www.mobilehome2017.com/fi/>.

6 We wrote with Issa Touma for the same publication. See Aleksi Malmberg and Annukka Vähäsöyrinki, eds., *Home Re-assembled: On Art, Destruction & Belonging* (Rotterdam: Jap Sam Books, 2017). I have used the text for the book as the base for writing this article, which is far more philosophical, and less polemical. I am very thankful for the editors for the call and the right to not worry about every sentence in this rewriting of the sketchy first version of the text.

7 This is one of the main examples of Umberto Eco’s *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), in chapter one.

8 The work is presented on Ibrahimovic’s home page (last visited May 24, 2019): <http://amelibrahimovic.net/Works/My-Refugee-Shoes-And-My-Refugee-Clothes>.

playing around with their mere horrifying existence, and the fact that they were Hitler's real products.<sup>9</sup> The 'real' is out there, and art sometimes makes good use of it. Sometimes it helps to bring them closer, so close that they creep under our skin.

While artists originally put statues on pedestals and cast ritualistic events on stage in order to build (aestheticized, reflective, dramatized) distance, its role has also always included bringing different phenomena close at different times. New media and means of communication have often been expected to "connect people", but so far the interaction between mediatized people has not led to any notable increase in empathy. As we can conclude from the examples of war, it is rather that media has created a collectivity that requires less and less commitment, which in turn has grown hand in hand with the expansion of our sense of where we belong (the globe). In this cultural situation, the potentials of art have not yet been fully discussed and tested, and to do that, one should maybe at least, for the sake of discussion, go through the theoretical problems hidden in the topic, something I tried to sketchily begin here in my article.

Monuments, memorials, nationalistic symbols and depictions of "great men" and (pathetically rarely) women, have been a financially lucrative territory for which sculptors have often, regrettably, settled. But on the other hand, it is partly because of this that the sensory and philosophical recycling is so effective in Pulkkinen's work. The mere thought of Pulkkinen's mobile ruins touches a chord, if one firstly just accepts ethically the act of exhibiting a destroyed house from a real war.

The ruin used in *Street View (Reassembled)* was transported to Europe through Turkey. It travelled from door to door, reminding us Europeans of the arms trade carried out by Europeans, the irresponsible foreign policy of leading Western countries, and what, in the case of one house and family, globalization means at the micro-level. From my point of view, in Pulkkinen's piece reality really made a visit.

## Epilogue

Our philosophical stroll through art, visual culture and philosophy of distance has ended, and I feel there have been no major surprises. But I think that going through these themes with care has perhaps made clearer how images work, what their role (or lack of role) in politics is, and how art at least sometimes, whether we like its working strategies or not, can affect our relationship to distant problems where "normal" images cannot 'help'. It looks like these excessive (extreme), kitschy and sometimes maybe even other types of reproductions can creep under our skin, but that mostly reproductive documentations do not do that. Mostly visual culture cuts distance only time-wise and place-wise, not morally and/or emphatically. As artists seeks to find new ways of coping with reality, bringing the real body of a distant reality for a visit might be something we could find rewarding even at length in a world where the stream of popular images mostly leaves us untouched.

Going back to Kant, whose strolls were totally non-surprising, always starting and ending at the same time, if he read about (natural) catastrophes from books, it is interesting to think about how seldom it was that he had moments when those issues he wrote about could really make their way under his skin. His body did not tremble with fear when he discussed waterfalls, as he was just sitting in an armchair. It makes me feel that the way we take for granted that we understand issues while not really experiencing them, touching them or in any way engaging with them, is

---

<sup>9</sup> See Mark Brown, "Hitler Gets Chapman Treatment as Hell Rises from the Ashes," *Guardian*, May 30, 2008, Art (last visited May 24, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/may/30/art>.

a far older and broader tradition and convention than we realize when we discuss media and its effects. Art might be able to remove us from this distancing practice at least occasionally without traumatizing us with the wrong kind of intimacy. But even if images are an easy target to think about, our ways of keeping up the distance—at the same time as we easily think we manage and understand the world where we live in—are a much broader and deeper problem of culture, of which we can just begin to see the basic contours.

Art alone cannot bridge us to the world, of course. And neither can philosophy. But there is certainly work to be done and rewards to be gained from this path, and I hope this text could be one drop in a growing river, which in the end could turn out to be a whole waterfall of new approaches to what it means to experience globally and ethically in a future world. A key to understanding the problematics might also mean that we need to accept the role of the “body” of a work of art, and its importance—here even the “body” of a piece of architecture and the everyday of a war zone. The presence of this body could often be a success-factor in understanding issues, which are distant. The “somaesthetics” of architecture here might be that our example connects our organic bodies to the architectural body of the war zone, and feeling this makes a difference to the world of popular images. We need to get more connected, not just to people, but to the bodies of e.g. buildings and clothes (Ibrahimovic’s jacket).

## References

- Benjamin, W. (2008). *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*. In Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.
- Eco, U. (1976). *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Huhtinen, A. M. (2004). *Keinosota – taistelu vastaanottajista: Informaationsodan strategiset rajat; Sotilasjohtamisen eettinen tarkastelu*. Lahti: Elan Vital.
- Kallio-Tavin, M. (2013). *Encountering Self, Other and the Third: Researching the Crossroads of Art Pedagogy*, Levinasian Ethics and Disability Studies. Helsinki: Aalto University.
- Kant, I. (1952). *The Critique of Judgement*. Oxford UK: Clarendon Press.
- Remarque, E. M. (1929). *Im Westen nichts Neues*. Berlin: Propyläen Verlag.
- Sontag, S. (2003). *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Walton, K. (2008). *Transparent Images: On the Nature of Photographic Realism*. In S. Walden (ed.), *Photography and Philosophy*, pp. 23-25. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Weber, S. (2013). *Clouds: On a Possible Relation of Terror and Terrorism to Aesthetics*. *Germanic Review*, 88 (3) (July 1, 2013), pp. 339-362.



© The Journal of Somaesthetics (JOS) 2019  
RELATE (Research Laboratory for Art and Technology), Aalborg University  
Rendsburggade 14, 9000 Denmark

ISSN: 2246-8498