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Eros and Thanatos – Bodies in Dance

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Editorial

Eros and Thanatos – Bodies in Dance

Catherine F. Botha

If eros designates those generative impulses within us that affirm and preserve life, and thanatos the latent drive toward death and dissolution, then how might we interrogate these antithetical yet entwined forces through the lens of somaesthetics? The term flesh—as distinct from body—invites us to reflect upon the ceaseless tension and intimacy between eros and thanatos: a dialectic in which vitality and finitude, desire and decay, define and delimit one another. In contrast, the notion of body—objectified, dissectible, the concern of biomedical inquiry—lacks this existential resonance. Most significantly, somaesthetics, in naming the soma, invokes neither the inert body nor the theological connotations of the flesh, but rather the lived, perceptive, and purposive corporeality of human existence.

As Shusterman (2014) clarifies, soma is preferred precisely "to avoid problematic associations of body (which can be a lifeless, mindless thing) and flesh (which designates only the fleshly parts of the body and is strongly associated with Christian notions of sin)" and to underscore that the somaesthetic project "concerns the lived, sentient, purposive body rather than merely a physical body." The contributions to this special issue, then, constitute an exploration of the tension and interrelation between eros and thanatos through a distinctly somaesthetic prism—with dance, as a privileged modality of embodied expression, occupying a central position.

The issue opens with Eric Mullis' insightful inquiry, "Reconstruction in Dance Somaesthetics", which draws upon Shusterman's initial taxonomy of somaesthetic branches and applies this framework to the domain of performative inquiry. Mullis raises two interrelated questions: How is embodied experimental inquiry presently conceived and practiced within dance studies? And what does this mean for the methodological foundations of dance research? Rather than focus narrowly on representations of eros or thanatos in choreography, Mullis turns our attention to the epistemological and ethical architectures of research-creation itself. Drawing from direct engagement with contemporary dance practice, Mullis argues persuasively for a reconstruction of dance somaesthetics—one that is attuned to current choreographic thinking, modes of collaboration, and artistic rigor.

Christian Kronsted's "Still Not About Sex — Vernacular Dance, Attention, Affect, and Self-Organization" offers a critical rejoinder to the prevalent evolutionary narrative that casts vernacular dance as an instrument of sexual selection. Mobilizing insights from dynamic systems theory, phenomenology, and embodied cognition, Kronsted displaces this reductive view, proposing instead that vernacular dance emerges from a deeply embodied drive for connection and equilibrium—both intra- and intercorporeal. In doing so, he repositions dance as a site of autopoietic regulation, rather than as mere display within a reproductive economy."Foraging Amid Perplexity: Queer Pragmatism, Neuropragmatism, and the Erotic Arts" also expands on the notion of *ars erotica*. In this essay, Tibor Solymosi challenges Shusterman's proposal to

develop a pluralistic *ars erotica* by using Catherine Malabou's recent philosophical work on the clitoris. Solymosi applies Malabou's idea of clitoridian philosophy with queer pragmatism and neuropragmatism as an expansive set of somaesthetic instruments that trouble phallocentric notions of ars erotica and contribute to more inclusive inquiry.

With evocative lyricism, Katy Oliver's "Butterflies in the Flames: Romantic Ballet and the Spectacle of the Burning Ballerina" brings into focus the spectral presence of the ballerina in the Romantic tradition—both exalted and extinguished, a paradoxical figure at once virtuosic and vanishing. Her paper meditates on the aesthetics of decay, revealing how the image of the burning ballerina becomes a locus for the uncanny beauty of bodies poised on the threshold between vitality and dissolution. Oliver invites us to consider the haunting power of the dance-body, which, even in its moment of perfection, calls forth our gaze toward its inevitable disappearance.

In "Eros and Thanatos Entwined: Somaesthetic Explorations in Kunqu Dance," Xueting Luo turns to the classical Chinese operatic form of Kunqu to examine how the movement vocabulary of *The Peony Pavilion* embodies the dialectic of eros and thanatos. Luo reflects on how emotional commitment, embedded in the interweaving of poetry, music, and dance, shapes the soma in accordance with traditional Chinese aesthetics. Her work illuminates how Kunqu's dance articulates existential tensions, offering fertile ground for further somaesthetic theorization.

Pooja Sunil and Vinod Balakrishnan's "Somaesthetics and Dance: The Convergence of Bharatanatyam and Yoga in *Kundalini Pattu*" elaborates a nuanced somaesthetic analysis of *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga*, a work that seeks to embody the regenerative powers of Kundalini and the cyclical movement from death to renewed life. Framing her discussion through Shusterman's tripartite structure of analytic, pragmatic, and practical somaesthetics, Sunil evaluates two performances of the piece—one by Guru Reshmi Narayanan, the other by her students—demonstrating how the disciplined cultivation of the soma undergirds both aesthetic refinement and spiritual transformation in Bharatanatyam.

The paper "Nietzsche and Freud: A Pandora's Box of Transgressive Contemporary Art" by Pedro Salinas-Quintana, Valentina Molina Fuentealba, Paola Rodriguez, and Belén del Cid, traverses the philosophical and psychoanalytic terrain shaped by Nietzsche, Freud, and Bataille, investigating how these thinkers inform the aesthetics of contemporary transgressive art. Salinas-Quintana et al. illuminates how sublimation, repression, and the eroticization of taboo serve as undercurrents in both visual and performative arts, particularly in dance. Dance emerges here as a privileged medium of corporeal excess, rupture, and liberation—a space in which the limits of representation and subjectivity are provocatively renegotiated.

Nora Horváth's "Desire and Eroticism on the Stage of Pál Frenák" offers a profound meditation on the ineffability of erotic experience and the ways in which choreographer Pál Frenák captures its emotional and ontological intensity. Through choreographic situations where bodies do not touch and yet resonate with deep affective bonds, Frenák stages the unspeakable dimensions of desire. Horváth invokes Bataille's claim that "erotic experience will commit us to silence," arguing that Frenák's work gestures toward precisely that liminal zone where language falters and embodied expression takes precedence. The soma, in these works, becomes the bearer of truths irreducible to conceptuality.

Tomasz Gil in "Erotics in Lacan's Schema L" draws on Lacanian theory to examine how desire shapes the subject. Gil provides an exposition on how, in Lacan's view, desire emerges as a sense of lack when the subject enters the symbolic order—society structured by language—leaving behind the primal closeness of the maternal world. Once within this symbolic system, desire is formed and mediated through language, residing in the unconscious. Lacan's model offers tools to understand how desire functions both internally and socially, particularly through speech and its relation to the "Big Other." Other dimensions, like imagination, sublimation, and unconscious drives, guide the subject toward the Real—a lost, pre-symbolic state linked to the maternal. These dynamics are mapped in Lacan's Schema L, which highlights the role of language in structuring subjectivity. Gil's paper focuses on how erotic experience fits into that structure, specifically through the interaction between the Real and object a (*objet petit a*). It further explores how performance—especially dance—can be situated within this framework to better understand the role of erotics in artistic expressio

Finally, Bernadett Jobbágy's "Somatic Composition and Embodied Filmmaking – A Case Study on Practice and Practitioners through the Example of a Creative Lab" concludes the issue with a compelling case study that bridges somatic dance practices and experimental film-making. Drawing from the Creative Lab held in Tallinn in 2024, Jobbágy examines how Body-Mind Centering® informed participants' creative processes in both movement and cinematography. The paper offers valuable reflections from both facilitators and participants, illustrating how somatic methodologies foster collaborative inquiry, embodied expression, and artistic innovation across media.

Together, these contributions illuminate the many ways in which the soma—understood as the sentient, expressive, and reflexive body—mediates the tensions between eros and thanatos, vitality and decline, desire and disappearance, and by means that include an engagement with both the theoretical and dance practice. As a whole, this special issue affirms that dance, in its many forms and traditions, provides a particularly rich field for somaesthetic exploration, wherein philosophy, performance, and the body conjoin in the search for meaning at the edge of being.

Reconstruction in Dance Somaesthetics

Eric Mullis

Abstract: *This essay examines the literature on contemporary concert dance and somaesthetics, with an eye on its relationship to dance studies. The role dance played in Richard Shusterman's disciplinary proposal for somaesthetics is discussed, as is more recent somaesthetics work on dance education, audience engagement, cross-cultural comparison, and practice-as-research. This supports an argument for a robustly interdisciplinary methodology which takes into account dance scholarship and the unique form of experimental inquiry movement-based artists practice to create theatrical performance. In the spirit of John Dewey's "Reconstruction in Philosophy," the essay concludes with several practical strategies that would render dance somaesthetics more conversant with contemporary dance practice and related scholarship.*

Keywords: *contemporary dance, dance studies, theatrical somaesthetics, practice-as-research.*

This essay considers the relationship between contemporary concert dance, somaesthetics and dance studies. It begins by discussing the original somaesthetics disciplinary proposal, focusing on how the methodology outlined therein pertains to work in dance studies. The second section briefly surveys existing literature on dance somaesthetics, and the third discusses two strategies that will help make such work more conversant with contemporary dance and related scholarship. Because many of the points made in the essay are based on personal experience as a scholar-artist, I should say that I am a mid-career dancer and choreographer who came to the art form after two decades studying Chinese martial arts and Chinese philosophy in America, Taiwan, and mainland China. I began regularly attending dance classes at the American Dance Festival and went on to complete an MFA in dance, and this introduced me to the field of dance studies and fueled a nascent approach to experimental choreography. Since then my work has become increasingly interdisciplinary, with forays into religious studies, costume studies, and the philosophy of technology.

1. Theatrical Somaesthetics and Dance Studies

Over twenty years ago, Richard Shusterman published "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal," an essay which charted a course for research in somaesthetics (2000: 262-283). Since then, the discipline has grown significantly, with scholars from around the world considering how diverse modes of embodied experience can be practiced, analyzed, and enriched.

The proposal outlines three dimensions of somaesthetic inquiry: analytic somaesthetics (AS), pragmatic somaesthetics (PS), and practical somaesthetics (RS). AS is a theoretical

endeavor which takes the work of philosophers and scientists into account when considering the ontological, epistemological, ethical, or sociopolitical aspects of embodiment. It is useful, for example, to consider writings by Foucault (1995), Bordo (2023), or Moten (2017) when examining body practices, such as traditional ballet training (Ritenberg 2010), that entail subjugation. Similarly, work by enactivists which details the science around body-world transactions is useful when addressing implications of mind-body dualism (Gallagher 2017).

PS critically compares body techniques with an eye on whether and to what extent they enrich experience. Many advocates of body disciplines make claims about improved health and well-being, and Shusterman suggests that, in response, one should consider whether the practice focuses on a particular part of the body or on holistic experience, on external representation or inner experience, and on self or other (2000: 275-276). For the purposes of this essay, he also observes that the representational-experiential distinction is not exhaustive and that a category of performative somaesthetics "might be introduced for disciplines devoted primarily to bodily strength or health, perhaps, for example, to disciplines like the martial arts, athletics, gymnastics, and weightlifting" (ibid., 275). He also states that "to the extent that such performance-oriented practices aim either at the external exhibition of one's strength and health or alternatively at one's inner feelings of those powers, we might assimilate them to either the dominantly representational or experiential mode" (ibid., 275).

RS involves first-hand practice of a body discipline. It may mean leaving the home or office for the gym, dance studio, city street, indoor track, or hiking trail to develop and refine habits of bodily movement, perception, and affect. The inclusion of RS in the proposal is consistent with a central tenet of pragmatist philosophy which holds that theory and practice should inform each other.

Though concert dance takes the body as its medium and features traditions of body-based experimentalism, it is not mentioned in the proposal (Mullis: 2006). Likely because of an emphasis on widely-accessible practices, the performative was framed in terms of social performance and, more generally, as part of PS, the normative endeavor informed by the overarching principle of pragmatic meliorism. Of course, the aim of the proposal was to provide helpful concepts and guidelines, not to discuss every avenue of body-based scholarship. Further, Shusterman could not have fully anticipated the directions that somaesthetics would move in as it developed.

Indeed, roughly a decade after the publication of the proposal, he ventured into performance art. At the urging of experimental photographer Yann Toma, he initiated a site-specific, multi-year iterative project called *The Man in Gold* (Shusterman, 2012: 239-261). Also, beginning in the early 2000s, scholars such as myself began considering somaesthetics in light of studio and performance practices used in contemporary concert performance. Taken together, this body of work can be seen as constituting the category of theatrical somaesthetics (TS). Its distinctness becomes apparent if the three dimensions of somaesthetics outlined in the proposal are considered in lieu of dance studies scholarship that centers on practices used by performers in rehearsal studios and on concert stages.

Scholars in dance studies analyze dance history, choreographic and dramaturgical techniques, and dance criticism, often with the intent of delineating relationships between dance and broader society (Bales & Eliot 2012, Dodds 2019). Their work sits alongside scholarship in theater studies and costume studies and, with them, falls within the broader discipline of performance studies (Davis 2008, Mangan 2013, Pantouvaki & McNeil 2020). Historically, dance studies came into its own in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s with an emphasis on dance history and ethnography (Manning & Dodds 2019). Currently, a key element of its methodology is the artistic

and social contextualization of dance works. This facilitates understanding of the choreographic and dramaturgical techniques (as well as strategies of artistic production and promotion) necessary for their realization. The endeavor is often informed by theory and, when relevant, scientific research. Indeed, dance studies scholarship and work in theatrical somaesthetics may draw on concepts from the same theories: phenomenology, post-structuralism, deconstruction, new materialism, feminism, race theory, and so on. Also, when necessary, they may incorporate science regarding the movement senses or embodied cognition. Because of this commonality, it can be said that, *in terms of the analytic dimension, TS and dance studies are consistent.*

In terms of PS, dance studies like somaesthetics holds that there are many avenues for cultivating embodied experience. Dance styles such as classical ballet, Bharatanatyam, and Butoh are informed by distinctive artistic values which determine their approaches to organizing the body both internally (for example, by prioritizing certain parts or delineating a general approach to gravity) and externally in relation to the elements of theatrical performance (e.g., the stage space, costuming, scenography, props, sound, lighting, and so on) (Foster 1986). Also, because dance techniques are currently taught with pedagogies aimed at enhancing dancers' physical and performative abilities (and otherwise empowering them as people), they are consistent with the somaesthetic cultivation and creative self-fashioning presumed by PS (Arnold 2005). For example, Contact Improvisation training facilitates somaesthetic experience of cooperative touch and, in turn, an ethical disposition characterized by physical receptivity, vulnerability, and care (Mullis 2016). Further, the Contact Improvisation communities around the globe illustrate that many contemporary dancers are committed to lives of body-based experimentalism that are lived with others in dance companies, training intensives, and workshops. It can be said then, that they remain dedicated to communal, creative self-fashioning (Mullis 2021, Novack 1990, Rustad, 2017).

In other ways, however, dance is distinct from body practices discussed in the disciplinary proposal. The first difference concerns the means and ends of performance training. The conventions of theatrical performance necessitate that performers maintain a high degree of physical adaptability. For example, a dancer may be asked to embody a theatrical fiction that has little or no relationship to their personal life (e.g., a homosexual dancer may perform a heteronormative role in a romantic ballet). Or, in a different project, they may have to execute demanding medium-specific choreography (such as that of Merce Cunningham or William Forsythe) that is grounded in a rigorously formal approach to the possibilities of human movement (Copeland 2004, Huschka, 2010). Indeed, having to work within the frameworks of different dance styles (something that, for reasons of employability, is now quite common) necessitates a highly plastic mode of embodiment (Bales & Nettl-Foil 2018, Roche 2015). For this reason, dancer's uniquely foreground the body's nascent pluralism.

It is also important to point out that dance techniques are informed by formal spaces of art performance. Beyond the fact that, from a proscenium stage, the spatial, temporal, and qualitative aspects of movement must be legible from a significant distance, the apparatus of the theater distinguishes actions performed within it from those of everyday life (Sofer 2013, Pouillaude 2017). The postmodern task dances of the Judson Church era, for example, presented cool, pedestrian choreography in artificial theatrical contexts in order to, among other things, spotlight the functional beauty of quotidian movement (Carroll & Banes 1982, Mullis 2014). The critical distance affected by the theater apparatus is also key for contemporary dance that critiques or models alternatives to oppressive social norms (Martin 1998). Demerson (2020) has recently discussed how some contemporary African concert dance advances a decolonial

aesthetic, and I examine how the anarchist aesthetic developed by Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Robert Rauschenberg queered gender norms of mid-century dance modernism (2022: 45-67). In sum, because it is removed from conventions of social performance, dance can offer audiences opportunities to reconsider taken-for-granted aspects of embodiment and to reflect on sociopolitical realities that shape embodied experience (Kowal et al. 2017).

Taken together, these two points show that dance techniques cannot be critically compared in the way body practices such as *taijiquan*, postural yoga, studio aerobics, or the Feldenkrais Method can. On one hand, dance techniques are equally valuable in terms of realizing artistic aims, whether that mean embodying fictions, advancing formal investigations of movement, highlighting overlooked aspects of embodied experience, or critiquing sociopolitical realities. On the other hand, because dance technique presumes a break with the means and ends of daily life, it may diverge from the meliorism principle that critical comparison presumes. To this point, after the publication of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, Martin Jay (2002) and I (2006a) discussed body-based meliorism in lieu of body art centered on experiences of fragmentation, physical discomfort, pain, exhaustion, and abjection. In this context it is also worth noting that, aside from the aims of particular performance works, most dance techniques will degrade the dancers' body over time. Indeed, because classical ballet legwork is bad for ankles and the wrenching spirals of Graham technique are tough on lower backs, contemporary dancers often supplement their training with somatic disciplines like postural yoga, *qigong*, or Pilates (Henn et al. 2020, Ritter & Moore 2008). Further, later in life, the physically demanding techniques of youth are often abandoned and the practice and teaching of healing movement methods taken up (Fortin et al. 2002).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully address the relationship between meliorism and dance training because it would require a discussion of pleasant and unpleasant aesthetic experience, relevant research in sports science, and interviews with dance artists about their personal motivations. It can be noted, however, that dance, like some competitive sports, entails trade-offs. That is, the risk of physical injury and long-term consequences of intense physical training are weighed against the goods of heightened perceptual and motor skills, increased self-confidence, intensely rewarding experiences, and a sense of shared community. Relatedly, barring any external constraint on individual autonomy, a dancer's commitment to their craft is part and parcel of a second-order desire to contribute to meaningful works of art that transcend them as individuals. Given these points, it can be said that the performance that highlights uncomfortable truths of embodied experience and the performance techniques that are necessary for their disclosure are worthy endeavors, even if they do not directly contribute to improved somatic functioning. In any case, these points show that to critically compare dance styles or to compare a dance style to a widely-practiced non-artistic body discipline misses the point. This is due to the fact that dance is first and foremost an endotelic practice which lies at a remove from everyday life. For this reason, *TS does not emphasize the PS dimension*. This conclusion is consistent with dance studies which acknowledges relationships between dance, physical health, and well-being, but views research on those topics as constituting a distinct field of study with its own publications (e.g., the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices and the American Journal of Dance Therapy*).

This brings us to RS. Beginning in the 1980s, work in dance studies increasingly employed autoethnographic accounts of studio and performance practices. A precedent for this was set in the 1970s with dance phenomenology, a methodology that presumes a wealth of first-hand experience with dance practice (Sheets-Johnstone 1966, Fraleigh et al. 2018, Stewart 2023).

Over time, the notion of the scholar-artist became common as dancers, choreographers, and dramaturgs theorized their work and, relatedly, as undergraduate and graduate programs in contemporary performance began requiring theory courses in their curricula. For these and other reasons, it is now standard for dance analysis to be grounded in personal practice (Foster 2002, Kozel 2008).

This approach has been formalized as "practice-as-research" (PaR), the systematic, reflective, and theory-informed approach to experimenting with movement in a studio setting, often with the aim of creating public performance (Midgelow 2023, Pakes 2017). A PaR project begins by framing creative research in terms of guiding questions such as: "What occurs subjectively when an ecstatic experience is undergone?" or "How can an unconventional costume destabilize one's sense of self?" or "What are the sociopolitical implications of the codes of human touch?" In turn, a studio practice is devised and implemented to generate embodied knowledge helpful in answering the research question.

As a whole, the process is informed by theory. For example, someone interested in investigating embodiment and physical aging may draw on post-structuralism or aging studies while formulating their question and reflecting on the experiences that accrue from their movement research (for case studies see Mullis 2015a, 2016a). Hence, PaR aligns with RS since it presumes the intertwining of practice and theory (Midgelow 2019: 117). However, it remains distinct because it is ultimately a kind of artistic research. To make this clear, consider that if someone develops a scholarly interest in postural yoga, RS will involve regularly attending classes and workshops, savoring somaesthetic experiences, and reflecting on the embodied knowledge that develops (Korpelainen 2019, Mullis 2015). It will not mean developing a theory-informed research question, devising a studio practice, and then critically assessing outcomes. Most important, the physical practice will not be engaged with the intent of creating theatrical meaning for a public audience. For this reason, the *practical dimension of TS remains distinct from RS.*

To summarize the points made in this section, TS and dance studies converge on the analytic dimension; however, because dance is an endotelic, artistic practice, pragmatic and practical somaesthetics do not have direct bearing on TS. These conclusions are informed by considerations of dance studies methodologies, specifically, dance work analysis and PaR.

2. Trends in Theatrical Somaesthetics

The TS literature published after the disciplinary proposal centers on four content areas: education, cross-cultural comparison, audience appreciation, and PaR.

Arnold (2005) argues that dance is an excellent form of somaesthetic education in that it teaches formal principles of movement and provides opportunities for creative composition and cultivation of expressive embodiment. Ginot (2010) takes a more critical approach, examining ways embodied knowledge generated through popular somatic practices is commonly framed by instructors (for example, in terms of a personal "proof by experience" narratives). More recently, Loots (2020) outlines a critical dance pedagogy that avoids the norm of universalization inherent to many western dance techniques.

Other work in the field advances cross-cultural comparisons. Shusterman's first foray into TS is an analysis of a mode of self-awareness used in classical Nō theater (2012: 197-215). Another case of east-west comparative somaesthetics is my discussion of the somaesthetic properties martial artists experience when performing choreographed sequences for observing audiences

(Mullis 2013). Also, Botha's edited volume on African somaesthetics includes essays which, among other things, foster cross-cultural considerations of performance practices. Beyond Demerson's contribution on decolonial aesthetics, Bailey's essay considers the experience of female South African breakdancers, focusing on challenges they face regarding cultivating embodied self-knowledge (2020: 120-141).

A third area of interest is audience appreciation. Curtis Carter (2015) outlines key elements of dance appreciation and argues that they should factor into AS. More recently, Fiala and Banerjee (2020) examine two site-specific dances which foreground embodied placemaking for the performing dancers and their audiences. Also, my essay on martial arts outlines somaesthetic properties appreciated by observers of martial arts movement and examines connections with sports aesthetics.

The fourth area of interest is distinct from the previous three in that the focus is on first-hand dance experience. Heinrich (2023), for example, draws on extensive personal practice of Argentinian Tango (and other ballroom styles) while developing an account of performative beauty. Ölme (2018) outlines a multi-year PaR project informed by the theory of new materialism which investigates the play of the material and immaterial aspects of dance embodiment. My book on experimental dance costuming is an example of PaR which, like Ölme's, weaves together theory and practice and culminates in public performances (Mullis 2022).

Shusterman's *Man in Gold* project has by far had the most impact on the field, eliciting multiple reviews, response essays, and interviews (Abrams 2022). However, because the performances are affairs of impromptu spontaneity and are not based in a theory-informed research program, the project is not methodologically consistent with PaR. Indeed, for several reasons, the project is difficult to nail down. The one-off, pop-up performances are not open to public, theater-going audiences, some of Shusterman's writings on it are quasi-fictional in nature, and the analytic writings do not contextualize the project in terms of contemporary performance or relevant work in performance studies (Shusterman 2016, 2012: 239-261). As I have argued elsewhere, the *Man in Gold* is clearly innovative and important but, along with the secondary literature that surrounds it, the primary focus is on expanding philosophy, not on interdisciplinary engagement with the performing arts (Mullis 2020).

This brief survey of the TS literature highlights the importance of this special issue. Though dance is a paradigmatic body-based artform and somaesthetics was founded decades ago, work in dance somaesthetics, and theatrical somaesthetics more broadly, remains insubstantial. At the time of writing, there are only a handful of essays and full-length manuscripts dedicated to the topics of dance education, dance appreciation, cross-cultural comparison, and creative practice. With this and personal experience in the performing arts in mind, the final section of this essay speculates about how TS may develop in coming years.

3. Reconstruction: Interdisciplinarity and Collaboration

The title for this essay is taken from John Dewey's book, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. There, Dewey observes that since Anglo-American philosophy of the time was narrowly focused on the pursuit of absolute truth, it was unhelpful in terms of addressing pressing social problems (1920/2008). He then argues for a pragmatically-oriented methodology that would render philosophy instrumental for understanding and generating solutions to the novel ethical, social, and political problems of the inter-war period. Without a doubt, somaesthetics was formulated in the spirit of reconstruction because Shusterman identified and outlined alternatives to certain

presumptions in the analytic philosophy of art. With that said–and given the points made in the previous two sections–it is worth considering what reconstruction in dance somaesthetics could entail. Two strategies are discussed here: increased interdisciplinarity and, in the spirit of a collaborative art form, writing techniques that de-center the scholar-artist. Before considering these, it is worth addressing three possible rejoinders to the idea of increased exchange between somaesthetics and dance studies.

First, it could be noted that somaesthetics scholars capitalize on an outsider status when identifying and providing alternatives to the taken-for-granted assumptions of a discipline. This could be the case, for example, with aspects of design culture that give insufficient attention to enhancing embodied experience (Hook 2018). To be sure, somaesthetics can play a key meliorative role in assessing cultural practices that presume mind-body dualism but this is not the case with dance studies which, as early as the 1970s, brought artistic body-based experimentalism to the forefront. For this reason, the outsider status argument fails.

Second, in response to Carter's (2015) suggestion that somaesthetics should take work in dance studies fully into account, Shusterman, among other things, noted a personal preference for popular dance forms over concert dance (2015: 186-188). However, after dance postmodernism undermined the traditional distinction between the culturally high and low (Banes 1987), dance studies went on to explore the many ways concert dance techniques and aesthetics have influenced popular dance forms and vice-versa (for examples see Croft 2017, Shay 2002, Weisbrod 2020). The wonderfully blurry border between social and theater dance forms problematizes any prioritization of one practice over the other.

A third rejoinder concerns accessibility. Because professional dance artists have highly specialized skills, it is arguably warranted to focus on ways everyday people dance to bring meaning into their lives. Here too, though, compartmentalization is not justified. To make an analogy with sports, amateur athletes around the world celebrate and physically emulate professionals who perform at the highest levels. Likewise, the hobbyist Irish step dancer can learn from and be inspired by the professional who performs onstage with an international touring company. One can enrich one's own practice by studying how the very best train and perform. Further, it is important for TS scholars to study body-based practices of dancers and actors because the specialized artistic contexts afford opportunities to cultivate unique embodied knowledge. Contact Improvisation can again be cited here because it reveals distinctive forms of cooperative touch which differ from those used in popular dance forms (like in ballet or Tango partnering) and in the course of everyday life (e.g., shaking hands, embracing, etc.). Such knowledge is in principle important to study because it reveals possibilities of embodied experience which in turn can fuel reconsiderations of what is familiar.

Increased interdisciplinarity is warranted for the sake of accuracy and, relatedly, increased audience reach. To the first point, it can be noted that a key metric for a submission to an academic journal such as this one is whether and to what extent it engages relevant literature. If a submission does not reference and dialogue with pertinent work in somaesthetics, then it is less likely to be published. This helps ensure that authors capitalize on insights of their peers and, more generally, that the field continues to advance. With that said, existing TS work, generally speaking, does not reference or engage relevant work in performance studies. Though Carter pointed this out almost a decade ago now, there is still little or no dialogue between somaesthetics and dance studies and, for that reason, a dance scholar or scholar-artist is likely to find TS work as uninformed, underdeveloped, and therefore as inconsequential.

A robust interdisciplinary approach that avoids these issues involves three strategies that

can be illustrated with a hypothetical research project on hip-hop dance, the form of street dance that developed in New York City in the 1970s and 80s and that since has become a global phenomenon (McCarren 2013).

If you will, imagine that, after reading Shusterman's work on hip-hop music (2000: 201-235), a somaesthetics scholar wanted to investigate the kind of dancing that often accompanies it. Because hip-hop dance is a complex cultural category, the project would need to be framed in terms of a case study, say, a piece choreographed by contemporary breakdancer Ephrat Asherie for the concert stage. For AS, the researcher would need to include material on the piece's historical context, how it inflects recent issues in the form (e.g, globalization, commercialization, or appropriation), and salient theorization. In terms of history, the research would draw on work in African American studies, dance studies, and Hip-Hop Studies (Aldridge & Stewart 2005, Roberts 2021, Fogarty & 2022). In terms of theorization, it could engage work on the cultivation of hip-hop body power or enacting sociopolitical resistance (DeFrantz 2004, Bragin 2015). Engaging this diverse scholarship is necessary for a disciplinary border crossing.

In terms of practical research, one would attend hip-hop classes at a local dance studio or in a university dance department (or, given the economic realities of concert dance, it is likely that Asherie and her dancers teach open public classes that could be attended). Doing so would ground first-hand knowledge of ways hip-hop movement, through its characteristic approach to space, physical effort, rhythm, and performativity, affects embodied experience. Also, consistently practicing with others would disclose the distinctive communal ethos commonly associated with the form (Gupta-Carlson 2010). If, for whatever reason, attending class proves impractical, the researcher could visit Asherie's rehearsals and conduct interviews with her and her dancers about their experiences creating the piece. Work by artist-scholars who have written about their practice of the form could also be engaged (for example, Dodds 2018).

There are a few things to note about this research program. First, interdisciplinary work that dialogues with existing scholarship for the sake of contextualization and theorization and that involves taking studio classes and/or conducting dancer interviews requires a substantial time commitment, much more than that required for a disciplinary project.

Second, the research process is likely to elicit subjective experiences in which it is unclear, at any given moment, what kind of work is being undergone. While practicing in the studio it will at times be difficult to distinguish whether one is researching dance history, theorizing, or developing ideas for a performance. As I have detailed elsewhere, this blurring is a key component of the praxis Dewey dubbed experimental inquiry (Mullis 2019, Sorrell 2013).

Third, because the project entails breaking with the familiar and taking on the role of a novice learner, it is likely to foster a deep sense of humility. Dance is a specialized practice, and the beginner must embrace a state of not-knowing and, relatedly, the possibility of looking silly or foolish. Gaining dance knowledge requires working with others, such as Asherie, who excel at dancing, performing, and teaching. Speaking personally, I have found that, whether world-class ballet performers or teachers leading classes at local studios, dance artists welcome anyone who takes a serious interest in their craft. This is because there is a commonly-held belief that dance is a fundamental human good and a right. The goodwill and generosity these beliefs fuel helps mitigate discomfort associated with being a novice learner.

Fourth, written and performative outcomes should meet the standards of dance studies scholars and scholar-artists. The work should be presentable at disciplinary conferences and, on principle, publishable in journals such as *Dance Research, Dance Chronicle,* or *Dance Research*

Journal. Similarly, PaR projects ought to be able to find a home in journals like *Choreographic Practices, Performance Research, Performance Philosophy,* or *the Journal for Artistic Research.* In terms of performative output (whether participatory workshop, lecture-demonstration, installation, or proscenium performance), relevant experimental movement-based work that self-reflectively blends theory and practice needs to be considered. Such work shows choreographic and dramaturgical strategies aimed at critical audiences that can be learned from, experimented with, and developed (Cvejic 2016, Lepecki 2006, Siegmund 2017).

The preceding shows that the reconstruction strategy of cultivating interdisciplinarity entails increased intellectual and practical labor, subjective experiences of disciplinary ambiguity, a palpable sense of risk and humility, and an accounting for intellectual and artistic standards of the related discipline. The second strategy concerns collaborative authorship.

As part of a multi-year project on ecstatic embodiment that culminated in a book and an iterative experimental dance theater piece, I collaborated with a dancer and two physical theater actors (Mullis 2019). A key research question for the project was: "Can ecstatic experience occur in a theatrical performance, outside of the social contexts in which it nomally occurs?" To answer this, a movement improvisation framework that facilitated brief dissociative states was developed. Because the framework was relatively loose, each performer had freedom to experiment with auto-affective techniques such as manipulating breathing patterns, quivering, shaking, stomping, spinning, abruptly performing large disorienting movements, repeatedly performing small articulate gestures, or vocalizing. After each session, we cooled down and shared our findings. Over time, it became apparent that we used different techniques and had very different kinds of experiences. We practiced for two hours weekly for a year before performing states of ecstatic embodiment in front of a live audience. That amount of time was necessary for finding techniques that reliably worked and for developing the sense of ensemble required for taking physical risks together.

When later writing about the collaborative process, it became clear that it would not do to summarize the others' accounts of undergoing dissociative states in performance. The ethical thing, it seemed, was for them to contribute first-person accounts to the book. Because their uniquely personal experiences were just one way they contributed to the project, including their voices better reflected the fact that the project was collaborative in nature.

I share this because, for several reasons, it has become common in PaR to subvert the idea that the lead artist is responsible for every aspect of the creative process. One is that the performing arts are fundamentally collaborative enterprises. Though, in a self-choreographed dance solo, just one artist takes the stage, the piece requires creative input from costume, sound, and lighting designers, from individuals who have dedicated their lives to their craft. This also pertains to performances that employ other dancers. Let's say that a choreographer creates movement on herself and then teaches it to a dancer in her company. Because the dancer is a unique person with a distinctive way of moving (i.e., they have a unique "movement signature"), they will inevitably change the movement in ways the choreographer cannot fully anticipate. It could be a subtle stylistic difference (for example, the way a movement is energetically attacked) or, at any given performance, a different kind of performativity (increased coolness or exuberance, etc.). Unlike times past when some dance styles were premised on presenting carbon-copy dancers–for instance, the corps de ballet of *Swan Lake* or the Tiller Girls (Mattingly & Young 2020, Reilly 2013)–contemporary choreographers are, generally speaking, keen to have dancers bring movement to life through personalization (Arnold 2000, Kloppenberg 2010). This may mean promoting variations of set choreographic material or, as in the case of my project,

developing improvisatory structures that frame the performers as co-creators. On one hand, this kind of approach is artistically valuable because it encourages the choreographer to take new ways of moving and performing into account and, on the other, it is more truthful to the way choreography gets embodied.

Another reason for decentering the choreographer concerns the way meaning emerges in an experimental, process-based project. Certainly, there are product-oriented approaches (common, for example, in Broadway musicals) in which choreographers are tasked with creating dances that advance pre-existing narratives. In such cases, the dance's meaning is defined before the choreographer is even hired. By contrast, in PaR, one begins with a relatively open-ended question and then generates movement through a process of self-reflective experimentation. In turn, choreographic and dramaturgical meanings emerge which are then collectively assessed and either intentionally developed or dropped.

It is important here to highlight an epistemological issue regarding emergent meaning. By way of analogy, a scholar, deep in research, may not see key opportunities for development nor problems that need to be addressed. Aware of such blindspots, they may request feedback from someone who is impartial and knowledgeable about the subject. Because dance is endotelic, the epistemological issue is more pronounced. That is, unmoored from practical and social conventions, possibilities of meaning-making quickly become overwhelming. It is for this reason that dramaturgs (i.e. individuals versed in performance history, theory, and criticism) are employed to ask clarifying questions about the intentions for a creative process and to make neutral observations about its outcomes (Hansen & Callison 2015, Profeta 2015). The dramaturg is a key voice in the collaborative creative process.

There is more to say about these points, but what has been said suffices to show that if the inherently collaborative nature of dancemaking and the emergent nature of dance meaning are embraced, then the choreographer's role becomes that of a facilitator, not a sole author. Put differently, because the resulting work is a matter of collective ownership (or, depending on one's ontological commitments, of no ownership at all), the facilitator will feel uncomfortable with the idea of taking sole credit for it.

What bearing does this have on reconstruction in dance somaesthetics? In terms of PaR, it means avoiding a scholarly tendency in which one person alone frames, summarizes, and theorizes a collaborative research process. De-centering the author is essential because performance making is never an individual enterprise. As in my case, this may mean supplementing autobiographical material with written contributions from key collaborators. It may also involve using dialogic techniques such as interviews with collaborators that surface collective insights about specific aspects of the work. One may also consider using experimental modes of writing like a round-robin technique in which a passage written by one individual functions as a springboard for the next person's writing. Or one could ask performers to contribute non-discursive materials such as sketches, photographs, or collages, made during the process or in response to it. These kinds of techniques express the fact that the work is a matter of exchange, emergence, and collective ownership. More generally, they spotlight that the collaborative creative process presents a unique opportunity to collectively embrace the unknown and to practice meaning-making. This is a distinctive contribution that TS makes to somaesthetics as a discipline.

4. Conclusion

Before closing, I would like to reiterate that the last point about collaboration is informed by

personal experience researching, making, and producing a piece with three other people. Similarly, the discussion about increasing interdisciplinarity is rooted in personal experience. Early in my academic career, I had only a basic understanding of dance and theater practices, made no effort to directly engage theater directors, actors, choreographers, dancers, or dramaturgs, and yet wrote about those art forms through the lens of somaesthetics. Though I was unaware of it, that work was weakly interdisciplinary.

The change was fueled by advice from a dance mentor, Simone Ferro. Upon learning of my interest in performative ecstatic states, she encouraged me to go beyond the bounds of my research program by developing an experimental studio practice and attending services of religious sects that practice charismatic embodiment. In addition, because the project involved making a dance theater piece, there was also a need to study dance history, specifically the works of acclaimed choreographers that took ecstatic embodiment as their theme. Daunted both by the workload and the experientially unknown, I originally dismissed her suggestions. However, as disciplinary and geographical boundary crossings accrued over time, I came to see that she was right. A diverse research program is the only way to do justice, artistically and intellectually, to the complex cultural phenomena such as ecstatic embodiment.

It is my hope that sharing lessons learned about interdisciplinary research and artistic collaboration will be useful to somaesthetics scholars, present and future.

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ll Not About Sex — Vernacular Dance, Attention, Affect, and Self-Organization

Christian Kronsted

Abstract: *Cognitive scientists and lay-people frequently buy into the trope that vernacular dance is primarily an evolutionary mechanism for sexual selection. I argue against the dance-as-sexual-selection hypothesis; the structure of attention, affect, and agency in dance are all geared towards experiences of the collective, not the identification of single individuals. I call into question several problematic assumptions about dance in the sexual selection literature and point to flawed experimental designs. Using dynamic systems, phenomenological evidence, and embodied cognition, I argue that vernacular dance is, first and foremost, tied to a deep-felt sense of connection and embodied equilibrium with others and with the environment. Connection through dance is tied to some of our most fundamental bio-cognitive processes involved in the body's ongoing autopoietic self-organization.*

Keywords:

1. Introduction

Despite solid contrary evidence, many researchers (especially in evolutionary psychology) still operate with the underlying principle that underneath its other functions, dance is primarily about sexual selection. The myth that dancing is primarily about sex is also alive and well amongst many non-dance-practicing lay people. This article provides another argument for why dance is not primarily about sexual selection. Much dance can implement erotic elements, and sometimes dance can, in fact, be about sexual selection; this, however, is by no means the primary social, cultural, evolutionary, or psychological function of dance. As I will show, dance is first and foremost tied to a deep-felt sense of connection and embodied equilibrium with each other and with the environment. Connection through dance is tied to some of our most fundamental bio-cognitive processes involved in the body's ongoing autopoietic self-organization.

Before moving into the argument, I want to address its scope. I am here only talking about vernacular dance; dances that are developed organically by cultures for the participants by the participants (which does include vernacular dances performed on a stage). I am not making any claims about dancing and sexuality or expressions of sexuality. I am a cognitive scientist, not a paleontologist, and will therefore not be making any claims about the actual timeline of proto-

dance or dance in hominin evolution. I am making a claim about many of the cognitive sciences, not the humanities (although I suspect the dance-sex myth might also be alive there. But that would be a different article). It is important to note that I am not making a puritanical argument. I am not claiming that dance is never about sex, sexuality, or eroticism. Neither am I claiming that it is somehow morally questionable when dance is about sex. Dance can often be a liberating medium to sexually express, understand, and encounter oneself and others. Furthermore, much of the research on dance and sex is very good and illuminating. What I am saying, however, is that it is a misunderstanding to think that the primary function of dance is related to sex.

2. The Myth of Vernacular Dance and Sexual Selection

Charles Darwin famously ties dancing across species to a display of prowess for sexual selection; the idea that dance is tied to sexual selection is as old as the theory of evolution itself (Darwin, 1872). Across the dance-as-sexual-selection literature, the underlying argument is that dance is a mechanism by which an animal signals how it stands out from the rest of the group. Dancing, supposedly, highlights the traits possessed by the individual animal that are relevant to survival and reproduction. Put in layman's terms; "look at me, I am strong, I am fast, I am coordinated, I can fight, I am so awesome I don't have to worry about frivolously spending a lot of calories on two-stepping, look how much I stand out from these other dudes, pick me you won't regret it, pick me, pick me, pick me." The general underlying assumption in this literature is that, albeit more complex, human dancing is functionally no different from other mating displays.

The following studies all, with slight variations of the theme, use the sexual selection mechanism in dance to explain their findings. Studies have shown that men dancing together are perceived by women to be more sexually viable because those men display cooperative skills with other males (Metin & Tekozel, 2024). Another study argues that male symmetrical dance moves are more attractive to women, just as male dance moves that display strength are considered better and more attractive to women (Brown et al., 2005; McCarty et al., 2013). Symmetry in movement, supposedly, displays good genes for hunting, gathering, protecting, etc. Similarly, female dance moves are considered more attractive and better when displaying large hip swings and asymmetry — wide hips and swinging supposedly indicate the ability to carry and successfully birth offspring (McCarty et al., 2017). In another dance movement ranking observation study, it is argued that variation in dance movement is an indicator of higher sexual fitness (Hugill et al., 2010). In this same vein, it is argued that male participants spend more time attending to attractive female dancers because dance is a mechanism for identifying sexually relevant features, for example, by showing the flexibility and width of one's hips (Röder et al., 2016). Following the logic of "women's-taste-in-dance-moves-reflect-their-sexual-selection-criteria" a recent review article hypothesizes;

> *Elaborate dance movements are challenging actions that require a high level of coordination, and only individuals with the relevant physical and neural skills can perform them. Because "good" dancing is not only artistic and appealing but also energetically demanding, we hypothesize that women will rate dances of men in better physical condition to be more attractive than dances of men in poorer physical condition (Fink et al., 2021).*

Again, we see the sexual selection logic at play. It is assumed that women will be unable to look at the aesthetic features of dance moves and instead subconsciously judge such movements

simply based on the reproductively relevant physical features of the dancer. Similarly, it is argued that male risk-taking behavior is considered evolutionarily relevant to sexual selection and, therefore, attractive (the why-we-like-bad-boys thesis). In dance, risk-taking behavior in male dancers is considered by women onlookers to be more attractive (Hugill et al., 2011). As we can see from this brief review, the idea that dance can functionally be reduced to sexual selection is alive and well in various corners of cognitive psychology and other cognitive sciences.

The Cultural Myth of Dance and Sex

Next, we will briefly examine North American and European pop-cultural attitudes towards dance and sex. One reason that the "dance is for sex" myth is still alive in the cognitive sciences could be that the myth is strongly embedded into much Western culture, and the starting point for any academic is (whether they will admit it or not) their cultural context. To fully cover the cultural history of the "dance is inherently sexual" myth would be a monograph-sized undertaking, but see (Ehrenreich, 2007) for a good start on the European and North American portion. In this article, I will only briefly mention a few prominent cultural themes in which we see the myth at work. This strategy is simply to further convince the reader that the dance-sex linkage is still very much alive both across academia and popular culture at least in North America and much of Europe.

Let us begin in the vernacular. There is still a pervasive cultural attitude in North America and much of Europe that, *vernacular dance* (especially from dance forms associated with people of color) is primarily about sex. For example, "twerking," despite being a celebratory dance, is within popular culture most commonly associated with the hyper-sexualization of women's bodies, and an indication that the woman in question is willing, able, and good at heterosexual intercourse (Gaunt, 2015; Kitata, 2020). This form of expression is typically scolded, yet desired, when performed by black and brown bodies, but celebrated when performed by white bodies (Halliday, 2020). Dance movies (especially those about vernacular dance) are often tied to sexualization and sexual selection, especially of non-white bodies (Borelli & Monroe, 2014). However, as demonstrated by Black Swan (2010) and Tiny Pretty Things (2020), movies and TV shows about ballet also participate in the ongoing history of connecting dance to sex. Especially Black and Latin dances have been tied to sex and sexual selection through screen-based media (Lundy, 2018; Mpofu, 2022; Ovalle, 2011). Here, we need only think back to the Step-Up series (2006-2014), Honey (2003), or any of the many other dance movies that dominated North America and Europe in the twenty-tens or the nineteen-eighties to see the emphasis on dancing as a vehicle for sex and sexual selection. The message that dance is a vehicle for sex is only further perpetuated through various social media challenges across Instagram, Tik-Tok, and other platforms (Robinson, 2023).

Multiple globally successful streaming shows (with hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide) that purport to show historical dance also portray dance as primarily a mechanism for mate selection. For example, in Netflix's international mega-hit series Bridgerton (2020-ongoing), aristocratic ballroom dances are shown entirely as a social ritual for ascertaining the viability of a sexual match (through marriage). Aristocratic dance is here reduced to its Darwinian function but in a strictly controlled and gentile fashion. While court dances at various junctures and locations in European history did function as mating marketplaces, these spaces were also highly complex negotiations of power, agency, history, aesthetic tastes, and more (Franko, 2015; Pakes, 2020).

Even within popular culture that claims to be "scientific," we see the continuation of the idea

that dance is inherently tied to sex and sexual selection. For example, the very first episode of the "science-based" show 100 Humans (Netflix, 2020) ran an experiment that linked the quality of men's dance moves to the quality of their sperm. In the episode, audience members were asked to rate the dance moves of a series of men. The highest-ranked dancers were then compared to the health quality of their sperm samples. This, in turn, disproved the show's "researcher's" hypothesis that there is a connection between dance movements and the quality of sperm. While the research design is (obviously) invalid, the episode is a good example of the persistent North American and European myth that dance is tied to sexual fitness and sexual selection and that such a view is scientific and, therefore, legitimate.

Similarly, when the video company Masterclass, which claims to offer video courses with "the world's leading experts," offered its first dance-related course, it was with Parris Goebel, a choreographer known for the "exotic" style, that focuses almost exclusively on male-gaze-oriented music video dance. Here, the subtext of the marketing is that the "best dancer" is, of course, someone who makes the most sexually arousing dance. Beneath this marketing choice from Masterclass is the old assumption that dance is about sex. So, to be the best at dance, the dancing must look explicitly sexualized. The untrained dance viewer is convinced that the dancing offered in the Masterclass course is amongst the best because it looks overtly "sexy." It is always important to remember that dance as a human activity, unfortunately, is also subject to capitalist market forces, and the myth of the dance-sex linkage is often perpetuated because of the truth that sex sells.

I am here making a very condensed claim pertaining only to North America and (much of) Europe. A more in-depth study is needed to investigate similar claims about other regions. While I do not have the page space to discuss the various causes and origins of the cultural myth, I hope to have at least indicated that the scientific focus on the dance-sex linkage and the cultural focus on the sex-dance linkage are similar and likely reinforce one another.

3. Against the Sexual Selection Thesis

Next, I will point out problems with the experimental design and the arguments and assumptions made by the empirical literature we surveyed above. An important article by Christensen and colleagues takes on a similar project. Their research team outlines a number of reasons including but not limited to, group cohesion, cultural memory, and entrainment, why dance is not just for sexual selection (Christensen et al., 2017). I continue this line of argumentation, by pointing to the cognitive structure of attention, affect, and agency in dance.

Problems with Experimental Design

First, we must ask about the ecological validity of the various dance-moves-ranking studies surveyed above. Does explicitly asking participants in an artificial laboratory setting to rank people or dance moves tell us anything about actual ecologically embedded cognitive processes? I, for one, am skeptical. For example, a rigorous review of studies claiming to measure automaticity versus top-down control in expert athletic action has been largely shown to be ecologically invalid because the laboratory setting itself skews how athletes think and move (Montero, 2016). Similarly, these ranking activities remove all context from the rich ecology of dances as living breathing cultures with narratives, memory sharing, enculturation, and more (Kronsted, 2021). This, in turn, removes all the intentions an agent has for dancing or looking at dance, putting an artificial focus on ranking that normally does not take place during culturally significant dance practices. Furthermore, ranking activities in a laboratory setting automatically assumes the hypothesis the ranking activity is meant to prove. Such activities assume that dancing is

for the sake of ranking mates and then explicitly ask participants to rank individuals. Dance ranking studies are designed to reinforce the very logic they are meant to prove in the first place.

In addition, these studies typically have not been reproduced and utilize small sample sizes. It is also important to note that this research program aims to make claims about all humans but typically only runs experiments on W.E.I.R.D White people — Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (Henrich et al. 2010). The way we look at, appreciate, and evaluate dance differs drastically from culture to culture, meaning that the "ranking" of dancing is also a culturally influenced product. Thus, these studies need much more culturally diverse data to make universal claims about the connections between dance movements and preferences.

Flawed Assumptions and Gaps

Human dance is far too metabolically demanding to be primarily a sexual selection process (Christensen et al., 2017). While evolution does not care for beauty, it does care about efficiency, and there are far more efficient and multifunctional ways to determine if an individual has suitable genes worthy of procreation. Agents who dance must take time and resources to physically recover from dancing, making it further from procreation; a resting partner is not a mating partner. In addition, dance and dance-like activities make its participants more vulnerable to external threats since dancing humans are less aware of their surroundings and spend their time exhausting their resources instead of being productive.

Christensen et al. point out that theories on dance as sexual selection have been completely silent on the fact that children and seniors frequently and spontaneously dance (Christensen et al., 2017, p. 22). Here, I further add that these theories are also silent on why people in committed relationships, queer people, pregnant people, and infertile people all engage in dance with equal enthusiasm. If dance is a mechanism for sexual selection, then we should not see its prevalence amongst those for whom reproductive mate selection is a non-issue.

In extension to this argument, I also point out that the sexual selection literature says nothing about why most people highly enjoy dancing by themselves (and sometimes exclusively dance alone). Again, this is not a phenomenon we should observe if the dance as sexual selection theory is true. The sexual selection literature also does not count for actual dance communities in which many dances are done only with the same sex and gender, or only with other dance enthusiasts.

Furthermore, many of the biological mechanisms for sexual selection the literature highlights in dance are much older than dance and can take place without being in the context of dance. For example, we do learn about genetic compatibility with other people through pheromones in sweat smell. However, any sweat-producing activity will do. Similarly, moving with grace, control, strength, symmetry, and purpose are all features that have been highlighted as driving mate selection in dance. All of these movement qualities take place in dance and in many other human activities that are much older than dance. Such activities are also typically more functional than dance and do have an immediate "productive" purpose. Why dance to show off one's prowess when we can simply go hunting and show off our hunting skills?

In addition, it is harder to explain why dance should be therapeutic for patients with autism and or schizophrenia if dance is primarily a mate selection mechanism (Hye-jin et al., 2015; Koch et al., 2015; Lilly et al., 2016). Schizophrenia and autism are complex conditions that are often driven by an experience of disrupted embodiment. If dance is for the selection of mates, then attention during dance would be outwards directed and focused mostly on the body of others. Dance movement therapy, however, demonstrates that attention and cognitive resources

during dance are often highly introspective and can focus on many aspects of self-experience not related to sex (Kronsted, 2018; Levine & Land, 2016; Millman et al., 2021; Solveig & Sabine, 2017).

Finally, the literature reviewed in this article ignores dance studies and anthropological, sociological, philosophical, and historical accounts of dance. In other words, these studies do not take seriously the vast literature investigating dance from a social-cultural perspective. Rather, they begin by assuming the underlying truth of what they are trying to prove, namely that cultural concerns about dance reduce to sex.

Continuing to focus on the sexual aspects of dance (whether in scientific research or in popular cultural discourse) can obscure the many functions and benefits of dance that often go underutilized — dance can offer us so much more. Furthermore, we risk misunderstanding many dance and dance-like cultural and cognitive phenomena if we investigate them through the lens of sex. As Christensen and colleagues point out (and I concur) the fact that dance can aid in mate selection is a nice by-product of dance but not the primary function of dance (Christensen et al., 2017).

4. Collective Attention Affect, and Joint Agency in Dance

Next, let us look at attention, affect, and joint agency in dance to further see why the shape of these phenomena during dance puts pressure on the dance-as-sexual-selection-thesis. I argue that dance as an activity is structured in such a way that attention is frequently directed toward the collective and not individuals. This structure of dance as a general activity indicates that the primary function of dance is not sexual selection; rather, dancing is for the creation of group connection.

Attention

Theorizing that dance reduces to individual selective advantages does not fit with the empirical reality of performing most vernacular dances.[1] In short, if dance has really evolved as primarily a mechanism for sexual selection, then attentive and affective processes during dance should be structured to pick out individuals from the crowd. Rather, what we see is that during dance attention and affect oscillate between the body and being directed at the crowd, not individuals (Kronsted, 2021; Ravn, 2020). It is true that some dances have culturally developed to be closely attentive towards one partner at a time: for example, salsa or tango (Kimmel & van Alphen, 2022). However, even in those cases, there is still a general structure of attention and affect that is oriented towards the collective. If tango or salsa dancers do not pay attention to the crowd, they will miss out on what makes the experience culturally significant but also likely crash. Dance is, in its attentional processes, affect, emotion, and movements, frequently directed at a collective, not individuals.

It is important to remember that the sexual selection thesis is based on the assumption that dance demonstrates male dominance. While mating "dances" in birds might be a single male trying to impress a single female, human dancing is typically community-oriented. Dancing in humans is a process that brings attention to a collective and demonstrates multiple agents' abilities to cooperate. This is, for example, evident in dance rituals that lead to collective effervescence, in which dancers become acutely aware of themselves "melting together with the crowd" (Gavanas, 2008; Malbon, 2002; Salkind, 2018; Schüler, 2017; St John, 2004). In these situations, dancing

1 Such a reduction to individualized processes for the purpose of individualized sexual selection is likely an example of classic "Western" scientific reductionism from a group phenomenon to individuals (Favela & Chemero, 2023; Feiten et al., 2023; Thonhauser & Wetzels, 2020).

leads to acute crowd-oriented attention. Dance as sexual selection theories, however, typically posit that dance is a way for agents to stand out from the group or show dominance. These theories generally misunderstand how dance mechanically, attentively, and cognitively function. In most vernacular dance situations, even in tightly coupled partner dances, the movers orient their attention simultaneously towards their own body, the body of their partner(s), and the crowd.

Crowd attention is a crucial part of the dance experience. For one, if dancers are not attentively directed at the crowd, the dancing situation will collapse. Simply put, dancers will bump into each other, and the whole system will turn into an uncoordinated mess, leading to the breakdown of the activity. Here, simply think back to the last time you saw someone step on their partner's foot on a crowded dance floor. Furthermore, part of the enjoyment of dance, is the smooth coupling between oneself and the group. Wedding guests, clubgoers, concert attendees, jam participants, and so many more revel in not only their own coordination or the coordination with their partner but the experience of "our coordination." Dancers revel in moving together as a group and being aware that "we" are moving together as a group. Many vernacular dances are not only in their cultural norms and philosophy about the attentive experience of community but the very way we must deploy our attention to perform these dances requires group-oriented attention. As an example, think here of dancing salsa with others in the park during a warm summer night. The magic of such an experience is not just that "you and I" dance, but that "we all" dance together under the stars.

If dance has developed primarily as a sexual selection mechanism, then our sensorimotor attention schemes would not be directed at collective experience. Instead, attention would be directed at singling people out. The cognitive processes at play in dance point to connection and group cohesion as the primary functions of dance. Strengthening human connection can, of course, lead to finding partners, but this is a fortunate byproduct of the much stronger evolutionary drive to survive through group cohesion (Christensen et al. 2017).

Extending the point of "we-experience" and dance culture, in most vernacular dances, there are social, cultural, and narrative mechanisms at play that make the dancers experience themselves as part of a living cultural community and a living historical legacy (Browning, 1995; Goldman, 2010; Salkind, 2018; Schloss, 2009; Talmon-Chvaicer, 2008). During dance, as an enculturated agent, the mover participates in a sub-cultural form of life (Kronsted, 2021). A dancer is not just casually breakdancing or voguing they enact their culture and community; they are a "B-boy" or they are "voguer" (DeFrantz, 2016; Schloss, 2009). In other words, attention in dance (even when abstract conceptual attention) is also directed at the crowd — In this case an even bigger crowd, namely the dancing community. The cultural, social, ethical, and historical reasons why people dance are facilitated by attentional processes that are crowd and community-oriented. On closer examination, these processes do not fit well with the dance-as-sexual-selection-thesis because this thesis requires single-agent-oriented attention.

Affect

Recent philosophy and cognitive science of emotion and affect demonstrates that in joint group activities such as dance affect and emotion are frequently jointly constructed (Krueger & Szanto, 2016; Slaby et al., 2019; Thonhauser, 2022). In line with research on the extended mind, this new affective cognitive science argues that in many cases, including dance, the affective profile could not have been achieved in isolation. Activities such as dance are better thought of as emergent joint affective systems (Kronsted, 2023; Slaby, 2014; Slaby et al., 2019). In such

systems, each agent is dynamically coupled and, therefore, simultaneously impacts one another. Because of the coupled nature of human social interaction, the affect is not experienced as "I have an emotion, and you happen to have the same emotion." Rather, the affect is experienced as fused or joint "we are having an emotion" (Thonhauser, 2022). Like the process of attending, the emotional and affective profile of dancing is directed towards the collective rather than the identification of individuals who stand out from the group. Rather than experiencing individualized attention that can be identified as being held in common within each individual, the dancers are creating a fully *blended* affective experience. I am not having an emotion and you are having an emotion. Rather, we are having an experience in which the self-other distinction begins to break down — we are having an emotion (Kronsted, 2023).

This point of collectivity is important when thinking about the dance-as-sexual-selection-thesis. For the selection of a sexual partner with "good" genes is the requirement that one can, in fact, make selections based on how discrete agents make one feel. However, in many vernacular group dance scenarios, it is very much the group that creates the electric affective atmosphere and not necessarily any one individual. The intensity felt in a dance cypher, in a nightclub, at a swing session, during tango milongas, and more, are produced, felt by, and for the community. As other evolutionary scientists have also pointed out, dance seems to be affectively driven by and towards feelings of community building (Christensen et al., 2017). So, even in its affective profile, it seems that dance is more often than not driven towards community rather than eroticism. Dance is much more likely for strengthening group connection and we see that at play in its affective profile.

Joint Agency

Our conclusions so far that dance is for strengthening group connections are perfectly consistent with accounts of agency in dance. As humans dance together their experience of their own agency moves from an experience of individual agency to an experience of joint agency (an experience in which it is not quite clear who is generating the initiative, intentions, movement choices, etc. In other words, a fused experience of agency (Buttingsrud, 2021; Deans & Pini, 2022; Kimmel & Hristova, 2021; Kimmel & van Alphen, 2022; Kronsted, 2023). Such a move from individualized agency towards an experience of "we-agency" happens as dancers become increasingly dynamically synchronized through the process of entrainment (Knoblich & Sebanz, 2008; Kronsted, 2021; Salmela & Nagatsu, 2017; Tollefsen & Dale, 2011, 2018). We further see this phenomenon when we look at dance ecstasy and collective effervescence. In these cases, the structure of the agency is strongly experienced as a collective agency. In collective effervescence dancers often experience a sweeping sensation of becoming one with the crowd (Collins, 2014; Rimé & Páez, 2023). Such an experience erodes the self-other distinction and creates a collective experience of moving as one. Such experiences happen from intense overlapping processes of synchronization and entrainment (Schüler, 2017, Kronsted in Press.). An erosion of the self-other distinction is exactly the opposite of what dancing as an evolutionary mechanism would need to be genuinely about the identification of individuals with sexually competitive traits.

The overarching point is that the identification of sexually viable partners requires a process that focuses on the identification of individuals—individuals who stand out from the crowd. Such a process is the direct opposite of what we see our cognitive faculties doing when we are dancing, namely moving us towards experiencing being one with the crowd and creating social connection. Whether we look at culture, affect, agency, or attention in dance, the story is the same: vernacular dancing is cognitively structured to create social connection and coupling with collectives, not the identification of unique individual agents.

5. An Alternative Proposal — Self-Organization and Deep-Felt Connection in Dance

At this point, I have used significant page space arguing against the dance-as-sexual-selection-thesis. However, a strong objection usually doesn't do much unless it at least sketches a positive alternative. I do not have the page space to fully flesh out my alternative account. I will, however, provide at least the outline of an alternative to the sexual selection thesis, based in autopoietic embodiment and self-organization. We have looked at dance cultures, attention, affect, and agency, and in each case, dance seems to be directed at the communal. The conclusion so far is that dance seems to be more fundamentally for connection. I will deepen this point by showing how connection through dance is tied to some of our most fundamental bio-cognitive processes—the kind of processes that ensure our well-being and equilibrium with the world. To make this point, we must look at some complex arguments from enactive embodied cognition, in particular the connection between autopoiesis, cognition, and equilibrium. Here, we will see that dance is a particular kind of sensemaking that utilizes the embodied human need for environmental and social equilibrium. Rather than assuming that dance is a mating display, when we root dance in embodied sensemaking, we can understand dance as a movement technology that fosters and maintains social connection.

Autopoiesis

Autopoiesis (ancient Greek for self-production or self-making) is the process by which an organism perpetually re-creates itself through the creation of a boundary between itself and the environment (Di Paolo et al., 2018; Froese et al., 2023; Maturana & Varela, 1980). Autopoietic systems are systems in which each component perpetually constitutes and maintains the other components while being recursively constituted by those components. Each sub-system is mutually constraining and enabling so that each sub-system is dependent on one another for their continuation, falling into a meta-stable, self-organizing, self-perpetuating organization. This is true of each single-celled organism all the way to the complex organization of mammals, and of course, whole embodied dancing human agents. In the autopoietic arrangement, the organism achieves a distinct identity apart from its environment. Through self-production, the organism achieves *operational closure:*

> *Operational closure describes the organization of a network of mutually supporting processes such that each process in the network is enabled by other processes in the network and, in turn, each process in the network enables some other process(es) also in the network.…Note that, contrary to what the term "closure" might suggest, an autonomous system remains structurally coupled to its environment and open to exchanges of all kinds; it is not self-isolated. Rather, the term " closure" is intended in the algebraic sense of a set of objects being closed under a given set of operators (Beer & Di Paolo, 2023, p. 2)*

Full operational closure will mean the death of the organism. All active systems must take in energy from the environment. If a system is fully operationally closed it does not have an energy source and will dissipate. Put in layman's terms, the organism dies (think about not taking in food, water, or air). On the other hand, full operational openness also means the system will dissipate as it becomes absorbed into or overtaken by the environment (think, for example, of a decomposing body being eaten by microorganisms, moved piece by piece by the wind, or washed away by the rain). A fully open system has no integrity to keep itself intact.

A living system must be coupled with the environment and open enough to perturbations that it can be adaptive but not so open to perturbations that it loses its internal organization. Thus, to maintain itself, the living organism must constantly act on its environment to maintain the right *equilibrium* between operational openness and closedness (Beer & Di Paolo, 2023). Hence, the name "enactive" cognition. By being in constant physical commerce with the environment the organism maintains itself and shapes the environment (Gallagher, 2017; Malafouris, 2013). In this way, the organism continually enact its own existence.

While it is outside the scope of this paper to go into depths about the relationship between autopoiesis, enaction, and perception, it is generally said within this branch of cognitive science that living beings "bring forth a world" from their ongoing interactions with the environment (Di Paolo, 2023). That is, organisms act on the environment, which brings forth sensorimotor perception, which in turn causes the organism to create more movement to stay within coupled equilibrium with the environment (Di Paolo et al., 2017; Gallagher, 2017; Varela et al., 1991). Dancing, then, is a particular way of bringing forth a world and staying in equilibrium with that world. It is one kind of mode through which the organism can achieve sensorimotor coupling and fit between the organism and the world.

Notice the similarity between the basics of enactive cognition and perception and partnered dance. Dancing agents must constantly stay within the right balance of operational open and closedness. The dancer must be open to perturbations from their partners, while also having enough integrity to bring forth their intentions. Each dancer acts on the other to maintain the equilibrium of their joint system "the dance." By acting on their partner, each dancer brings forth perceptions that present new possibilities for action to further bring the dance into existence (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007; Hermans, 2015; Kronsted, 2021). The structure of vernacular dance mirrors the most fundamental structure of biological cognition, and as we will see shortly, this mirroring, also utilizes those processes to create a deep-felt sense of well-being.

The drive towards equilibrium develops a deep-felt existential sense that things are good when we are in equilibrium and bad when we are disequilibrated (Colombetti, 2014). This sense of rightness is felt across multiple time scales and connected layers of existence — from the equilibrium within our cells to the equilibrium in our relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners (Di Paolo et al., 2018). Even equilibrium with one's culture (Gallagher, 2020). Across all of these layers at various time scales, an organism must and will strive towards equilibrium, and our bodies are constantly affectively letting us know how well we are doing. In other words, all cognition is underpinned by and overlaid with affect — that affect provides a felt sense of how the organism is "doing" in the world (Colombetti, 2014; Maiese, 2016). Put more simply, there are things that are good for an organism and things that are bad for it, and from this basic experience of the world emerges a deep-rooted felt sense of being in or out of equilibrium with the world. There is a phenomenological, affective, often non-propositional experience of being in equilibrium with the environment (Colombetti, 2014). Dancing exploits this felt embodied sense of equilibrium by creating densely nested processes of synchronization between people so that we feel connected and in equilibrium with our physical and especially social environment.

When we dance, we often experience a great sense of pleasure, often with an existential dimension to that pleasure; "this experience I am having is meaningful." This is the body's way of understanding itself as being in equilibrium with its environment—in this case, a social environment. The fact that we feel "existential" or meaningful positive affect when we dance with others points to dance as being functionally for social connection. It is an activity that utilizes embodied forms of sensemaking to create social equilibrium. Dance has likely evolved

to create and strengthen social connections, and the way it does this is (amongst others) by bringing the organism into equilibrium with its social environment.

Self-Organization

As we see from our brief discussion of autopoiesis, living is an inherently cognitive process (Di Paolo et al., 2017; Froese, 2021; Thompson, 2007; Varela et al., 1991). All living organisms undergoing autopoiesis must, because of their inherently precarious existence, strive to bring themselves into equilibrium with their environments across short-term and long-term dynamics by being in constant coupling with the environment. Our most fundamental mode of existing as living cognitive beings is coupled action with the environment to bring the agent environment coupled system into equilibrium. There is a biologically built-in telos towards an equilibrium that emerges from the organization of the autopoietic body. Importantly, such an equilibrium is most typically achieved through self-organizing processes:

> *A self-organizing system is a system that exhibits regularities that arise without a plan or leader but emerge from the interactions of the parts of the system. The posit that human action is self-organizing began the recent resurgence of interest in dynamical systems models in psychology (Kugler et al., 1980). Dynamical systems models work by assuming that thinking, experiencing, acting humans are self-organizing systems that comprise portions of their brains, bodies and tools. Self-organizing systems have their organization without a plan or controller (Feiten et al., 2023, p. 314).*

Chemical binding, single cells, multicellular organisms, sand-dune assemblage, snowflake patterns, whirlpools, convection patterns, anthills, animal milling, bird flocking, fish schools, pedestrian behavior, and thousands of other processes are all examples of self-organizing systems. Self-organization is a ubiquitous phenomenon across the natural world, ranging from rapid dynamics at minute levels of analysis to macro interactions across slow time scales (Camazine et al., 2020).

A large literature within the cognitive sciences have since the introduction of dynamic systems theory consistently shown that human behavior itself, consists of perpetual loops of self-organizing sensorimotor loops (Beer, 2024; Chemero, 2009; Kelso, 1995, 2021). Through coupled synchronization human actions self-organize into recursive patterns of meaningful behavior (De Jaegher et al., 2010). For example, learning how to reach, grab, and bring food to mouth, using the vocal cord, walking and running, conversation, lying and deception, and so many more of our fundamental critical behaviors rely on self-organizing sensorimotor loops (Kelso, 1995, 2016; Thelen & Smith, 1994; van Dijk & Rietveld, 2017).

Importantly human dancing itself has been shown to also rely on a myriad of dynamic synchronization processes and sensorimotor loops that self-organize into an ongoing participatory system (Kronsted & Gallagher, 2021). Many of the processes we consider part of successful dancing are a matter of using synchronization processes to create equilibrium through self-organization. If this seems a bit abstract think about the way that over time as we dance with people not only do our legs fall into synch with the rhythm and each other, but so do hips, torso, hands, shoulders, heads, gaze patterns, breathing, and pretty much any other body part or bodily mechanism we can think of. A "good" dancing couple is one that falls into polyrhythmic relationships that are in self-organized equilibrium with each other and the whole dance space.

The point that I hope is emerging, is that vernacular dancing exploits the body's innate

need to experience self-organized equilibrium. Vernacular dancing likely feels good, at a deep visceral level, because it taps into one of our most ancient mechanisms. Sensorimotor coupling, synchronization, self-organization, and equilibrium are all the basic building blocks of our bio-cognitive existence, and dancing explicitly utilizes and magnifies these processes. Unlike many competitive sports in which players have to trick, overcome, and beat the other player by bringing them out of equilibrium, dance is all about continually intensifying the depth, intensity, and number of synchronizing, self-organizing processes. In short, vernacular dance aims for an intense experience of embodied equilibrium and thereby taps into our most fundamental sense of well-being. It is no wonder that so much language around dance ends up having a spiritual lean (Midgelow, 2018). It is hard to linguistically explain the feeling of embodied equilibrium since it is so fundamental.

Dance has likely evolved as a tool for social connection, by magnifying and multiplying embodied relationships of synchronization and self-organization. We must remember that being in equilibrium is also being so with one's social and cultural environment (Gallagher, 2020). When we dance, we also organize into multilayered perpetuating self-organizing relations of synchronization with others, the music, and ourselves. This, in turn, creates a pleasurable, meaningful connection with others and the community. We cannot forget that synchronization and self-organization function through structural coupling (that is making one system causally interconnected with another). This kind of coupling makes us feel and be connected with others, and being connected with others is crucial for the organism's thriving and continuation.

In sum, we have seen that from the perspective of enactive cognitive science, coupling and self-organization are involved at every scale of analysis — from the most fundamental processes in our cells scaling up all the way to multi-agent interactions. Given this fact, it should be no surprise that so many vernacular dances create deep feelings of well-being. When we dance, we are explicitly rarefying and using the most fundamental mechanisms that our system is telling us are good for us. Tapping into a primordial sense of embodied normative correctness; correctness that is tied to connecting with the environment and with others. While dance is not primarily about sexual selection, it is very much for social connection.

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Butterflies in the Flames: Romantic Ballet and the Spectacle of the Burning Ballerina

Katy Oliver

Abstract: *Some of Romantic ballet's best-remembered dancers are those who burned to death in horrific stage accidents. As a grisly form of visual spectacle, the dancer-aflame both disturbed and excited those who bore witness to it. This article explores how the figure of the burning ballerina is rendered—immortally—as a dual emblem: living virtuoso and dead angel of the dance. On the page, the ballerina metamorphoses beneath the weight of the competing configurations imposed upon the narrative of her death, configurations of pious disembodiment and agonizing 'hyper'-embodiment, in which the body must carry both the weight of its own damaged viscera and the weight of aesthetic figuration.*

This article discusses the frightening delights of looking at—and writing about—bodies on the cusp of decay, death, and dissolution, even at the height of its aesthetic perfection. All the while, this body possesses a powerful presence of its own, never fully recoverable, but always inviting us to look again.

Keywords: *aromantic ballet, dance, romanticism, nineteenth century, affect, inscription, sympathy, gothic, aesthetics, pain.*

What was going on in this young soul so fatally doomed to suffering? What regrets crossed her imagination? What hopes did she have? What feelings were blooming in her, that she felt wither before they blossomed? God and his good angel alone know this; his confessor will not reveal anything.

Paul d'Ambert, "Emma Livry" (translated from the original French)

1. 1. Prelude: Ballet in flagrante

This article offers a somaesthetic reading of a peculiar rhetorical and aesthetic problem (or, rather, a constellation of interrelated problems) that I observe within the history, culture, and study of Romantic ballet. In diagnosing these problems, we must begin with a discussion of *techne*—that is, a *techne* of singular importance to the Romantic ballet. This technology is one of the world's oldest and most two-faced, and its connection and application to nineteenth-century ballet, though of undeniable significance, was essentially accidental in nature. I speak here of the *techne* of fire. As a consequence of gas lighting and the explosion in popularity of several new and highly flammable fabrics, fire became inextricably bound to the history and aesthetic development of Romantic ballet. Open gas jets and uncovered footlights were particularly prone to destruction; many fires started because of a piece of fabric—a curtain or a costume, draped or worn—lingered for too long near an open flame.

The burning theater was such a frequent and horrific danger during the nineteenth century that Sir Eyre Massey Shaw, the first Chief Officer of London's Metropolitan Fire Brigade, wrote and published the first edition of his treatise *Fires in Theatres* in 1867. By his own admission, Shaw's account of theater conflagrations is not exhaustive, due to the sheer volume and scope of the research necessary to compile such a record: "The following is a list which I have collected with much difficulty, and from many sources, of theatres destroyed by fire, and I believe it to be correct as far as it goes, but not at all complete, nor even approaching to completeness" (Shaw, 1867, p. 44). Figures 1 and 2 below show Shaw's list of theater-destroying fires from the range of dates that I give for the Romantic period of ballet, 1827-1870. The list, Shaw (1867) explains, contains only those theaters completely destroyed by fire, for "it is impossible for [him], at present, to give an estimate" of theaters "merely damaged" by fire, their numbers being so immense (p. 44). He adds that "This account of accidents ... [is] merely collected from such sources as happen at the moment to be at my command. I have no doubt whatever that, if I had more time at my disposal, both lists could be very largely increased" (Shaw, 1867, p. 47).

Theatres Destroyed by Fire. 45

Year.	Place.	Name of Theatre.
1826	Paris	Cirque Olympique, Rue du Faubourg du Temple
1826	Paris	Ambigu Comique
1829	Glasgow . . .	Theatre Royal
1830	London	English Opera House (now Lyceum Theatre)
1830	London	Astley's Amphitheatre. 3rd fire
1830	London	Amphitheatre, Argyle Rooms
1836	Paris	Folies Dramatiques, Basse du Temple
1837	Paris	Théâtre de la Gaité
1838	Paris	Théâtre Italien
1838	Paris	Théâtre du Vaudeville, Rue du Chastres
1839	Paris	La Salle du Diorama, Rue de Bondy. 1st fire
1839	Cheltenham . .	Cheltenham Theatre
1839	Glasgow . . .	Batty's Theatre
1841	London	Astley's Amphitheatre. 4th fire
1842	Glasgow . . .	Cook's Circus. 1st fire
1843	Berlin	Berlin Theatre
1844	Manchester . .	Theatre Royal
1845	Glasgow . . .	City Theatre
1845	Glasgow . . .	Cook's Circus. 2nd fire
1846	Canada	Quebec Theatre
1846	London	Garrick Theatre
1847	Baden	Grand Ducal Theatre
1847	Carlsruhe . . .	Carlsruhe Theatre
1848	New York, U.S. .	Park Theatre
1848	Glasgow . . .	Adelphi Theatre
1849	London	Olympic Theatre
1849	Paris	Théâtre du Diorama, Bazar Bonne Nouvelle. 2nd fire
1852	Boston, U.S. . .	Tremont Theatre
1853	Edinburgh . . .	Adelphi Theatre
1853	London	Islington Fields Circus
1855	Bordeaux . . .	Théâtre des Variétés
1855	Angers	Théâtre de la Ville
1856	London	Pavilion Theatre, Whitechapel
1856	London	Covent Garden Theatre. 2nd fire
1859	Hull	Theatre Royal. 1st fire
1860	Namur	Namur Theatre. 1st fire
1862	Namur	Namur Theatre. 2nd fire
1862	Bath	Bath Theatre
1863	Plymouth . . .	Plymouth Theatre
1863	Jersey	Theatre Royal
1863	Glasgow . . .	Glasgow Theatre. 2nd fire.

Figure 1 *Eyre Massey Shaw, Fires in Theatres, 1876, p. 45*

46 *Theatres Destroyed by Fire.*

Year.	Place.	Name of Theatre.
1863	Vienna	Théâtre Treumann
1863	Rome	Théâtre Alberti
1863	Barcelona . . .	Barcelona Theatre
1863	Boston, U.S. . .	Grand National Theatre
1864	Chambéry . . .	Chambéry Theatre
1865	Edinburgh . . .	Royal Theatre
1865	London	Surrey Theatre. 2nd fire
1865	Sheffield . . .	Theatre Royal
1865	Stockholm . . .	Théâtre du Parc
1865	Verona	Théâtre Mondini
1865	Breslau	Theatre Royal
1866	London	Standard Theatre
1866	Cincinnati, U.S. .	Opera Theatre
1866	Constantinople .	Théâtre Impérial
1866	New Orleans, U.S.	Grand Theatre
1866	Paris	Théâtre des Nouveautés
1867	Bourges . . .	Théâtre de la Ville
1867	Namur	Namur Theatre. 3rd fire
1867	New York, U.S. .	Bowery Theatre
1867	New York, U.S. .	Winter Garden Theatre
1867	St. Louis, U.S. .	Théâtre Comique
1867	Philadelphia, U.S.	Varieties Theatre
1867	Madrid	Théâtre du Conservatoire
1867	San Francisco . .	Great American Theatre
1867	London	Her Majesty's Theatre, Haymarket. 2nd fire
1867	Paris	Théâtre de Belleville
1868	Turin	Theatre Nota
1868	New York, U.S. .	Butler's American Theatre
1868	Vienna	Orpheum Theatre
1868	Venice	Théâtre de Trévise
1869	Glasgow . . .	Prince of Wales's Theatre
1869	Hull	Hull Theatre. 2nd fire
1869	Durham . . .	Durham Theatre
1869	Dresden . . .	Court Theatre
1870	Glasgow . . .	Alexandra Theatre

Figure 2 *Eyre Massey Shaw, Fires in Theatres, 1876, p. 46*

Subsequent editions of Fires in Theatres gave updated accounts of the fires, and indeed, many significant and devastating fires were right around the corner. While I must share Shaw's (1867) method of reporting that such fires are simply too numerous to list in full, some of the most devastating were the Brooklyn Theatre fire of 1875, wherein as many as 300 people died (the exact number is unknown), 1887's Exeter Theatre Royal fire, which killed 186 people, and Chicago's Iroquois Theater fire in 1903, which killed 602. In 1873, just seven years after Shaw's publication emerged, the Paris Opéra's own ballet stage, the Salle de Peletier, was to burn to the ground, prompting the construction of the Palais Garnier, which is still in use today.

Partial fires, while perhaps not as spectacular to the passer-by as the total immolation of a theater, could be equally as disastrous. Many ballerinas lost their lives or else were gravely injured when their costumes caught fire, a phenomenon the British medical journal *The Lancet* (1868) called "The Holocaust of Ballet-Girls" due to the dreadful frequency of such events (p. 631). The grisly technology of the burning ballerina "form[ed] one of the most horrible realities, yet one so obvious that it may occur again, at any moment, of the theatrical life" (Duyckinck, 1845, p. 71). In Aristotelian terms, a *techne*, by its very nature, is a repeatable practice that is tied to some kind of skill. Though one may be inclined to categorize fire as a 'wild' element—that is, a naturally occurring phenomenon that is not a technology in and of itself—or even an instance of poiesis, the product of a practice that stands alone as a created object—the mythological origins of fire often mark it as gift (or theft) of a tool of the gods. In experimentations with the burgeoning technologies of light, such as the gas lamp and the gas-jet footlight, and with the highly flammable fabrics of the Romantic costume, Romantic ballets created the conditions in which a ballerina could burn again and again. Despite repeated warnings and pleas from fire brigadiers and scientists, most theaters were slow to implement adequate fireproofing and fire-prevention measures. This reticence to make use of life-saving technologies induced in many journalists, ballet reviewers, and theater fire chroniclers a sense of resignation and despair. "Barbarities of the Theater," an 1845 article in *The Broadway Journal*, describes the burning death of English ballerina Clara Webster:

> *Miss Clara Webster, a dancer of ability and a favorite of the audience, was performing in the opera of the Revolt of the Harem, in the bath scene, where there is a miserable attempt at the representation of water, and women bathing in it … There is nothing to be said against the indecency of such an exhibition, for it was too painful and revolting to produce any other feeling than an uncomfortable disgust. Painted actresses with staring eyes, … illuminated in a glare of light, like Dante's figures in purgatory, offer the least attractive subject of contemplation in the world. Miss Webster was engaged in this gross show of tinsel, when her gauze dress took fire from the lights placed below. She was immediately enveloped in flames, and ran about the stage shrieking for help, avoided and shaken off by the other dancers, at the peril of their lives, till the carpenter at the side scene, rolled himself over her, and extinguished the fire at the cost of great personal suffering to himself. She was taken home to die—and the play went on to the conclusion. This reads like a reflection of the humanity of an English audience. So it occurred. Yet, as they were men and women, that vision, clad in fire, must rise up before them as a horrible portent—the extremest agony of pain, lit up by the blaze of a theater. What light foot can tread the boards again? (Duyckinck, p. 71)*

Another incident, the deaths of the Gale sisters (depicted in Figure 3), is perhaps one of Romantic ballet's better-known tragedies. In 1861, Philadelphia's Continental Theatre caught ablaze, again when a dancer's costume touched a gas jet. Four sisters engaged as dancers at the theater, Cecilia, Ruth, Abeona, and Hannah Gale, were among those who lost their lives.

Figure 3 *"Frightful Scene in the Dressing-Room of the Continental Theatre, Philadelphia, on the Evening of Saturday, September 14, 1861—Accidental Burning of a Portion of the Ballet Corps While Preparing for the Dance in Shakespeare's Play of the "Tempest," Resulting in the Death of Seven of the Dancers.Sketched by Mr. Oehlschlager, Who Witnessed the Catastrophe," detail, Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, September 28, 1861, 312-3. House Divided Project at Dickinson College*

Richmond's *Daily Dispatch* describes the event in an article published two weeks later:

> *It appears that Miss Cecilia [Gale], one of four talented and handsome sisters, was about robing herself in ballet costume. She stood upon a settee to reach her dress, and somehow flirted it into a jet of gas, when it was instantly ignited. Before the young lady could recover from her fright her clothing was all ablaze, and her sisters and several of the ballet girls from an adjoining dressing room, rushing up to assist her, were in turn set on fire. About a dozen of these helpless girls were thus burning at once, and the fire ran over their gauze and among their underclothes, making fast to their close leggins or "tights," and literally burning to the bone. […]*
>
> *Miss Cecilia Gale, writhing and still in flames, darted down the stairs as stated, and was caught by Mr. Bayard, a stage carpenter, who at once tore up the sea cloth, a sheet of canvas used to make waves, and wrapped it around her. He was much burned while doing this. The young lady was removed to the hospital soon afterwards.*

> *Several girls leaped into the street, through the second story windows, and Miss Hannah Gale, already badly burned, fell upon the pavement, bruising her back and head so that her case is considered hopeless.*
>
> *Miss Phœbe Norden, of Bristol, Pennsylvania, inhaled the flames and was shockingly burned. She was at the point of death last evening.*
>
> *Miss Annie Phillips died on Sunday morning.*
>
> *Miss Anna McBride was burned in the breast, arms and legs, and taken to the Pennsylvania Hospital. She suffered the most excruciating pain during Saturday night; but towards morning her delirium abated, and she died in the arms of Mrs. Wheatley.*
>
> *Miss Annie Nicholas was somewhat burned, but in the panic which ensued after the accident she jumped from the head of the flies to the stage--twenty-five feet--and breaking through a lot of mirrors and plate glass used to represent a lake, her hands and cheeks were lacerated.*
>
> *Ruth and Adeline Gale were burned in the hands and breast.*
>
> *Mrs. Mary E. Herman suffered exceedingly.*
>
> *Abby Carr, Margaret Conway, Thomas Bayard, Kate Harrison, and a young man, name unknown, were more or less badly burned. The last named inhaled the fire and his lungs have since been bleeding.*
>
> *[…]*
>
> *The telegraph has announced the death of the sixth of the sufferers—one of the Misses Gale. ("The Recent Terrible Accident at the Continental Theatre in Philadelphia," 1861, p. 1)*

The Continental Theatre fire would ultimately claim the lives of nine dancers. *The Adams Sentinel*, a Gettysburg newspaper, published a brief article following the death of Hannah Gale, one of the first Gale sisters to succumb to her wounds. The article gives a brief but detailed account of Hannah Gale's last hours:

> *Hannah Gale had lain at Grear's saloon. Soon after she was brought there her pain ceased—the result of inward mortification. She was entirely tranquil, and calmly asked those present to read the Bible to her. An intimate friend, Miss Annie Wilkes, spent some time with her reading the sacred book. For herself she had no apprehensions, but for her sisters and mother she felt keen anxiety.*
>
> *Hannah Gale died at 3 o'clock. A death-bed more solemn, yet less mournful, is seldom seen. ("The death-bed of a ballet girl," 1861, p. 1)*

Both the article in *The Adams Sentinel* and the illustration of the fire from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (Figure 3) organize and aestheticize the events of the fire into a dramatic tableau, though each goes about it in an entirely distinct fashion. *The Adams Sentinel's* depiction

of Hannah Gale, which hinges on her moral character and her last fleeting moments of subjecthood, must more or less elide the body of the dancer in order to free her (or perhaps more accurately, the reader) from the awful burden of her wounds—and the disrepute of her profession. In performing this unburdening, The Adams Sentinel's reporter aims to convince "Those who suppose that the theatrical profession is inconsistent with fervent piety" that this is not so (1861, p. 1).

In shifting the focus from the body to the more abstract—and impervious—qualities of Gale's interior being, the author of the *Adams Sentinel* (1861) article also obscures the reader's 'view' of Gale's extensive injuries. Gale's bodily displacement through language pre-empts language used today in the medical field. In her essay "The Pain Scale," Eula Biss (2007) discusses the way that the use of a numerical scale for grading the intensity of pain ultimately solidifies pain into an orderly, legible, and quantifiable phenomenon. Pain, which is famously resistant to articulation—beyond 'inarticulate' cries and moans of suffering—is a deeply, almost irrevocably individuated experience, and so the use of tools like the pain scale are intended to provide a framework for assessing and cataloguing pain to simplify the process of its treatment. However, one of the side effects of this solidification is that a patient's pain may become so abstracted from its lived sensation (or deadened via language) as to become utterly disembodied. On the experience of using such diagnostics to assess pain, Biss (2007) writes,

> *The sensations of my own body may be the only subject on which I am qualified to claim expertise. Sad and terrible, then, how little I know. "How do you feel?" the doctor asks, and I cannot answer. Not accurately. "Does this hurt?" he asks. Again, I'm not sure. "Do you have more or less pain than the last time I saw you?" Hard to say. I begin to lie to protect my reputation. I try to act certain. (p. 9)*

As the pain scale (or abstracting language more broadly) renders a patient's pain increasingly inscrutable to him- or herself, the same thing may take place as the patient communicates with medical professionals. This is to some extent by design: "'One of the functions of the pain scale … is to protect doctors—to spare them some emotional pain. Hearing someone describe their pain as a ten is much easier than hearing them describe it as a hot poker driven through their eyeball into their brain'" (Biss, 2007, p. 24).

A similar form of readerly 'protection' takes place in the *Adams Sentinel* (1861) article. By constructing Hannah Gale as having lived a "blameless life" of unselfish love for her sisters and widowed mother, the author of the article is able to soften—and eventually overshadow altogether—the dreadful implications of Gale's "inward mortification" via the account of her moral bravery and "sustaining grace" in the face of total personal destruction (1861, p. 1). Meanwhile, Gale's beauty and skill as a dancer, while mentioned briefly at the beginning of the article, are held at arm's length as she is disembodied into a state that is "entirely tranquil," where she has "no apprehensions" concerning her own safety, comfort, or possible recovery (1861, p. 1). This forms a stark contrast with the image of a frantic Gale "leap[ing] into the street, through the second story windows … already badly burned," who "f[alls] upon the pavement, bruising her back and head so that her case is considered hopeless" ("The Recent Terrible Accident," 1861, p. 1). Instead, we find a serene image of a person who experiences "a degree of resignation too sublime," which allows the dying dancer to "[converse] as few people would suppose her capable of conversing" ("The Recent Terrible Accident," 1861, p. 1). That is to say, Hannah Gale may be fully extrapolated from her dancerly body of flesh, severing her from the suggestion

of impropriety, lowliness, or 'bawdy embodiment' that forms the context of the ballet girl and relocating her to a place where the "veil between life and eternity" is insubstantial, where one's "last breath" is a sublime mechanism that voices the name of the perfectly eternal ("The Recent Terrible Accident," 1861, p. 1). This functions to decontextualize or abstract Hannah Gale from her life and render her the chaste object of pity that may be satisfactorily contained within a column of newsprint—her true deathbed, as it were.

Much more in keeping with the tone of the *Daily Dispatch* article is the sketch from *Frank Leslie's* (1861). *The Daily Dispatch* (1861) article, with its long litany of the wounded, dead, and dying, levels a sympathetic but unflinching gaze at the dancers' burning bodies. The materiality and duration of its narration are incredibly physical; death has a certain rhythm as it unfolds. The sketch, meanwhile, offers a surprisingly graphic depiction of the fire, but one that is also undoubtedly aestheticized—rendered 'scene-like'—for the benefit of the onlooker.

The Frank Leslie's (1861) sketch depicts the moment that the fire has just begun to engulf its victims. Ballerinas in the foreground run from the conflagration while looking over their shoulders, their gazes turned toward the surging death that swallows the changing room. The fire itself, an object of terror and sorrow, forms a white slash upon the picture plane, distinct from the grayscale gradient that defines the other figures. The fire's distinct lack of crosshatched texturing transforms it into a void upon the page, into which the figures of the burning ballerinas fade into faint outlines, consumed, bodies already made phantasmal by its monstrous heat.

The elaborate and beautifully-rendered lace of the dancers' skirts draws the eye with increasing insistence, particularly to the figure of the ballerina who has fallen to her knees, whose skirt burns with a torrent of flame almost resembling folded wings. With her eyes downcast, her pose reads as ambiguous—has she swooned in a moment of physical agony as the fire scalds her skin? Has she fallen prey to a paroxysm of despair at her impending death? She presses her hands between her knees as though to prevent her skirt from riding up her thighs in a strange show of self-conscious modesty. Others look on her suffering with horror, transfixed. The ballerina standing most directly in the foreground flees, not yet touched by the licking tongues of white flame. She stands in a mutated *fondu* as her right calf, as starkly bright and untextured on the page as the fire, juts out for our examination. Her floral headpiece cascades down her back, her bearing still elegant even in her terrible distress. A soft circular patch of illumination beneath her feet functions almost as a spotlight as she crosses paths with the only male figure on the page, who strides toward the fire with his arms outstretched, carrying a flame-suppressing cloth. He rushes to save a figure in the middle plane who poses in a fashion that is nakedly theatrical, one arm cast out in lamentation and the other hand braced against her brow as she sinks into shadow. Other figures raise their arms in attitudes of prayer or desperate passion. Delicate feet in pointe shoes bound this way and that in futile attempts to escape.

The dancers are dying beautifully. Unlike the reverent and sublime depiction of Hannah Gale in *The Adams Sentinel* (1861), which disembodies her in a deliberate project of 'spiritual beautification,' the *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (1861) sketch insists upon the awful—yet simultaneously graceful—physicality of the burning dancers. This is an act of 'hyper'-embodiment, in which the body is made to carry not only the weight of its own visceral matter, but also the weight of aesthetic figuration. The hyper-embodied dancer is there to be read literally rather than allegorically, and as such it engenders an aesthetic, sympathetic, and affective response from those who look on. The caption of the *Frank Leslie's* (1861) sketch takes care to emphasize that the artist is one "Who Witnessed the Catastrophe" ("Frightful Scene in

the Dressing-Room," 1861, pp. 312-3). This element of supposed verisimilitude seems crucial. Did it really look like that? the captioned image invites us to ask. *Was that really how it was? Am I too witnessing the event as though I had been there?*

The image creates a sense of irresolvable mystery. This brings us to the true beginning of this article: the immolation, the silence, and the enigma of Emma Livry, a dancer whose brief but remarkable career and harrowing slow death render her indelibly—immortally—as an emblem of Romantic ballet. In text, Livry metamorphoses beneath the weight of the very same competing aesthetic configurations of pious disembodiment and agonizing hyper-embodiment that ballet writers imposed upon the Gale sisters. All the while, she possesses a powerful and moving affect of her own, never exhaustible, never fully recoverable, but always inviting us to look again.

2. The Long Death of Emma Livry

The death of Emma Livry is one of ballet's best-known tragedies. Ivor Guest, one of nineteenth-century ballet's foremost historians, goes so far as to mark her death as the point at which the 'twilight' of French ballet becomes irreversible—the point at which it is dying, and, far to the east, the Russian Imperial style is entering full bloom (1953, p. xi). The loss of Livry in 1863 is a foreshock; the Siege of Paris in 1870, *the coup de grâce*. It is not difficult to understand why Livry's story is so persuasively memorable; the facts of the case are quite simple. She was young, she was sweetly pious, she was shockingly talented—poised to become one of the next true greats—and she died horribly: all the necessary ingredients of a tragedy.

But why does her story emerge as the turning point of an entire era? What lodges Livry so insistently in the collective memory of the art form, and what compels me to lay her burnt body at the center of this article? The answer, or answers, lie snarled in the tangled channels of affect, somaesthetics, history, and the sensitive, sympathetic nexus that is the body.

First, a brief biographic sketch: in 1842, Emma Livry was born Emma Marie Emarot, the illegitimate daughter of the Baron de Chassiron and his mistress, Célestine Emarot, a former dancer with the Paris Opéra.[1] Célestine Emarot noticed early in Emma's childhood that she possessed an aptitude for ballet, so she enrolled her in lessons with a colleague from her own time at the Paris Opéra. Livry's talent was prodigious and her ascent towards mastery rapid; these qualities, as well as the help of her mother's subsequent entanglement with the Vicomte Ferdinand de Montguyon (a great lover of the ballet), meant that by 1858, Emma was able to make her début performance at age sixteen—and in a principal *rôle*, no less.

Livry's first *rôle* was that of the titular Sylph in *La Sylphide*. Her début was an enormous success, and many critics remarked that her talent and feeling for the dance were astonishing—and that time and experience would smooth out what few imperfections remained in her technique. (In what would be an ironic prophecy, others were more skeptical, worrying "'What accidents might happen on the journey between the promise of talent and final celebrity! What storms may break before the corn ripens!'" (as cited in Guest, 1953, p. 11).) From there, Livry performed in the ballet *divertissement* of the opera *Herculaneum* and created the lead rôle of Farfalla in Marie Taglioni's ballet *Le Papillon*, cementing her reputation as a young dancer of extreme ability and extremer promise. Critics and journalists began to speak of her as the 'hope' of the French ballet.

Other *rôles* and *divertissement* performances followed, and by 1863 Livry was rehearsing

1 This condensed biography is based on Ivor Guest's excellent chapter on Livry's life in The Ballet of the Second Empire: 1858-1870, which gives a much richer account of her development as an artist, her contracts, her performances, and her style.

to appear in the opera *La Muette de Portici*, portraying the mute Fenella in a miming part. On November 15, 1862, during a dress rehearsal, as Livry prepared to take to the stage, she stood up and shook out her skirt, forgetful of the wing-light alongside. The sudden movement caused a flame to dart over its guard and touch her skirt.

> *Don't move, mademoiselle!" shouted a fireman, as he rushed towards her. Hearing him shout, Emma looked back and saw the flames rising from her costume. Panic-stricken, she ran down from the rock onto the stage. Almost at once, the flames were rising into the air three times her height. […] Enveloped in a searing column of fire, Emma screamed three times in her terror… […] Then from the wings, one of the firemen, Muller, ran out with the safety-blanket, caught her, threw her to the ground, and, by rolling with her on the boards, at last succeeded in extinguishing the savage flames. Before Emma lost consciousness, her form could be distinguished beneath the sodden blanket, in an attitude of prayer. (Guest, 1953, pp. 30-1)*

Following the accident, Livry was rushed to her home on a stretcher as a "curious and sympathetic crowd" looked on (Guest, 1953, p. 31). Livry's physician, Dr. Laborie (one of the Opéra's in-house doctors), assessed that "'The fire had caused very extensive burns, covering both thighs, the loins, the back, the shoulders, and both arms… Her condition appears very serious, not because of the depth of the burns, but because of their extent.' Her face and chest were barely touched" (as cited in Guest, 1953, p. 32). Her mother and various doctors attempted to alleviate her pain and settle her in for what would undoubtedly be a long period of recuperation—provided that she survived the initial shock of the injury.

Fresh agonies were to come. "For more than four months," Guest writes, Livry "remained lying face downwards with her arms outstretched… Lemon juice was applied to her burns, and attempts were made to graft flesh in the hope of preventing scars from forming" (1953, p. 32). Livry's doctors forbade her "to speak, and even to groan or weep or make any movement at all, for fear that the feeble tissues that were being encouraged to cover her sores might be damaged. … when she could bear the anguish no longer, when her youth and strength revolted, an impassive voice warned her, "Keep calm if you want to live" (Guest, 1953, pp. 32-3).

Gradually, her condition appeared to improve, and Livry was able to move and speak for short periods of time, and her long isolation gradually reduced. In July of 1863, Livry's mother, her doctor, and a Sister of Charity attempted to transport her to a villa on the Place de Villiers, in the hope that she might recuperate there in greater comfort. According to most accounts, shortly after completing the journey, she contracted either blood poisoning, erysipelas ("a skin infection involving the dermis layer of the skin," which "may also extend to the superficial cutaneous lymphatics"), septicemia, or some combination of the three (Michael and Shaukat, 2023). She died very quickly thereafter, aged only twenty, after an unimaginable ordeal of eight months.

3. The Mire of Sympathy and the Riptide of the Gothic

The somaesthetic approach invites one to consider the body/mind, the soma's interior/exterior, and its "representational/experiential" dimensions simultaneously (Shusterman, 1999, p. 306). This blended or multi-register perspective, however, stands in sharp contrast with traditional ways of writing about and theorizing the Romantic ballerina's embodiment. Ivor Guest's rendition of Emma Livry's injury and false convalescence serves as a clear example of conventional practice. Guest's history is touchingly and elegantly told, interweaving contemporary textual resources

with a solemn and sympathetic narrative voice. While some contemporary accounts of Livry's accident did chronicle her convalescence, Guest labors to narrativize the previously 'veiled' period of her life that lay between her burning and her funeral—to illuminate the dark crevasse of Emma Livry's personal experience of that last agonizing period of quiet suffering. However, his telling does not escape—and indeed indulges rather freely with—the impulse towards uncritical romanticization that dogs so many narratives of Romantic death. To romanticize an event or being is to transform it into a work of art, to render it as a monument, or else to hyper-individuate it. I specifically choose to call this process "romanticization" to reference the birth of the aesthetic paradigm that I mention above, the valorization and obsessive aestheticization of the white ballerina's body.

Romanticization is fundamentally an act of displacement. The language of romanticization performs a similar manipulation as the medical pain scale, which deadens and extrapolates pain into something quantifiable and graspable. The process of romanticizing the ballerina's body, then, produces a 'cartoon' or 'manifest' Romanticism. Cartoon Romanticism constructs the Romantic ballet as a microcosm of the saccharine and the tragic. Its delicate bodies are pronounced too beautiful for this world; accordingly, must vanish into thin air. This uncritical celebration of the 'body that dies beautifully' offers the onlooker a sense of spiritual solace and recompense.[2] However, upon closer inspection, one begins to see a Romantic ballet that is at war with itself. Cartoon Romanticism valorizes the delicate and imperiled body in a way that is undercut by the brutal history of Romantic ballet itself.

Traditional narratives of the death of the ballerina adopt a 'segmented' or partial (which is to say, non-somaesthetic) schematic of the body. Ivor Guest's (1953) accounting cannot attend unswervingly to Livry's wounded body because it is busy attending to her piety, her modesty, and her goodness—the conditions of her interior being. The romanticizing quality of Guest's (1953) writing is not directly or entirely attributable to Guest himself; his description of Livry's death is more or less a direct translation of an article Paul d'Ambert (1863) wrote for *Le Nain Jaune* immediately following the ballerina's death. D'Ambert's (1863) emphasis on Livry's spiritual qualities, her highly developed sense of chastity, and her selfless compassion reflect the commemorative sensibilities of the mid-nineteenth century. That said, while the sentiments *originate* with d'Ambert, Guest (1953) makes unapologetic use of the vocabulary and rhetoric of nineteenth-century sympathy—a vocabulary that has maintained a pervasive and disturbing hold on the language of Romantic ballet. The d'Ambert-Guest script *does* incorporate a few pointed descriptions of Livry's injured body, such as the mentions of the doctors applying lemon juice to her burns and their attempts to graft unblemished skin onto the worst of her wounds. However, these graphic snapshots are embedded within a larger and ultimately overmastering frame of her impenetrable piety. Indeed, d'Ambert's descriptions echo similar passages in the print eulogy of Hannah Gale, as well as countless other articles describing similar tragedies befalling young *danseuses*.

Like Gale, the Livry of the *Le Nain Jaune* article becomes a font of comfort for the loved ones who will survive her: "during these terrible crises, her greatest concern was to console her mother. In the convulsions of an agony repeated twenty times before taking her away, she smiled at her and assured her that she was well. The mother of such a girl can never console herself" (d'Ambert, 1863, p. 2). Livry is rendered perfectly chaste and moral; realizing, after the flames are put out, that her body is exposed to view, she attempts to cover herself with the "scorched and tattered remains" of her costume (Guest, 1953, p. 31). Although Livry does not literally

2 The 'body that dies beautifully' includes both 'that-which-dies-while-still-beautiful' and 'that-which-is-rendered-beautiful-in-dying.'

lie before the reader, the text invites us, momentarily, to imagine her divested, "nearly naked," smoking from flames only just extinguished, guttering with a shame provoked by modesty's forcible interruption (Guest, 1953, p. 31). The fire has burned not only her clothing, but even the very surface of her flesh in a cruel and irreversible denuding.

D'Ambert's (1863) instinct appears to be to write protectively of his subject. Working from the assumption that this grim anecdote is true and not a fanciful fabrication on the part of the author, the descriptions of Livry's grace in the face of suffering have the effect of drawing an enshrouding screen over her body, which has been exposed to us on every possible register through the description of her accident. This spell of protection also shelters those who read from the awful revelations of the devastated body. Readers of *Le Nain Jaune* will find no nightmare vision of their beloved *danseuse* crazed with all-encompassing terror, agony, and despair, slicked with blood and tears, spangled with fluid-filled blisters, her exposed tissues as dreadfully scarlet as meat on a butcher's slab. Instead, they will find only images of Emma Livry the patient—supine, composed, and resigned to selfless silence.

In text, d'Ambert (1863)—and later Guest (1953)—eagerly provide Livry with a touching moral apotheosis, transforming, for others if not for Livry herself, the too-painful and unimaginable eight months of her suffering into a legible spiritual journey with a worthwhile destination:

> *This death is as poetic, as ideal as her life. The dear child smiled at the sky that opened before her eyes, … she wept for those she was going to leave; her youth, her success, her lost future. She sank on her stem, like a dried flower in the rays of the sun, leaving behind her perfume, that is to say a reflection of her soul in the memories of those who loved her. (d'Ambert, 1863, p. 2)*

If the death is "poetic," then it may be read, interpreted, and understood, and it is sure to contain meaning (d'Ambert, 1863, 2). Emma Livry's body is rendered flower-like; her death, like the eventual withering of all flowers, becomes suddenly natural—even anticipated.

In life, a ballerina may portray, and by extension may be said to resemble, all manner of delightful things—butterflies, flowers, cupids, houris, sylphs, nymphs, jewels, sprites, princesses, exotic nomads, shadows, fairies, stars, goddesses, birds, angels, ghosts, dream-visions, priestesses, dolls, 'savages,' or even the enthralling geometries of point, line, parabola, and vector. It is the nature of the Romantic ballerina to *become*—to transform into something that is not herself, something beautiful and remote, something illusive and temporary. The dancer in performance takes on the weight of hyper-embodiment, a vessel for representation and fantasy, aesthetic pleasure and *frisson*.

In death, the haze of transposition surrounding the ballerina's body does not dissipate—it *intensifies*. What could come more naturally to the writer's pen than the metaphor of the wilting flower? What could be more touching, more beautiful, than the thought of Emma Livry permanently escaping gravity as she leaps into the open arms of Heaven? By the logic of the d'Ambert-Guest narrative, Livry's accident, in freeing her of the cumbersome weight of her body, might be said to perfect her. If the story is tragic, it is principally because Livry, in dying, leaves behind her a Paris Opéra that is more conspicuously imperfect, more resolutely doomed and fragmentary. As Livry is the 'great hope of French ballet,' the boundaries of her body extend outward to absorb the entirety of the Paris Opéra in the moment of her greatest distress. Her

wound takes on the shadowy weight of the Opéra's wounding, and her death becomes its dying.

In preserving the romanticizing language of d'Ambert's (1863) *Le Nain Jaune* article, Guest (1953) continues the tradition of disfiguring Emma Livry, rendering her burnt body truly shadow-like, until it becomes a secondary, transparent, intangible figment of the Emma Livry captured in language, always attached, but ever distant and apt to fade from view, distorting as the long hours eke by and merging into the undifferentiated darkness of the night.

The language of sympathy renders visceral images palatable, anodyne (in all senses of the word), and heavy with tragic irony or deeper significance—but by no means is this the only method of transfiguring and disfiguring the ballerina's body via language. A century after Eyre Massey Shaw (1867) attempts to compile as comprehensive a list as possible of theater fires, Mary Swift (1982) assembles a list of American ballerinas who perished by burning between the years of 1850 and 1870. Just as Shaw admits his list is almost certainly not exhaustive, Swift notes that "Probably there were more of these young victims" who have been lost, whether by archival slippage or deliberate concealment, to silent obscurity (1982, p. 8). Although Swift's account of ballet's burnt legions is impressively thorough, naming a terrible host of dead and injured, the circumstances of their accidents, their wounds, and their times of death, Swift falls prey to the same romanticizing impulse as Guest in his tender narrativization of Emma Livry. "Ballet history is replete with tales of horror, of tender maidens engulfed in flames that charred their milk-white flesh," Swift writes in the opening sentence of her article, opting for terms that indulge in the vivid imagery of the fairy tale, the penny dreadful, or even the giallo film (Swift, 1982, p. 1). We might choose to call this 'Gothic language.' Gothic language harnesses the sensuous (or even erotic) excitement and agitation of lurid oppositions (indeed, recall Anne Radcliffe's famous description of the Alpine landscapes of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, "beauty sleeping in the lap of horror") (2001, p. 39). Our example of this aesthetic disjunction shall be an anonymous Victorian poem describing the spate of burning *danseuses*:

There are perils dire

Which oft beset the Ballet Girl,

And worst of all is Fire!

Most deadly of the deadly foes that threaten player folk,

An enemy who never sleeps, whose power is ne'er broke,

While of the groups Theatrical, the greatest risk who run

Are lightly costumed ballerinas—escape for them is none.

A spark upon the muslin dry, then instantly it lights into a flame,

Like lightning's flash, at sea, on summer nights,

A blazing mass of agony, all maddened, quick they fly,

Yet fly not from the enemy who dooms them thus to die

That shrivels up the glowing limbs, and face and form, alas!

Leaving of female loveliness a charred and calcined mass.

Ah, happy if they die at once, and from Life's stage retire,

> *Than linger on in torment from the all-remorseless fire. (as cited in Kelly, 2014, p. 71)*

Like Swift's account, this poem of warning revolves around the juxtaposition of pleasing and terrifying images, in the jolt of "loveliness … charred and calcined" (p. 71).

Both of these strategies of romanticization explore, by different avenues, representations of sublimity—modes of bodily transcendence. Sympathy discards, and discards joyously, the body, while the Gothic mode discards all else, until only the body remains. Mary Swift's Gothic tone, like the *Daily Dispatch* (1861) article and the *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (1861) illustration, aestheticizes and hyper-embodies the burned American dancers. While each representation of dancerly death presents unique problems in its portrayal of the body, I find the language of sympathy to be the more damning of the two because of its tendency towards wholesale erasure. As such, it is all the more distressing when Swift (1982), as her article continues, shifts away from the Gothic mode and appears to accept without suspicion the language of sympathy that haunts the nineteenth-century ballet-girl's eulogy:

> *Their stories afford many insights into nineteenth-century theatrical practices, but perhaps it tells more about the very ballet girls them-selves. Far from being hard, coarse floozies, as they are sometimes depicted, these dancers were very often, it seems, gentle, sweet dutiful daughters, often the sole support of a needy family. (Swift, 1982, pp. 8-9)*

Richard Shusterman writes that dance is potentially "the most paradigmatic of somatic arts," and yet for centuries the conventional vocabularies of the Romantic ballet have remained in a bizarre deadlock between Gothic language's obsessive scrutiny of the body and the language of sympathy's willful disembodiment (2012, p.8). D'Ambert's *Le Nain Jaune* article, printed in 1863, shapes Guest's *The Ballet of the Second Empire*, which was first published in 1953. Swift's article emerges a few decades later in 1982—and yet the original language of "gentle, sweet dutiful daughters" is still there, doggedly clinging to the ballerina for nearly 120 years, never meaningfully changed or challenged (pp. 8-9). Even Deirdre Kelly's well-regarded *Ballerina: Sex, Scandal, and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection*, published a further 32 years later in 2014, cannot avoid adopting this language, albeit more cautiously, using the more flexible language of 'seems-to-have-been' and 'by-all-accounts-was.'

The language of sympathy, surely, emerges most often from a place of genuine compassion and fellow-feeling. It is not without merit; it performs a public or communal form of mourning that gives expression to grief—and perhaps more importantly, the intense desire for meaning and catharsis and the hope for the sufferer's release from pain. It may also serve, again, the purpose of shielding the dead from scrutiny or even personal humiliation—it is very possible indeed that Emma Livry wanted (or would have wanted) nothing whatsoever said of her injured body or her struggle to recuperate. Highly possible, too, is that many of the dead were "gentle, sweet dutiful daughters," or selfless and charitable, or godly and devoted, or "hard, coarse floozies," or any combination of so much overdetermined, eulogistic ballast (Swift, 1982, pp. 8-9). We cannot know now. Nevertheless, the language of sympathy is an interminable problem when reckoning with accounts of the body and its capacity to suffer.

The same lithographs of Grisi, Cerrito, and Elssler, the same anecdotes of Taglioni, the same tired passages of Gautier's criticism are trotted out again and again in each new history of the

period. Gautier himself seems to register a sense of the long self-cannibalization of Romantic ballet as early as 1853:

> *The cycle of romantic legends from which plots for ballets have been drawn these many years is on the point of being exhausted. The stories of Musäus, the brothers Grimm and Heinrich Heine have been widely used; swan-women, elves, nixes, wilis, valkyries have brought their graceful sabbaths into the blue gleam of German moonlight. Have we not seen enough of those white apparitions, lifting the sheets of water lilies on slumbering lakes and revealing their blonde heads crowned with gladioli, arrowheads and forget-me-nots before the enchanted gaze of some noble knight who has lost his way in the magic forest? Have they not been dragged around enough, those nocturnal dancers, the hems of their dresses turned green from the moisture of damp grass that has felt the foot-prints of their fairy rounds? ("Opéra: Aelia et Mysis" 250)*

Those of us who remain long after Romantic ballet's passing hang our heads again and again for the inevitable destruction of Emma Livry, Giuseppina Bozzacchi, Clara Webster, and Adèle Grantzow, mourning what-will-have-been-lost in an endless beating of the breast. The same gestures are repeated in a pantomimic reprisal that never seems to lose its appeal.

Jacques Derrida writes in "No Apocalypse, Not Now" that "Culture and memory limit the 'reality' of individual death to this extent, they soften or deaden it in the realm of the 'symbolic' (1984, p. 28). That which is symbolic becomes more easily displaced, its materiality substituted for some form of signification that 'stands in' for the body itself. In turn, this recalls Paul de Man's claim that "…what we have done with … all the other dead bodies that appear in romantic literature … is simply to bury them, to bury them in their own texts made into epitaphs and monumental graves. They have been made into statues for the benefit of future archaeologists 'digging in the grounds for the new foundations' of their own monuments" (1984, p. 121). Romanticizing rhetoric in all its forms fails to resist the thrill (or thrall) of language that "textualiz[es] the body," the seduction of knowing and seeing the intimate interiors of its subject, whether those interiors be the soul, rendered—*at last!*—legible to the naked eye, or the secret literality of a corpse's organs, the heart, guts, and mind no longer merely metaphorical, no longer broad abstractions (Shusterman, 1999, p. 309). As the language of romanticization—encompassing both the language of sympathy and the language of the Gothic—attempts to bring the reader 'closer' to its subject, by its very nature it instead forms a barrier between them. Even in the highest paeans to the subject's aesthetic or moral beauty, we might as well be staring at a doll's face. This is a language of representation. It has little correlation to subjecthood, much as it may try. Ultimately, romanticizing language attempts to turn the subject into art. Imagining the body as physically deadened or already dead becomes a form of spiritual compensation. It cannot in good conscience be called writing for the sake of the dead; it is writing for the sake of the living—it is a form that creates and recreates the lost rather than a form that remembers them.

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Eros and Thanatos Entwined: Somaesthetic Explorations in Kunqu Dance

Xueting Luo

Abstract: *This paper investigates somaesthetic principles in Kunqu Opera, particularly through the classical work 'The Peony Pavilion', focusing on how dance movements convey the interplay of Eros and Thanatos. It delves into the spiritual influence of emotional commitment on Kunqu's integrated system of poetry, music, and dance, and considers how traditional Chinese aesthetics may shape the mind-body relationship. This exploration seeks to contribute to the discourse on somaesthetics by suggesting that Kunqu dance offers nuanced insights into existential themes, thereby enriching our understanding of life and death within the arts.*

Keywords: *Somaesthetic Practice, Chinese Aesthetics, Embodied Performance, Philosophy of the Body, Philosophy of the Body, Body-mind Attunement, Traditional Chinese Theatre, Affective Embodiment, Kunqu Movement.*

In the realm of art, the persistent struggle and interaction between the visceral drive for life (Eros) and the inevitable pull towards death (Thanatos) manifest as pervasive themes across various cultural art forms. These universal concepts find a deep and unique echo in Chinese theatre, especially in *The Peony Pavilion*, one of the most emblematic works (Yu, 2004, p. 17). Staged as a Kunqu Opera — a form that dominated Chinese theatre from the 16th to the 18th century and continues to be performed today — *The Peony Pavilion* explores themes of love-induced death and resurrection, as well as the intricate interplay between emotion and reason. This masterpiece illustrates profound human experiences that transcend cultural boundaries and eras.

The Peony Pavilion, penned by the celebrated playwright Tang Xianzu (汤显祖 1550-1616) and first performed in 1598, is a romantic tragicomedy set during the Southern Song Dynasty. It tells the story (Yu, 2004, pp. 17-18) of Du Liniang, the daughter of a senior official, Du Bao. Persuaded by her maid Chunxiang to stroll through her family's spring garden, Du Liniang falls asleep and dreams of a romantic encounter with the scholar Liu Mengmei. This dream ignites a profound longing in her, becoming so intense that it leads to her untimely death. Transformed into a ghost, Du Liniang reunites with Liu Mengmei. Convinced of their fated love, Liu bravely exhumes her grave and miraculously brings her back to life. However, the resurrected Du Liniang and Liu face opposition from her father, who is incredulous about her return from the dead. Their persistent love eventually secures the emperor's endorsement, culminating in a

heartwarming and triumphant reunion.

The Peony Pavilion has become a masterpiece in both literature and performing art history, not solely due to its compelling storyline that elegantly explores themes of love, death, and rebirth. The refinement of its lyrics, the delicacy of the singing, and the vibrant, exquisite dance movements coalesce into a perfect unity with the poetry, music, and performance (Hu, 2012, pp. 100-101). As a result, it has established an aesthetic standard for Kunqu performances and has become a treasured repertoire (Niu et al., 1996, p. 166), passed down from generation to generation of Kunqu performers to the present day.

Kunqu is renowned for its unique performing paradigm that seamlessly blends singing, dancing, and poetry, adhering to the principle that every aspect of its performance — from the melodic to the kinetic — engages with dance. This integrative approach is encapsulated in the proverbs: "In Kunqu, there is no song that is not accompanied by dancing, only dance without singing" (Zhou & Luo, 1988, p. 131) and "there is no sound that is not singing, and no move that is not dancing" (Qi, 2005, p. 101)[1]. These sayings underscore the inseparability of movement and melody in Kunqu, highlighting a holistic approach to storytelling where every motion is charged with significance.

This paper aims to explore the embodied inquiry in Kunqu through *The Peony Pavilion*, drawing on somaesthetic principles as defined by philosopher Richard Shusterman (2008). Somaesthetics emphasizes the body as a site of sensory-aesthetic appreciation and personal expression (Shusterman, 2008, p. 19). It highlights the essential role of the body in perception, cognition, and action, promoting disciplined practices aimed at cultivating mindfulness through enhanced bodily awareness and aesthetic engagement with our somatic experiences (Shusterman, 2008, pp. 6-8).

This investigation examines the way in which Kunqu movements can be perceived as conduits to the characters' inner lives, expressing the dialectic of Eros and Thanatos. Additionally, it considers the ways traditional Chinese aesthetics can be seen to shape body-mind attunement, providing a comprehensive understanding of Kunqu's embodiment of somaesthetic principles.

1. Emotional Commitment in Kunqu Dance

The defining trait of Du Liniang, the heroine, is her profound dedication to love. This essence is eloquently captured by Tang Xianzu in his prose, “The Peony Pavilion Inscription”:

> *Du Liniang stands as an embodiment of profound affection. Her emotions, mysterious in their origin, ignite spontaneously and deepen ceaselessly. In life, she would willingly embrace death for the sake of her profound emotional commitment, and in death, find life again through it. Those who are not prepared to die for such emotions in life, and those whom such emotions cannot resurrect in death, have yet to touch the true zenith of emotional depth.*[2] (own translation, Tang, 2016, p. 1)

1 In this context, the term "Kunqu dance" could refer to all physical movements by performers in Kunqu, and can be used interchangeably with "Kunqu movement", reflecting the comprehensive integration of performance elements.

2 The original text: “如丽娘者，乃可谓之有情人耳。情不知所起，一往而深。生者可以死，死可以生。生而不可与死，死而不可复生者，皆非情之至也”

Scholars interpret this character appraisal as the central tenet of Tang Xianzu's philosophy of "emphasizing emotional commitment (唯情论, Weiqinglun,)"[3] and they attribute the core of Tang Xianzu's aesthetics to the term of "Qing (情qíng, emotional feeling)"[4] (Ye, 1985, p. 339). Tang Xianzu's emphasis on Qing is also evident in his other discourses, such as:

> *The world perpetually unfolds through the tapestry of emotional feelings [Qing], giving rise to poetry and leading us into the spiritual realms of art. Every sound and expression, every issue — great or small — and the intricate dance of life and death, all emanate from these profound emotional experiences. Emotions can gently and harmoniously sway the human mind, steering us towards joyous singing and dancing; yet, in other moments, they evoke sorrowful laments that reverberate through spirits and deities, resonating with the winds and rains, the birds and beasts. They agitate the grass and the woods, and their profound vibrations even perforate and crack the metals and stones.*[5] (own translation, as cited in Ye, 1985, p. 340)

> *Human beings are graced with an innate capacity for emotion. Thoughts, joys, anger, and resentment, experienced with delicate subtlety, transform into chanting and singing, shaping our bodily movements.*[6] (own translation, as cited in Ye, 1985, p. 340)

According to Tang Xianzu's discourses, emotion is inherent in every individual and serves as the foundational impetus for all artistic endeavors. It is the source from which not only poetry springs but also singing and dancing. Within his aesthetic philosophy, emotion is exalted to a fundamental core of human existence, acting as the dynamic force that propels human activities, including artistic creation.

In our time, Tang Xianzu's strong emphasis on emotional engagement might appear excessive to some artists and audiences, as if the artistic expression of emotion has lost its valor. This perception is particularly pertinent under the influences of consumerism and materialism — a critique voiced by art theorist Wassily Kandinsky (1977). Kandinsky, writing in the early 20th century, condemned the art market's focus on aesthetic and material success, which he argued significantly reduces the potential for profound emotional and spiritual expressions in art (Kandinsky & Sadleir, 1977, pp. 36-38). His concerns resonate with contemporary challenges in preserving deep emotional engagement in art, as exemplified by Tang Xianzu's approach. This showcases a cross-cultural resonance in the struggle against the diminishing depth of artistic expression.

The dichotomy between spirit and material, emotion and reason, has been a perennial contradiction in the philosophical histories of both the East and the West. Materialism and utilitarianism have consistently, in the name of "reason", opposed the pursuit of deeper

3 The theory of "Weiqing (唯情)" is also referred to as "Zhiqing (至情)" (Yu, 2004, p. 21) .

4 In this essay, I address the translation challenges presented by the Chinese word "情 (qíng)". Unlike in English, where emotions and cognitive processes are distinctly separated, qíng in Chinese embodies a broader spectrum that intertwines emotional feelings with deeper cognitive elements such as loyalty, moral sentiments, or philosophical concepts. It often denotes a complex interplay between emotion and thought, extending beyond mere affective states. Given the nuanced nature of qíng, I will use context-specific phrases throughout this text to convey its meaning accurately, rather than relying on a single fixed translation.

5 The original text: "世间总为情，情生诗歌，而行于神。天下之声音笑貌大小生死，不出乎是。因而澹荡人意，欢歌舞蹈，悲壮哀感鬼神风雨鸟兽，摇动草木，洞裂金石 。"

6 The original text: "人生而有情。思欢怒怨，感于幽微，流乎啸歌，形诸动摇 。"

spiritual understanding and authentic emotional expression. During Tang Xianzu's era, Neo-Confucianism (理学，lǐxué, literally "School of Principle") was established as the official philosophy by the rulers, primarily because its emphasis on ethical principles aligned with their needs to consolidate their feudal rule. The Neo-Confucian motto "Cherishing heavenly principles, overcoming human desires"[7] (own translation, Zhao, 2019, p.166) was utilized by these rulers to suppress emotional expression. Although its initial aim was to foster self-cultivation[8] by promoting the regulation and guidance of human emotions through reason (Dong, 2020), it was not intended to completely deny or disregard human emotions, which are essential for moral cultivation and spiritual depth.

The Peony Pavilion was set against a societal backdrop that prioritized ethical order over genuine emotion[9]. In this context, the emotional awakening and pursuit of love by the protagonist, Du Liniang, are perceived as challenges to conventional ethics and morality. Her emotional needs went unmet in a society that dogmatically adhered to the Neo-Confucian doctrine of suppressing desires, causing her melancholic demise. Tang Xianzu's advocacy for the value of emotional engagement represented a direct challenge to the distorted Neo-Confucian views of his time (Ye, 1985, p. 341). In his narrative, Du Liniang is portrayed as the quintessential artistic representation of complex emotions and desires; her profound affection for Liu Mengmei stemmed from what can be perceived as her primal "human desires."

The recognition of emotions as intrinsic to human nature was established long before Tang Xianzu's era in the Ming Dynasty. As early as the Western Han Dynasty (202-8 BCE), the *Book of Rites*[10] categorized human emotions into joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hatred, and desire, highlighting these as innate human capacities that do not require learning[11] (own translation, Zheng, 2021, p. 301). Furthermore, the understanding of the expressive power of emotions was already significantly articulated in the "Preface to the Mao Commentary"[12] during the same period. This seminal work, forming part of the early exegeses of the *Classic of Poetry*, underscores the crucial role of emotion in literary and artistic expression.

> *Poetry is the expression of a person's heartfelt thoughts. Heartfelt thoughts reside in the heart, and when expressed in words they transform into poetry. If one's emotions are touched in the heart, they will be expressed in words; if words are not enough to convey them, one will sigh in exclamation; if sighs are not enough to convey them, one will sing in a long voice, and if singing in a long voice is not enough to convey them, one will dance with the hands and feet*[13] (own translation, Mao, 2018, p.1)

This passage illustrates that when emotions run deeper than words can express, the engagement of the entire body becomes necessary. Movement and dance, as extensions of

7 The original text: "存天理，灭人欲 。"

8 The Neo-Confucian scholars distinguished between normal emotional responses and excessive "human desires", which they defined as desires that surpass typical physiological and psychological needs. This nuanced approach was designed to temper only those desires considered excessive, while still recognising the importance of fundamental human emotions in ethical and spiritual development

9 Although the story of *The Peony Pavilion* is set in the Song Dynasty, it actually reflects the social context of the mid-Ming Dynasty, during which Tang Xianzu lived.

10 The Book of Rites, or Liji (礼记), comprises a collection of texts that detail the social forms, administrative practices, and ceremonial rites of the Zhou Dynasty, as interpreted during the Warring States and early Han periods.

11 The original text: "何謂人情，喜、怒、哀、惧、爱、恶、欲七者, 弗学无能 。"

12 The *Mao Commentary* (毛诗传; Maoshi Zhuan) is one of the four early traditions of commentary on the *Classic of Poetry* (诗经, Shijing), the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry, comprising 305 works dating from the 11th to 7th centuries BCE.

13 The original text: "诗者，志之所之也. 在心为志，发言为诗. 情动于中而形于言，言之不足，故嗟叹之，嗟叹之不足，故永歌之。永歌之不足，不知手之舞之、足之蹈之也 。"

emotional expression, demonstrate how the physical articulation of feelings can complement verbal or written forms, enhancing the emotional depth and communicative power of artistic works. Thus, from ancient times, the integration of body and movement has been recognized as essential for conveying profound emotional experiences, highlighting the holistic nature of human expression in art.

It is noteworthy that the connection between emotion and action highlighted in this passage aligns with the etymological roots of the word "emotion" in English. Derived from the French "émotion," from "émouvoir" meaning "to stir up," and ultimately from the Latin "emovere" (where "e-" suggests "out" and "movere" is "to move"), the term etymologically implies "to move out" (“Emotion | Etymology of Emotion by Etymonline,” n.d.). This suggests a process where feelings are stirred up from within, leading to external actions or expressions. This connection emphasizes how emotions not only provoke internal psychological activities but also manifest physically, often driving us to action. Thus, emotions effectively bridge the internal and external realms, illustrating the intrinsic link between our feelings and movements.

From ancient texts, we understand that dance is considered an exceptionally subtle and potent medium of emotional expression, uniquely capable of embodying the mental and spiritual realms beyond verbal articulation. It is worth exploring why emotional expression is so emphasized in ancient art theory.

An insightful response to this question might be found in Kandinsky’s seminal work, Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1977). Kandinsky posits that the true purpose of art is to act as a conduit for societal spiritual enrichment. He suggests that genuine art resonates with "prophetic strength," moving "forwards and upwards" through a spiritual journey facilitated by human experience (Kandinsky & Sadleir, 1977, p. 37). According to Kandinsky (1977, p. 47), the future of artistic innovation lies beyond the tangible, accessible only through the artist’s deep emotional and intuitive engagement.

He contends that by transcending technicalities and embracing emotional intuition, artists unlock the "what" – the essence of their work that nourishes the spiritual life of society (Kandinsky & Sadleir, 1977, p. 43). This essence transcends external realism, capturing internal truths that articulate the soul’s experience, achievable only through art. Thus, Kandinsky underscores that artistic wisdom and spiritual growth are inextricably linked, achieved through exploring and expressing deep emotional truths. This exploration transforms art into a profound spiritual journey, revitalizing its role and connection with society.

As a continuation of the Chinese artistic tradition that integrates poetry, singing, and dance — a tradition originating with the *Classic of Poetry* (Yin, 2018, pp. 167-186) — Kunqu Opera maintains this emphasis on emotional expression. In Kunqu performances, there is a particular focus on utilizing movement to convey characters' personalities and intricate emotional states (Su, 1980, pp. 25-29). This is vividly illustrated in *The Peony Pavilion*, especially through the nuanced use of the "round-field step (圆场步, yuán chǎng bù)." This quintessential type of footwork in Kunqu (Jin, 2020, p. 109) is a travelling step characterized by flexing the foot during each step. The heel, sole, and toes make contact with the ground in sequence, with the feet alternating as you move forward. Although this step appears in various scenes, it dynamically adapts to reflect different emotional contexts.

For example, during the garden scene, Du Liniang's movements are light and graceful, her steps delicately transitioning as she explores the vibrant spring scenery, reflecting her blossoming inspiration and yearning for freedom. In her dream encounter with Liu Mengmei, her steps

become soft and slow, capturing the tender shyness of first love. When she awakens and attempts to revisit the path of her dream in the garden, her movements are eager and determined, driven by a deep longing. In contrast, as she succumbs to despair and lovesickness, her steps grow heavy and sluggish, mirroring her physical and emotional decline towards the brink of death. Each step Du Liniang takes not only advances the plot but also deepens our understanding of her intricate emotional journey.

2. Existential Experience in the Movement Principle

In the Chinese linguistic context, the concept of "emotional commitment" is encapsulated by the character "情(qíng)." This character's significance is deeply rooted in its inherent, unspoken link with the concept of life, as its etymology suggests.

The character "情" combines the " 忄 " radical, symbolizing the heart (represented by "心, xīn"), with "青 (qīng)," typically translated to "green / blue" and is often used to depict vitality (Baidu Baike, 2024 b). Historically, as recorded in the Guodian Chu Slips[14] around 300 BCE, "情" appeared both solely as "青" and as a combination of "心 (heart)" and "青," with "青" positioned above "心"(Mao, 2018, p. 149). This structural formation, particularly in the use of "青" in "情," inherently relates to life's dynamic nature. The ancient script of "青" prominently features "生" in its upper part, symbolizing growth — from young plants sprouting from the soil, as depicted by the character "生," to the vibrant hues of green and blue, indicative of new life. These colors metaphorically align with youth and vitality[15], encapsulating the cyclical and ever-evolving aspects of life. Thus, "情, " through its connection to "青" and "生, " embodies a profound relationship with life, emphasizing that emotions are not merely transient or subjective, but deeply interwoven with the essence of living. This etymological insight into "情" underscores the intrinsic link between human emotions and the life force, elevating our understanding of emotional depth as an integral component of existence.

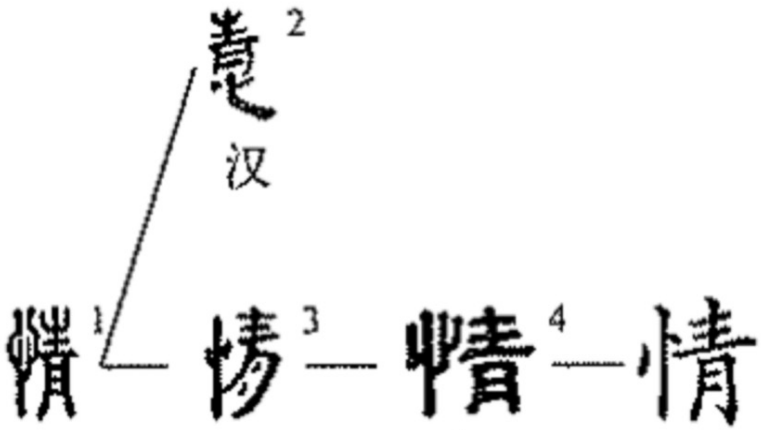

Figure 1 *The evolution of the Chinese character "情 (emotional commitment)" throughout history. Among these, 1 and 2 are in Small Seal Script, 3 and 4 are in Clerical Script, and the last one is in Regular Script (Baidu Baike, 2024 a).*

14 The Guodian Chu Slips, discovered in a tomb in Hubei Province, China, in 1993, are ancient bamboo manuscripts dating back to the Warring States period (circa 300 BCE) and are historically significant for providing invaluable insights into early Chinese philosophy, particularly Confucianism and Daoism.

15 "青" extends to notions such as youth ("青春", qingchun) and youngsters ("青年", qingnian), all underscoring the vitality and active growth phase.

Figure 2 *The historical evolution of the Chinese character "生 (birth / growth)" (Baidu Baike, 2024 c), from left to right: Small Seal Script, Clerical Script, Regular Script.*

This intrinsic connection echoes the concept of Eros in Western philosophy, as discussed by Plato and later by Freud. Plato (2008) regarded Eros as a life-affirming force driving human interactions towards intellectual and spiritual fulfillment, a perspective that aligns closely with the life-sustaining qualities of "情." Freud (1961) further expands on this by defining Eros, in his psychoanalytic theory, as the life force itself, manifesting as a desire to create life and fostering productivity and construction, which he contrasts with the death drive, Thanatos.

This alignment between Eastern insights into "情" and Western concepts of Eros underscores a universal resonance, highlighting how both traditions view emotional engagements and needs as central to the human condition. Eros and "情" therefore, bridge the emotional experiences with the pursuit of life's essence, tying emotional depth to existential significance and illustrating how intrinsically human feelings are woven into the fabric of both individual and collective existence.

This existential perspective illuminates why, in *The Peony Pavilion*, Du Liniang gravitates towards death when her emotional desires for love are thwarted by insurmountable realities, and then resurrects after achieving the freedom to love beyond death. The cycle of individual vitality mirrors that of nature's flora, which blossoms in spring and withers in autumn. Yet, as long as the perception of sensitivity and feelings persists, vitality remains. Following her demise, Du Liniang courageously confronts the King of Hell to secure a chance for resurrection. Her wandering spirit meets Liu Mengmei at the Plum Blossom Temple, where their profound love flourishes. United by their affection, they pledge to marry. Their commitment catalyzes her physical resurrection, symbolizing a seed sprouting anew, a testament to enduring vitality.

Concerning the meaning of life as intertwined with emotional experience, a vivid elucidation can be found in the poem "Grass on the Ancient Plain in Farewell to a Friend" by Bai Juyi (白居易, 772-846), a distinguished poet of the Tang Dynasty:

Wild grasses spread over ancient plain;

With spring and fall they come and go.

Fire tries to burn them up in vain;

They rise again when spring winds blow.

Their fragrance overruns the way;

Their green invades the ruined town.

To see my friend going away,

My sorrow grows like grass overgrown.[16] (Xu, 2021, p. 271)

The poet seamlessly incorporates the imagery of dense green grass as a backdrop to a poignant farewell, imbuing the landscape with deep emotional resonance. The grass, which undergoes cycles of growth, decay, and renewal, mirrors the constant flow of human emotions. It blossoms in spring, withers in autumn, and springs forth anew with each cycle, symbolizing the resilience and vitality that are intrinsic to both nature and the human spirit. Despite wildfires that devastate the foliage, the grass is revitalized by invigorating spring breezes, emblematic of nature's indomitable regenerative power. This metaphor extends deeper, positing that emotional experiences are a natural and integral aspect of human existence, interwoven into the very fabric of life. Hence, authentic emotions and sensitivity are not only natural but essential responses to the world around us, underscoring the interconnectedness of human emotions and the natural cycle. This interpretation suggests that our emotional landscape is as cyclical and inevitable as the processes governing the natural world.

The structure of the Chinese character "情(qing)," which symbolizes emotional feelings and sensitivity, features the " 忄 " radical on the left side. This radical is a variant of "心(xin)," representing the “heart-mind”[17] (Cooper, 2003, p. 63), suggesting that emotions are inherently viewed as an inner energy emanating from the heart-mind. This concept of emotions as a potent internal force is central to the movement principles of Kunqu Opera. In Kunqu dance, the "heart-mind (xin, 心) " is regarded not only as a source of mental power but also as crucial in the development of physical strength.

In Kunqu movement, the focus is primarily on the inner strength of the body-mind, rather than on the external forms created in three-dimensional space, representing heightened somatic awareness. This approach primarily stems from the emphasis on the Xin (heart-mind), which is the source of feelings and emotional experience. This principle is succinctly captured in a proverb that serves as a foundational guideline for Kunqu practitioners: "Form Three, Jin-strength Six, Xin-intention Eight, Non-intention Ten"[18] (own translation; Zou, 1985, p. 8). This maxim underscores the progression from mastering physical forms to achieving a deeper, intuitive connection with the emotional essence of performance.

"Form Three" emphasizes the precision and standardization of a performer's physical postures and movements, accounting for thirty percent of a successful performance. When the internal strength, known as "Jin (劲, jìn)," becomes visible, facilitating fluid transitions between movements (Huang, 2024), the performance achieves sixty percent effectiveness ("Jin-strength Six"). Additionally, when performers align their personal heart-mind state with that of the character, influenced by the character's personality and situational context in the drama, this intentional alignment leads to a surge of internal momentum that intensifies the "Jin-strength," achieving eighty percent effectiveness ("Xin-Intention Eight"). The pinnacle, "Non-intention Ten," is achieved when a performer becomes so proficient with the internal mechanics of the performance that they express the actions and the character’s essential spirit in a natural and subtle manner (Zou, 1985, p. 10). This deep internalization of the character transcends conscious

16 The original text: “离离原上草，一岁一枯荣. 野火烧不尽，春风吹又生. 远芳侵古道，晴翠接荒城. 又送王孙去，萋萋满别情.” Translated by Xu Yuanchong (Xu, 2021, p. 271)

17 As David E. Cooper (2003, p. 63) explains in his work *World Philosophies*, the Chinese word Xin (心), typically translated as "mind", also encompasses the meaning of "heart". This fusion of concepts suggests that Xin might be better translated as "heart-mind" or "thinking heart". This indicates the absence of the dichotomy, familiar in the Western tradition, between the mind as the "organ" of knowledge and the heart as the centre of passion and subjective feeling, thus bridging the "cognitive" and the "affective".

18 The original text: "三形、六劲、心意八、无意者十。"

effort and results in perfect harmony between personal experience and character portrayal.

This proverb illustrates how a performer's heartfelt experience, resonating with the character's emotions, forms a vital bridge between physical movements and the character's inner essence. This connection is facilitated through Jin-strength, a continuous internal force driven by the heart-mind's intention, originating from the waist and extending throughout the body, as described in the proverb: "When the heart-mind thinks, it sets out from the waist, rushes to the ribs, travels to the shoulders, and follows through to the arms"[19] (own translation; Yang, 2002, p. 121).

"Sets out from the waist" refers to the principle of "using the waist as the pivot" (Zou, 1985, p. 8) in Kunqu performance, a concept also fundamental to other Chinese bodily practices such as Tai Chi and martial arts. This approach envisions the human body as a wheel, with physical strength emanating from this central hub to the extremities. Viewing the waist as a wheel, the generation of internal strength from this area creates a circular, cyclical pattern of movement, reminiscent of spiral movements found in nature, akin to the growth of a tree expanding outward in concentric rings from its core and displaying a spiral force as it grows upward while rooting downward.

Spiral patterns are prevalent in nature and play crucial biological and structural roles. The natural principle of “the golden spiral” or “growth spirals” (Olsen, 2009, p. 24), observed in the arrangements of seeds and swirling patterns of galaxies, is celebrated for its aesthetic harmony and mathematical efficiency. It optimizes growth and space utilization in nature, exemplifying continuous and proportional expansion in phenomena such as the unfurling of ferns and the growth of nautilus shells.

Thus, the inner Jin-strength driven by the heart-mind and emitted from the waist can be seen as the core of bodily spiral motion, generating an ideal flow of energy and movement. This mirrors the natural efficiencies observed in the growth patterns of living organisms. In Kunqu movement, the heart-mind serves as a continuous source of physical strength, embodying the Chinese philosophical view on the powerful growth potential of emotional feelings and commitments.

3. Attuning Body and Mind through Nature

In *The Peony Pavilion*, emotional commitment intimately links life and death; it not only leads to death but also promotes life. The play is deeply infused with themes of Eros (the life drive) and Thanatos (the death drive), with the pivotal emotions of love and desire originating from a dream. This interplay between dreams and reality is strikingly portrayed as Du Liniang falls in love with Liu Mengmei within her dream, inspired by her stroll in the spring garden. Her longing persists upon awakening, leading to her death from lovesickness. However, her story continues as Du Liniang’s spirit seeks out her earthly lover, thereby blurring the distinctions between reality and illusion, and between life and death. This narrative powerfully highlights the emotional tension between the forces of life and death. However, in today's world, shaped by a scientific worldview that prioritizes empirical evidence and logical reasoning, the authenticity of experiences within dreams is often questioned. Moreover, the ease with which the characters transition between life and death may seem implausible to contemporary audiences accustomed to scientific explanations.

The seemingly fantastical plotlines of *The Peony Pavilion* deeply resonate with the

19 The original text: “心一想，归于腰，奔于肋，行于肩，跟于臂。”

philosophical ideas of Zhuangzi, exemplifying the intricate interplay of his thoughts. The blurred boundaries between dreams and reality echo the "Butterfly Dream" parable from Zhuangzi's "Qiwulun (On the Equality of Things)," where Zhuangzi, dreaming of becoming a joyously fluttering butterfly, becomes so immersed that he forgets he is Zhuangzi. Upon waking, he is plunged into profound doubts about his own existence: was it Zhuangzi who dreamt of being a butterfly, or is it a butterfly dreaming it is Zhuangzi? This scenario suggests that perhaps the real Zhuangzi is merely a figment of the butterfly's dream (Feng, 2015, pp. 37-38).

The narrative encourages readers to contemplate the essence of existence. Philosophical scholar Yang Lihua (2024) interprets the "Butterfly Dream" parable, noting that in specific contexts, an individual's self-awareness is directly perceptible — I am immediately aware of being "here and now," independently of cognitive processes. This stands in sharp contrast to Descartes' 17th-century assertion "Cogito, ergo sum (I think, therefore I am)" (Descartes, 2004, p. 15), which firmly anchors self-certainty in rational thought. Zhuangzi, who lived approximately 2,000 years earlier, offered a more fluid conception of identity and reality, suggesting that our perceptions, including self-identity, might be as ephemeral as a dream. This ancient perspective invites us to question the permanence of what we consider "real" and our own identity, beyond an individual's existential situation. These reflections, emerging from different epochs and cultural backgrounds, dissolve the barriers between self and others, reality and illusion, urging a reassessment of our understanding of existence through the comparative lens of Eastern and Western philosophies.

Through this narrative, Zhuangzi articulates his philosophy of the "Transformation of Things" (Feng, 2015, p. 38), suggesting that all entities in the world are in constant flux, unbound by absolute distinctions or boundaries. He critiques the binary oppositions commonly established by humans — such as life and death, likes and dislikes, benefit and harm, useful and useless — arguing that these are inherently interconnected and relative (Yang, 2024). In Zhuangzi's view, life and death are not diametrically opposed; rather, they are intertwined processes that continuously transform into one another, highlighting the fluid nature of existence and challenging rigid categorizations.

A similar perspective is evident in Gregory Bateson's *Mind and Nature* (1979), where he explores the concept of the "pattern which connects" (Bateson, 1979, pp. 8-9) to highlight the relational and interdependent nature of all phenomena. Bateson illustrates this idea through the anatomy of crabs and lobsters, explaining how the structure of their claws and legs reflects patterns of symmetry and serial homology — each part defined in relation to others within the organism and across species (Bateson, 1979, pp. 10-11). This relational perspective mirrors Zhuangzi's critique of binary distinctions by demonstrating how apparent separations — such as species boundaries — are subsumed under larger, interconnected patterns. Similarly, Zhuangzi's notion of the interplay between life and death can be seen as part of the broader "pattern" that governs the transformation and unity of existence. Bateson's emphasis on recognizing such interconnected systems enriches our understanding of Zhuangzi's insights into the fluid and relational structure of the world.

Bateson's concept of interconnected systems and Zhuangzi's insights into transformation naturally converge on a broader unifying principle, articulated through the concept of "Dao," which originates in the *Dao De Jing (Laozi*) as the ineffable source of all things (Waley, Chen, & Fu, 1999) and is further elaborated and reinforced in *Zhuangzi* (Fang, 2015). Dao underscores the inherent connection among all entities, serving as both the origin and the foundation for the existence and development of everything, including human life (Editorial Committee of the

KCCTC, 2015, p. 13).

Wang Bi (王弼, 227-249), a philosopher from the Three Kingdoms period, elaborates that Dao is the fundamental essence through which all things must pass, hence its designation as "the Way"[20] (Wang, 1980, p. 624). This principle permeates the cosmos, with every element of the natural world embodying and articulating Dao. Zhuangzi, in his discourse on life and death, aligns human existence with natural phenomena. He likens life and death to the cyclical patterns of day and night (own translation; Feng, 2015, p. 78)[21] — inevitable and integral aspects of the Dao. Within this framework, the natural progression of birth, growth, ageing, and death are viewed as universal processes governed by the Dao.

Based on this understanding, Zhuangzi advocates a philosophical approach to human life. In the chapter "Yang Sheng Zhu (The Fundamentals for the Cultivation of Life)," he asserts that life should be embraced as it comes and released as it goes, following its natural course; thus, those who adapt to these natural changes can attain inner peace and tranquility, remaining undisturbed by the sorrows and joys associated with life and death (own translation; Feng, 2015, p. 43)[22]. Moreover, in the "Da Zong Shi (The Great Teacher)" chapter, he argues that a true sage maintains a detachment from both life and death. He articulates this philosophy as follows:

> *The true sages of ancient times neither rejoiced in life nor detested death. Their arrival in this world was not met with joy, nor did they resist departing it. They simply came and went, freely and naturally. They did not forget the source of life, [preserving it without effort], nor did they seek an ultimate destination, [allowing nature to guide their course].*[23] (own translation; Fang, 2015, p. 95)

This passage reflects Zhuangzi's view that embracing the fluidity of existence without attachment allows one to live in harmony with the universe's inherent rhythms.

Life and death are perennial themes that have intrigued humanity across all ages. Zhuangzi's philosophical views on these subjects have profoundly influenced generations of Chinese scholars, literati, and artists, inspiring them to seek inner balance through an understanding of the Dao. His teachings encourage transcending worldly distinctions and returning to nature in pursuit of unity with the Dao. Zhuangzi's impact on Chinese literature, especially poetry, is significant, as noted by the aesthetician Xu Fuguan (2019). Xu observed that Zhuangzi's spirit of transformation is evident in poetry, which "can endow nature with personification and personhood with naturalization; this enables individuals to find solace in nature — amongst the mountains and rivers" (Xu, 2019, p. 185). Since the Wei and Jin dynasties, Zhuangzi's philosophy of integrating humans with nature has profoundly influenced the essence of Chinese poetry (Xu, 2019, p. 184). The notion that literature is an extension of nature has remained central to literary theory (Chang & Owen, 2010, p. 6), leading poets to frequently employ natural scenes to articulate their emotions and heartfelt thoughts. This practice forges a deep connection between emotional expression and the natural world.

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20 As Wang Bi (1980, p.624) explains, "Dao is the name of nothingness, [the way] leading to everything, through which everything passes, and which is silent, formless, and beyond depiction." The original text: "道者，无之称也，无不通也，无不由也，况之曰道，寂然无体，不可为象."

21 The original text:"死生，命也，其有夜旦之常，天也。"

22 The original text: "适来，夫子时也，适去，夫子顺也. 安时处顺，哀乐不能入也。"

23 The original text: "古之真人，不知说生，不知恶死. 其出不欣，其入不距. 翛然而往，翛然而来而已矣. 不忘其所始，不求其所终。"

In *The Peony Pavilion*, numerous classic lyrics embody this poetic tradition, exemplified by these lines:

> *Originally, a riot of deep purple and bright red blooms profusely,*
>
> *now they merely adorn the crumbling well and ruined walls.*
>
> *How can such fine times and beautiful views be squandered,*
>
> *and who will savor these delightful moments within their courtyards?*[24] (own translation; Tang, 2016, p. 78)

Here, the poet contrasts the vibrant beauty of blossoms against a backdrop of decay. This depiction not only highlights the misplacement of beauty but also mourns the transient nature of beauty, the impermanence of youth, and the inevitable demise of life, emphasizing the value of cherished moments. This mode of expression, where emotions, thoughts, and natural scenes are intricately linked, vividly encapsulates Zhuangzi's philosophy of integration with nature. Through these evocative portrayals of nature, poets explore enduring themes of life, love, and natural beauty, infusing their poetry with rich emotional depth and philosophical insights.

In Kunqu performance, the essential harmony with nature and its artistic embodiment, deeply rooted in the traditions of classical Chinese poetry, leads to the vivid portrayal of natural settings. Traditional Kunqu stages are starkly minimalist, sometimes devoid of any set decorations or furnished merely with a table and two chairs, which can symbolize a variety of settings such as a mansion, temple, mountain, or even a well. The transformation of these sparse spaces into rich, elaborate environments depends largely on the performers' actions, occasionally supported by their singing. Therefore, the authenticity of these movements is critical in capturing the audience's attention and drawing them into the narrative, effectively transforming the simple stage into a vibrant, dynamic tableau.

Here is the video link to the performance featuring the scene where Du Liniang strolls through the garden (Bai, 2007):

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Hzv9QjZUSWgjtdN0XtFkAj212qJiYPPe/view?usp=sharing

The art of movement vividly brings to life the natural landscapes described in the lyrics of Kunqu performances. For instance, in the scene where Du Liniang strolls through the garden, the lyrics evoke natural elements like "threads of rain and gusts of wind (雨丝风片)." Here, the actor steps backwards while using a fan to shield their face three times, effectively capturing the sensation of wind and rain. In another moment, as the lyrics paint a picture of "painted boats gliding in misty waves (烟波画船)," the performer employs a technique known as "cloud steps (云步, yún bù)" (Jin, 2020, p. 110). This makes the footwork graceful and smooth, akin to a boat gently sailing on a lake. The performer's hands, holding a fan and drawing tiny figure-eights, simulate the action of rowing, transforming the actor into an embodiment of the boat.

Furthermore, some movements exquisitely blend reaction and simulation. For example, during the lyrics "around the rubus blossoms, silky mist drunkenly softens (荼蘼外烟丝醉软)," the performer first addresses the "rubus blossoms," which she locates in her mind's eye to her upper right. Then, with hands entwined, she mimics the encircling mist, gracefully moving towards the direction of the envisioned flowers. After pausing in a posture, her relaxed waist

24 The original text: "原来姹紫嫣红开遍，似这般都付与断井颓垣。良辰美景奈何天，赏心乐事谁家院！"

elegantly traces delicate circles, dynamically guiding her upper limbs to create a soft, inebriated demeanor, thus simulating the mesmerizing effect of the mist.

In Kunqu movement, where responsive and imitative actions towards natural elements intertwine, the audience's immersion into the poetic and atmospheric scenes is deepened. Is it a person that inhabits this natural scene, or is it a landscape crafted by the human mind? The boundaries between subjective perception and objective reality are blurred, forging a profound affinity between humans and nature. On a stage devoid of sets and backdrops, the performers' movements transform the empty space into a verdant spring garden, alive with nature's vitality. This transformation resonates with Zhuangzi's philosophy of the integration between humans and nature.

The embodiment of Zhuangzi's ideas can be seen in the way performers physically express and navigate complex emotional landscapes through their movements, which are not just performative but deeply introspective and philosophical. The natural imagery woven through Kunqu movements imparts a beauty that transcends earthly confines — a beauty derived from human emotional engagement yet surpassing it, probing the essence of life. This aesthetic, deeply anchored in human existence yet ethereal and subtle, emerges from a reverent interaction with nature, crafting an allure that is both fleeting and profound. This approach not only showcases the depth of traditional Chinese artistic expression but also serves as a philosophical exploration of the interplay between existence and perception.

4. Conclusion

This paper situates *The Peony Pavilion* within the broader discourse of somaesthetics, enhancing our understanding of how Kunqu dance navigates the complex interplay between the forces of life and death.

The investigation highlights the central importance of emotional expression in Kunqu dance and its critical role in shaping the integrated system of Kunqu Opera. By synthesizing the perspectives of Tang Xianzu and Wassily Kandinsky, it addresses the spiritual dimension in artistic exploration and the expression of emotional depths. The paper further examines the deep connection between emotional commitment and existential experience. By linking the concept of Eros with the Chinese term Qing (情), it bridges cultural and philosophical gaps in elucidating the vital role that emotional engagements play in life and art. Additionally, it explores Zhuangzi's reflections on life and death, revealing how his insights into nature's integration shape the body-mind-nature paradigm in Kunqu dance, thereby enriching the artistic spirit and narrative depth.

The exploration illustrates how bodily practice in Kunqu dance transcends mere physicality to engage with deeper metaphysical and existential themes, blending physical presence with philosophical depth. This enriches the discourse on how dance and performance can serve as profound mediums for existential understanding and aesthetic appreciation.

Furthermore, this study reinforces how the art form's focus on emotional expression and its harmonious alignment with nature embodies somaesthetic principles. In Kunqu, the detailed attention to the body's movements and expressions extends beyond mere performance; it engages with deeper levels of somatic awareness. These practices resonate with the natural rhythms and cycles of life, embodying a form of aesthetic mindfulness central to somaesthetic philosophy. Such alignment not only enhances the performer's sensory and emotional engagement but also deepens the audience's experiential understanding, bridging the internal experiences of dancers

with the external expressions of the dance. This integration of body, mind, and environment in Kunqu provides a vivid example of how traditional artistic forms can encapsulate and advance contemporary somaesthetic discussions, offering rich insights into the lived experience of both performers and spectators.

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Somaesthetics and Dance: The Convergence of Bharatanatyam and Yoga in *Kundalini Pattu*

Pooja Sunil, Vinod Balakrishnan

Abstract: *This paper is a Somaesthetic evaluation of Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga, a dance performance portraying the spirit of Kundalini as a creation of life and life forces after death. The discussion laid out in three sections uses Shusterman's philosophy of Analytic, Pragmatic and Practical somaesthetics to evaluate the two performances of this choreography, one featuring Guru Reshmi Narayanan and the other her students. The study attempts to establish the disciplining of the soma as a necessary condition for the attainment of aesthetic perfection in Bharatanatyam, the South Indian classical dance tradition.*

Keywords: *Somaesthetics, Dance, Bharatanatyam, Yoga, Kundalini*

1. Analytical Somaesthetics: Proposal for a Somaesthetic Examination of Bharatanatyam and *Kundalini* Yoga

Somaesthetics, originally conceived by Richard Shusterman as being under the aegis of philosophy and aesthetics, is derived from the Greek words for 'body' (soma) and 'aesthetics'. Provisionally, in his essay, "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal", this interdisciplinary endeavour is described as "the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory- aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning." (Shusterman, 1999, p. 299). At its core, Somaesthetics studies are grounded heavily in bodily perceptions, performances and presentations that heighten the individual's artistic appreciation and creation. It is "devoted to the knowledge, discourses, practices, and bodily disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it" (Shusterman, 1999, p. 299). This enhances somatic consciousness on the perceptual familiarity of meanings and human sentiments, ultimately elevating everyday experiences.

Three principal dimensions envelop the field of Somaesthetics: Analytic Somaesthetics which describes the basic "nature of somatic perceptions and comportment and their function in our knowledge, action, and construction of the world" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 42); Pragmatic Somaesthetics constituting the analytic dimension and as such proposes the "means to improve certain facts by remaking the body and the environing social habits and

frameworks that shape it" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 43); and Practical Somaesthetics focused on practising somatic care "through disciplined, reflective, corporeal practice aimed at somatic self-improvement" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 45). Practical Somaesthetics is about training the body with such care that the intelligently disciplined entity is moulded for somatic self-improvement in a performative mode. It is in this that Shusterman points out art like yoga and dance as embodying practices of somaesthetics that foster bodily care and excellence.

Originating in ancient India, 'Yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'Yuj', which means 'to unite'. It is commonly perceived to be a practice that unites the body, mind and breath. In its spiritual sense, yoga can be described as "the Divine Science which disentangles the Jiva from the phenomenal world of sense-objects and links him with the *Ananta Ananda* (Infinite Bliss), *Parama Shanti* (Supreme Peace)" (Sivananda, 1994, p. 3). The most popular yoga style is hatha yoga, with its three main goals being: "(1) the total purification of the body, (2) the complete balancing of the physical, mental, and energetic fields, and (3) the awakening of purer consciousness" (Stephens, 2010, p. 17). Therefore, Hatha Yoga practitioners avail both physical health benefits and improved mental health.

A section of the Yogis believe that Hatha Yoga builds up its philosophy around *Kundalini*, a dormant spiritual energy that lies at the base of the spine awakened by Yoga. Through the practice of Hatha Yoga, a yogi seeks to attain "a body which shall be as strong as steel, healthy, free from suffering and therefore, long-lived", thereby making him the master of his own body and "the master of both life and death" (Sivananda, 1994, p. xxii). The rise of kundalini in the body would mean one has found the means to tap into the energy within them, embracing life (Eros) and escaping death (Thanatos). Through a *Kundalini* awakening, the practitioner can transcend physical limitations and conquer the fear of death. Yoga plays a dominant role in activating *Kundalini*, the inner energy. By embracing the spirit of *Kundalini*, yoga practitioners realise their true potential. It speeds up the process of being the finest by achieving steadiness in body, mind, emotions and energy.

Interestingly, Shusterman views the practice of yoga as sharing similarities with the art of dance. Both deploy the same focused body consciousness. Dance, like Yoga, requires the performer to adopt somatic practices that build bodily attributes such as flexibility, balance and physical strength. The bodily system of the practitioners permits them to embrace bodily sensations along with a deeper appreciation of the art form, as the "dancer's body belongs as much to the ends as to the means of the dance work" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 45). Dance as an art form therefore becomes the "most paradigmatic of somatic arts" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 8), steering the way for the improvement of muscle memory and proprioception.

The sense of bodily motion, often referred to as the 'sixth sense' or proprioception, involves body position in space. This sense of space "does not directly depend on a specific sensory organ but is instead essentially the product of multisensory representations that build up a spatial map through a learning process, implicit or explicit" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 94). This attribute of the body is critical to dancers since they need to estimate where they are in space. It helps them monitor and adjust the positioning of their arms, feet, and legs accurately. Over time, these dance movements become unthinking and "philosophers recognize that such intelligent spontaneity is not mere uneducated reflex but rather the acquired product of somatically sedimented habit" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 94). These repetitive skills called muscle memory, become another important bodily attribute tied to dance. Thus, both proprioception and muscle memory eventually contribute to the understanding of bodily awareness in the

practice of traditional dances such as the Indian classical dance, Bharatanatyam.

A Bharatanatyam practitioner perceives the living body as the site of movement. Primarily a forte of devadasis, this art form does not just make use of space, time, and form. It also discloses the dancer's spatial and temporal aspects, such as rhythm, kinetic bodily logos, and movements. Bodily attributes differ from one individual to the other, and as such, the dancer's strength, size, shape, height, length of the legs, energy level, and muscularity are known to affect individual performances. For an expert Bharatanatyam dance performance, a heightened awareness of the proprioceptive factors is demanded, wherein the dancer rehearses with the body which becomes an outward gesture of the internal sensations:

> *Superior stage performances demand from the dancer a compound consciousness: that of the movements and imagined feelings of the character he dances but also that of his own somaesthetic feelings. These feelings include his proprioceptive sense of posture and facial expression, his sense of contact with the floor and position on the stage, his kinesthetic sense of movement and gestural style, his sense of energy level and degree of fatigue. Total absorption in the illusory world of the performed role will make him blind to the real-world stage context and his own somatic conditions, awareness of which is crucial to successful performance. (Shusterman, 2019, p. 157)*

Thus, Bharatanatyam is an art form in which the body and mind are deeply co-dependent.

Each dance movement in Bharatanatyam is structured to follow the rhythmic patterns that are defined by music and narrative. The dancer's limbs and expressions convey a myriad of emotions embedded in the song amalgamating footwork, the vocalist's timbre, poses, the rhythm of the music, the body language, costumes designed for the performance, and the aesthetics. All blend to express and communicate the underlying text as a dancer's "actions are not merely means to create the work as an artistic object and aesthetic end; instead, those actions, with their expressive qualities, are essential parts of that object and end" (Shusterman, 2019, p. 145).

This paper focuses on situating dance, particularly the Bharatanatyam performance of *Kundalini Pattu* in Shusterman's somaesthetics. Shusterman asserts that if soma is our ultimate and necessary instrument for creating and appreciating art, then art would be an appropriate vehicle to train this instrument to perceive and perform more effectively (Banerjee & Fiala., 2020, p. 78). This is exemplified in Bharatanatyam as an art form that requires the disciplining of the body through training to enhance bodily awareness and performance. To study the vision of Bharatanatyam as far as bodily awareness is concerned and to ascertain the demands on the body for performance to reach perfection, this paper draws from two videos of Bharatanatyam performances under the production of Sree Shankara School of Dance, located in Kalady, Kerala.

The first video selected for study features Guru Reshmi Narayanan's tenth-year performance of her magnum opus, *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga*, on the *Kundalini* song at Thrissur Nelluvai Sri. Dhanwadhari Temple on 4th January 2017. This was choreographed by Natyashastra Guru C P Unnikrishnan. Since 2007, this composition has been performed by Reshmi Narayanan as a solo and duet in over a hundred arenas across South India. Incidentally, one of the authors is a direct disciple of Guru Reshmi Narayanan. The wide

appeal of this production is attributed to its employment of marvellous lighting effects by C P Unnikrishnan and its captivating music. The second video taken for this study is of Sree Sankara School of Dance's special production performed by Guru Reshmi Narayan's students, as part of the International Yoga Day in 2021. It is selected for analysis to show how the seasoned Bharatanatyam dancer's performance demonstrates superior muscle memory, heightened proprioceptive sense, adequate velocity of movements, and cultivated balance.

The composition titled *Kundalini Pattu* (see Appendix for the transliteration and translation of the text) is a renowned mystic work of Sree Narayana Gurudeva, one of the greatest sages and social reformers of India, about *Kundalini Shakthi. Kundalini Pattu* is composed to evoke the divine spiritual power residing in every human being. It is a poem elucidating the mystic experience of the individual's personality in union with the universal, setting forth the six phases of the Yoga Sadhana of Patanjali. Also known as the 'Song of the Serpent Power', the concept of *Kundalini* envisages the serpent to have embodied and transformed into a figure that holds itself as an *atmeeya sakti,* meaning soul-force, and then goes on to explain how the six steps are esoteric stages in the ascent towards divine ecstasy. The music resembles *Pampatti Chindu*, a song sung in the demotic language of the common folk that elaborates on spiritual experiences. The dance movements incorporated into this music are seamlessly sewn together depending on the body structure of each performer. This helps them derive certain benefits from yoga postures and demands body-controlled breathing routines. The contributions of Bharatanatyam and Yoga intermingling in the performance lead to a vocabulary of body shapes inspired by yoga.

The union of Yoga and Bharatanatyam dance aids the practitioner in evoking the spirit of *Kundalini* via superior concentration, bestowing them with bodily strength and a calm mind. Moreover, a close somatic analysis of the choreography *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga* incorporating Yoga postures is done to prove that both Yoga and Bharatanatyam draw from each other, creating a heightened somaesthetic field. The distinction between the varying executions of the same choreography, the teacher in comparison to her students, employs Shusterman's theory of somaesthetics in examining factors such as movement velocity, proprioception, muscle memory and bodily balance. It further tells us how Bharatanatyam as an art form demands a disciplined, reflective, and corporeal practice that will eventually contribute towards somatic self-improvement. In essence, this paper attempts to prove that the fusion of Yoga and Bharatanatyam in the performance *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga* demonstrates the theory of somaesthetics in terms of an elevated somatic experience, facilitating the awakening of *Kundalini shakti* and sharpening various physical attributes through disciplined reflective training.

2. Pragmatic Somaesthetics: The Convergence of Bharatanatyam and Yoga in *Kundalini Pattu*: A Dance-Yoga

Both Yoga and Bharatanatyam are products of *Sanātana Dharma,* an endonym used to refer to Hinduism. Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* contemplates not just the physical aspects of Bharatanatyam as a dance form but also its spiritual and stylistic dimensions. The Bharatanatyam legend, Balasaraswathi observes, "Bharatanatyam is an artistic Yoga (*Natya Yoga)*, for revealing the spiritual through the corporeal" (Marchand, 2006, p. 178). Therefore, Somaesthetics is pragmatically effective for the analysis of classical dance forms such as

Bharatanatyam, which contributes towards the movement of individuals in terms of spiritual evolution from human to superhuman and ultimately to the Divine, akin to Yoga. Moreover, both Yoga and Bharatanatyam emphasise disciplined training methods making somaesthetics vital for analysing how these art forms build somatic awareness.

The aim of somaesthetics is "to correct the actual functioning performance of our senses by an improved direction of one's body since the senses belong to and are conditioned by the soma" (Mullis, 2006). In the performance of Bharatanatyam, various *Asanas* (postures) and *Pranayamas* (breathing routines) from Yoga are useful in creating a sense of lightness and improving the dexterity of the dancer. Yoga postures - spinal twists such as *Vakrasana*, back bending postures like *Chakrasana*, and forward bending postures such as *Paschimottanasana* – when incorporated into Bharatnatyam, ensure greater flexibility of the body.

This bond between Yoga and Bharatanatyam is reflected in Practical somaesthetics - "disciplined bodywork aimed at somatic self-improvement" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 307). Both disciplines demand from their trainees intense concentration and balance throughout the training period. This helps achieve perfection in performance by fostering the human body-mind connection:

> *The perfectionist project of aesthetics…requires a systematic program of instruction that includes two branches. The first (askesis or exercitatio aesthetica) is a program of practical exercise or training. Here, through repetitive drills of certain kinds of actions, one learns to instil harmony of mind with respect to a given theme or thought. (Shusterman, 1999, p. 300)*

To enhance the body's somatic functioning through Bharatanatyam and Yoga, one must undergo assiduous training, which entails regular practice of the prescribed exercises. With the help of Yoga and Bharatanatyam, the body becomes a finely tuned instrument, allowing the dancer to perform any movement effortlessly and gracefully.

For this mastery, one must have a deeper knowledge of the foundational principles of Bharatanatyam - *Nritya, Nritta* and *Bhava*, that provide a framework for the dancer's expressive vocabulary. Furthermore, the vocabulary of body shapes inspired by Yoga in the performance of Bharatanatyam elevates the dancer's physical capabilities allowing them to fine-tune the technique involved. Delving deeper, this union of Yoga and Bharatanatyam in the choreography, *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga,* aligns the dancer's body with spirituality. This enables pragmatic somaesthetics to trace the dancer's journey towards increased somaesthetic awareness and ultimately, *Kundalini* awakening.

2.1 The origin of *Nritya, Nritta and Bhava*

In India, most forms of art, including Bharatanatyam dance form, are traditional and have a religious origin. Indian classical dances evoke inner beauty or sacred godliness in humans, as in religion, primarily through the body as an instrument of communication. Bharatanatyam, a seamless meld of *Nritta* (the rhythm of dance also known as pure dance), *Nritya* (rhythmic elements along with expression which forms the interpretive aspect of dance) and *Natya* (the theatrical aspect of dance used to enact the narrative), began to take root in the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Put together, they communicate to the audience both physical and emotional aspects of the dance's narrative.

Nritta in Bharatanatyam is structured to follow the rhythmic patterns that are defined by music and narrative. It is a "form of dance which is void of flavour (rasa) and mood (bhava)" ("The Mirror of Gesture, Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara," 1917, p. 14). The dancer's hands and facial gestures become the language to recite the legends or historical dramas, thereby conveying emotions. The footwork, body language, postures, musical notes, tones of the vocalist, aesthetics and costumes blend to portray and communicate the underlying text.

Nritya, on the other hand, is the "narrative theatrical element communicated through the dancer's bodily features such as eyes, hands, and the face. It therefore possesses flavour, mood, and suggestion (*rasa, bhava, vyanjana* etc.), and the like" ("The Mirror of Gesture, Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara," 1917, p. 14). Most dance forms are an amalgamation of *Nritta* and *Nritya*, both of which are highly dependent on the body.

Abhinaya (gestures), depicting *Rasa* (sentiment) and *Bhava* (mood), is a part of *Nritya. Abhinaya*, the patterned expression of *Bhava* and the narrative element, makes use of *Mudras* (hand gestures), *Bhanga* (body postures) and *Rasa* (facial expressions) to communicate with the audience. *Rasa* is thus evoked from the body of the dancer, which in turn creates a sentimental effect in the viewers. *Rasa* is further nuanced by *Abhinaya*, which is divided into *Aangika* (bodily), *Vachika* (vocal), and *Aahaarya* (ornamental).

Angika abhinaya is the "exposition employing the gestures of the body and limbs" ("The Mirror of Gesture, Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara," 1917, p. 17). In Bharatanatyam, the three elements of bodily gestures originate from the limbs, parts of the body, and features (*anga, pratyanga, and upang*a). In *Angabhinaya*, "the head, hands, armpits, sides, waist, and feet, these six, and some say also the neck, are called the limbs" ("The Mirror of Gesture, Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara," 1917, p. 17). In *Pratyangabhinaya* the "shoulders, shoulder-blades, arms, back, stomach, thighs and calves, some say also three others, the wrists, knees, and elbows, are the parts of the body ("The Mirror of Gesture, Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara," 1917, p. 18). In *Upangabhinaya*, the "eyes, eyelids, pupils, cheeks, nose, jaw, the lips, teeth, tongue, chin, face, these eleven are the features. Besides these are the accessories, such as the heel, ankle, fingers and toes, and palms" ("The Mirror of Gesture, Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara," 1917, p. 18) that become accessories useful in describing the dance narrative. These movements and bodily gestures are intrinsic to *Rasa*. They play a pivotal role in the ability of the Bharatnatyam performer to convey the essence of dance.

Theorists hold varying opinions over the use of *rasa* in dance. Rudolf Arnheim argues that the perception of expression is much too immediate and compelling to be explainable merely as a product of learning. Therefore, he states that emotions such as sadness are inherent and are perceived by the viewer through the dancer's movements: the "whole body may dramatically collapse, head and arms may droop, to create visible sadness for our eyes and feelings" (Arnheim, 1975, p. 263). This argument aligns with Shusterman's understanding of the role of expression in the somatic comprehension of dance, wherein every movement is said to have originated from the soma. Therefore, in analyzing the act of dancing, *Rasa* and *Bhava* are seen to be drawn from somatic experiences. They originate from the human body and create a foundation for artistic meaning.

2.2 The vocabulary of body shapes in *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga* inspired by Yoga

The Bharatanatyam dance production of *Kundalini Pattu* employs a vocabulary of body shapes inspired by Yoga, thereby contributing to the intermingling of Bharatanatyam and Yoga. A string of Yoga asanas are brought together in a sequence of movements in the performance, which include: *Balasana, Janu Sirsasana,* and *Trikonasana*. Each of these asanas is vital to meet the precision expected from a Bharatanatyam practitioner. As such, they provide varying benefits that enhance the classical dancer's physical conditioning and help them deliver an exceptional performance.

In this particular production by Sree Sankara School of Dance, movements were choreographed depending upon the body structure to derive some benefits from a few yoga postures and controlled breathing patterns. *Balasana* or the child's pose releases tension in the hands, chest and shoulder. It aids the dancer as it increases "the blood circulation to the head region, steps up the efficiency of the nervous system, sharpens the audio visual capacity and the power of concentration. It limbers spine, knees, legs, and strengthens the muscles on neck back, thighs and the abdomen" (Abraham, 2008, p. 113).

Janushirsasana calms the body and mind. It helps in "curing back pain, loosening the joints, reducing fat especially on the stomach region, maintain perfect body figure, digestion become easy, better relief from diabetes, gas trouble and low blood pressure. Stimulating blood circulation and strengthen the whole body" (Abraham, 2008, p. 109). Hence, it straightens the spine, liver, spleen, hamstrings, and shoulders of the dancer, providing better agility, reducing the pain in the waist and legs and helping get rid of excess fat in the belly.

Trikonasana elevates stability and activates the core muscles by "strengthening the legs, ribs and hands. It tones up the muscles of the legs, hands, shoulders, sides of the body and neck, eliminates the deposited fat from the waistline, expands the lungs, and chest, stretches the back, abdomen, shoulders, arms and legs" (Abraham, 2008, p. 125) which provides increased body flexibility by bringing down the stiffness in the individual's spine and the back.

Several asanas are seamlessly incorporated into the dance movements of *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga* to help develop flexibility and strength. One such pose, The Reverse Prayer Yoga or Penguin Pose, also known as *Pashchima Namaskarasana,* with which the performance of *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga* commences, is shown in Figure 1. The dancer, with precision, performs this on stage by joining both her hands to form a namaskar gesture behind her back (Narayanan, 2017, 00:24). There are several bodily benefits to this pose as it is an upper body posture that "brings stability to the body, removes stiffness in the neck, shoulders, elbows and wrist." (Kavya, 2016, p.62). This pose that strengthens the upper body helps one to breathe easily and maintain a high energy level. Additionally, the shoulder movement helps build up the strength of wrist tendons.

Figure 1 Reshmi Narayanan in the Reverse Prayer Yoga Pose, 2017

The *Reverse Prayer Yoga* pose also massages and loosens any tight shoulder muscles and relaxes the shoulder blades. This means no shoulder or neck pain for those who practice it regularly. This pose prepares dancers for the intense physical demands during the several practice hours of the choreography. In his "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal", Shusterman notes, that cultivating the habit of regular practice through somaesthetics can "reveal and improve somatic malfunctioning that normally go undetected even though they impair our wellbeing and performance" (Shusterman, 1999, p. 302). A regular practice of *Pashchima Namaskarasana* can help the dancer avoid hip, back, shoulder, neck and knee-related problems that are seen pervading the modern dance world.

The performance of *Kundalini Pattu* also incorporates the *One-Legged King Pigeon Pose,* otherwise known as *Eka Pada Rajakapotasana*, as depicted in Figure 2. The performer does a half split with one leg stretched back so the top of the foot presses into the stage mat and the other leg is bent, resting on the ground. The torso is lifted, opening the chest, with a slight arch in the back and the hands above the head. A movement is composed out of this yoga posture wherein the dancer's hand gestures are tuned to the rhythm of the *Pambatti chinthu* music, and she shifts sides performing the same sequence of movements (Narayanan, 2017, 01:01- 01:58). For many individuals, this pose acts as a deep hip opener.

Figure 2 Reshmi Narayanan performing the One-Legged King Pigeon Pose, 2017

The hips are known to be the central hub of movement in one's body. When the hips are tight, it means that there is reduced movement in them, and the spine experiences physical inconvenience. Hip-opening yoga postures are important as they "increase the external, or outward, rotation of the femur bone in the hip socket" (Rizopoulos, 2021). The widening of this body part helps enhance the circulation to the lower extremities, thereby giving a better range of movement. This benefits the dancer. Yoga thus enhances somaesthetic awareness preparing the Bharatanatyam dancer's body to perform difficult sequences in the choreography.

2.3 The Dancer's path to *Kundalini*

The practice of Yoga postures evokes superior concentration among dancers. This concentration, when intensified, leads us into the meditative state of *Dhyana* (Meditation). The different aspects of Bharatanatyam, such as *Nritta, Nritya* and *Natya*, must be seamlessly unified with great concentrative ability for the performance to peak in its intensity. Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani, a Yogini as well as a distinguished Bharatanatyam artist, comments on the Yogic psyche of this ancient Indian classical art form:

> *Bharatanatyam is a Yoga, if Yoga means union. For surely this ancient art is one of the most beautiful and satisfying ways of expressing the human longing for union with the Divine. As an art form, Bharatanatyam demands conscious understanding of body, mind and emotions. The sincere dancer must understand the nature of Bhakti and Jnana and the innate longing in all living creatures for Samadhi or cosmic consciousness. (Bhavnani & Bhavnani, n.d.)*

This aids the performer to tap into the spirit of *Kundalini* and embrace its power thereby building a greater connection between the body and the divine.

The dancer who achieves intense concentration in performance evokes the spirit of *Kundalini* and "has both *Bhukti* (enjoyment) and *Mukti* (liberation) in the fullest and literal sense" (Sivananda, 1994, p. 4). It liberates the spirit of *Kundalini* in the dancer's body alongside artistic expression leading to somatic self-improvement. By elevating the performer to the state of *Kundalini*, the Bharatanatyam performance becomes a harmonious union of body, mind and spirit. The classical dancer thus attains a state of utmost concentration and heightened spiritual awareness during the performance of *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga* due to the fusion of Bharatnatyam and Yoga-inspired postures.

3. Practical Somaesthetics: Somaesthetic execution of two versions of *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga*

In this section, Smt. Reshmi Narayanan's tenth-year performance of her masterpiece composition *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga* under the production of Sree Sankara School of Dance, Kalady is contrasted with the collective performance of the same choreography by her students as part of the International Yoga Day celebration. The two videos are compared based on the dancers' muscle memory, movement velocity, balance and finally, proprioceptive sense. Here, one will look at the distinction between the varying executions and try to examine them based on the above-mentioned factors and the demands on the body for the performance to reach perfection.

3.1 Muscle Memory

Muscle memory, procedural memory or motor memory makes it easy for a dancer to perform without conscious deliberation. Here, individuals do not have to explicitly think of the action, in order to perform it. They have internalized, through mindful iterations, a habit of performing for somaesthetic realization. Muscle memory aids the individual to perform:

> *various motor procedures or skills in an automatic or spontaneous fashion, without conscious deliberation of how the procedure should be followed and without any explicit calculation how one identifies and achieves the various steps involved in the procedure and how one proceeds from step to step". (Shusterman, 2012, p.91))*

This type of memory results in the mastery of performances such as dancing, which becomes similar to the performance of sequential everyday tasks such as walking, eating, and running. In an art form such as Bharatanatyam, the skill of muscle memory is honed through years of practice and training.

The Teacher's Performance. It is evident in the performance of *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga*, that the teacher possesses a superior muscle memory. Guru Reshmi Narayanan has been training in Bharatanatyam from the age of six under the guidance of her Guru, Sudha Peethambaran, who is also a well-known Mohiniyattam danseuse and the Director of Sree Sankara School of Dance, Kalady. Since she has been learning the art form since 1993, years of rigorous training have brought to her body heightened muscle memory and reaction time. Not once does Reshmi Narayanan forget the choreography or depart from the set array of steps. She executes her moves with ease, unthinking and instinctive since the "movement sequences become automated with practice" (Stevens et al., 2019, p. 18). Since she has performed in over a hundred stages across South India, it has become the habit of Merleau-Ponty. For her, the choreography has become second nature. Merleau Ponty's idea of the 'lived body' as " a vehicle of being in the world" through its "perpetual engagement therein" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p. 86) is evident here as the teacher's movements are not merely physical but a result of embodied consciousness.

The Students' Performance. Unlike the teacher, the students display inconsistencies in the execution of the choreography due to varying degrees of muscle memory. One reason for this lack of fluidity could be the fact that the degree of displacement "from the benchmark sequence may influence whether or not the dancer can continue to link the movements" and the other could be a less accurate recall of the sequences which might lead to "a relatively minor error of detail" disrupting the recall process (Stevens et al., 2019, p. 26). The students' muscle memory is clearly in the developing stage. They have had less rehearsal time as opposed to their Guru. Hence, they need improvement with a focus on quality.

Strategies for Improvement. To promote muscle memory, the students can choose a small part of the choreography and keep mindfully repeating until the steps and postures come naturally to their bodies. A practice session of one hour daily with a focused repetition of specific parts of the choreography is recommended to attain this. Regular practice, which "marks the beginning of phrases or sections within the dance, or significant moments of change in the form of the work might be expected to aid movement recall" (Stevens et al., 2019, p. 19). This aids the body to internalise the movement sequences. This gives way to motor intentionality, "characterised as conscious perception without explicit awareness" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 54), where repetition of movements places the dancer's motor skills deeper into their body's embodied consciousness.

Therefore, muscle memory gradually builds up if the individual regularly practices, correctly and mindfully.

3.2 Movement Velocity

Movement velocity in dance indicates how fast and in what direction the dancer's body is moving. It is a feature of dance that is closely tied to musicality. The alignment of movements in the choreography of *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga* with the rhythm of music is important for a seamless performance.

The Teacher's Performance. While the Guru exhibits impeccable synchronisation with the rhyhm, her students are seen to exhibit inconsistent pacing. While building on the array of steps to create a movement, the teacher performs with precision as she lunges her back, bending forward, and moves her palms to the rhythm of the *kundalini* music (Narayanan, 2017, 5:37-5:43). Her effortless pacing of steps is a reflection of her sharp sense of timing. This is a display of her "purposive understanding and intelligent intentional action" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 54) built with years of practice.

The Students' Performance. In contrast, the students fall short of meeting the movement velocity demands of the choreography. While performing the sequence of steps starting from the *Anjanayasana* yoga posture, also known as the Crescent Moon Pose, or *Ashwa Sanchalanasana,* the students seem to move at different speeds (Sudha's Sree Sankara School of Dance, Kalady, 2021, 1:00-1:11). Some faster than the rest. This demonstrates a lack of synchronization of the dance movement to the music. It is the lesser technical abilities of the students in comparison to their teacher, that makes them unable to understand that the movement velocity should be slowly paced to match the musical notes of *Kundalini Patt*u. Furthermore, the difference in movement velocity exhibited by the students might be the result of the lack of familiarity with the movement cues from the music.

Strategies for Improvement. A metronome could be handy for cultivating the required movement velocity in dance. As a prescription, one should never try to learn or practice the entire choreography in one go, but practice with cues, which will lead to a better performance. A practice time of 30 minutes per day focusing on aligning movements with the music tempo is advised for the same. Regular and hard practice helps develop "a more conscious level of bodily perception" that can be "characterized as conscious perception without explicit awareness" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 54). This is a vital factor that contributes towards the sharpening of dance moves set against specific musical notes. So with time, the students will be able to synchronise their movements with the *Kundalini* music better and showcase fluidity like their teacher.

3.3 Balance

Balance "is the ability to maintain the centre of gravity of the body while minimizing the postural sway, which is "achieved through the coordination of multiple body systems- motor and sensory" (Penkar & Sadhale, 2020, p. 92). A Bharatanatyam dancer must continuously deal with changes in bodily stances during performances, thus increasing the chances of dance movements affecting their balance. For a dance performance to be perfect, a classical dancer's body demands high core strength and stability.

The Teacher's Performance. Guru Reshmi Narayanan exhibits exceptional bodily control, providing precise direction to her movements. On her part, the teacher executes a succession of movements right after the *Bhujangatrasita karana* pose effectively (Narayanan, 2017, 3:48-

3:56). This is a result of controlled practice with sincere and consistent efforts taken to engage core strength. Over time, the dance practice and exercises done to attain balance in which she habitually engages incorporate their "instruments into themselves and make them play a part in the original structure" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p.104) of her own body. Thus, the teacher remains poised and stable during the movement transitions.

The Students' Performance. Opposed to their teacher, the students are still on the learning curve to achieve her level of bodily control to maintain balance in their performance. As such, a student is seen losing balance while performing a movement right after the *Nataraja* or Dancing Shiva posture (Sudha's Sree Sankara School of Dance, Kalady, 2021, 2:06-2:08). Here, the student's insufficient core stability, as a result of lesser years of training in the dance form, makes her unable to meet the requirements of the intricate movement. With lower core engagement as a result of fewer practice hours devoted, they end up losing balance while performing.

Strategies for Improvement. The student's challenge in maintaining a balanced posture highlights the need for consistency and hard training that builds core strength. To hold the various posture and effortlessly perform the sequences that follow, a dancer requires high flexibility and mastery over bodily movement achieved by "practising and training" that "makes for better balance and ease of dance" (Penkar & Sadhale, 2020, p. 95). Thus, core-strengthening exercises that span 15-20 minutes should be introduced into the students' training regime. This must be followed by the practice of choreography for 30 minutes. By ensuring that this routine is followed, the students will begin to exhibit precise posture transitions, thereby improving their core strength and gaining balance in movements. Balance and stability thus become a habit. This can only be achieved through years of monitored training in the dance form because "it is the body which 'catches' (kapiert) and 'comprehends' movement. The acquisition of a habit is indeed the grasping of a significance, but it is the motor grasping of a motor significance" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p. 165).

3. 4 Proprioceptive Senses

In classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, the kinaesthetic sense or proprioceptive sense, terms often used interchangeably in the dance world, assume a salient and dominant role. It forms part of the motor performance and refers to how:

> *we are somehow aware of our own movement, of the position of our bodies and the parts of our bodies by means other than the common five senses. Proprioception refers to neurological receptors located in the muscle fibres and the ligaments that sense load and tension on muscles and send that information to the spinal column or to the brain to let the brain know how things are going at the muscular and joint level. (Samanta et al., 2016, p.75)*

For Bharatanatyam dancers, the heightened awareness of their body in space is of utmost importance to align their movements with fellow dancers as well as situate themselves in the right positions on the stage. If they lack proprioception, they would have to be vigilant and continue in a state of alarm since it would require them to self-consciously determine whether a simple movement or sequence can be executed successfully. The countless sensations of movement that the dancer feels from performing Bharatanatyam help develop a kinaesthetic resonance which "should not only be seen as a form of somaesthesia but as a necessary element in the provision of an education in dance" (Arnold, 2005, p. 49). To reduce the gap between the seasoned and

the decent performer, increased attention must be paid to the individual's proprioceptive senses.

The Teacher's Performance. It is evident in the teacher's performance that her increased sense of proprioception, honed by years of training and practice, enables her to know where to position her arms even with her eyes closed. The awareness of movements helps her execute them smoothly and accurately by standing, gliding, and pivoting, positioning herself rightly on stage, without moving out of the audience's vision. In her performance, it is noticeable that she has mastery over her proprioceptive senses as she demonstrates "the perfect synthesis between technique, artistic skills and athleticism to give the best performance" (Ljubojevic et al., 2020, p. 109). Here, Reshmi Narayanan is seen to be well aware of the sensations of her dance motion. This indicates the presence of somaesthetic perceptions par excellence "because they are not only somaesthetic by invoking mindful aesthesis or discriminating, thematized perception, but also by relying essentially on the somaesthetic sensory system rather than our teleceptors" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 53). There are no signs of spatial disorientation in her execution of the choreography. She maintains her place throughout the performance, never loses balance and can execute movements gracefully.

The Students' Performance. However, in the performance of *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga*, the students are seen to exhibit spatial disorientation via compromised balancing of poses. This is because their proprioception mechanisms, which "play essential roles in regulating balance by way of neuromuscular control", seem down (Ljubojevic et al., 2020, p. 109). Their proprioceptive awareness is still in the development stage. This sheds light on the need for more training.

Strategies for Improvement. Hard training and regular practice of the dance choreography are what aid the performer in increasing awareness of their body and thus establish the required body posture. That being said, "dance technique classes alone are not sufficient for the development of certain motor skills such as dynamic balance and that proprioceptive training can be very effective in improving the balance performance of modern dancers (Tekin et al., 2018). They can also resort to engaging in activities that increase awareness of body movement and position like Yoga and minor balancing exercises. Hence, a continuous and rigorous proprioceptive training session for 15-20 minutes along with the practice of the choreography for 30 minutes is suggested. In time, this increases spatial awareness and confident dance movements thereby helping deliver a performance with greater precision.

4. Conclusion

The philosophy embedded in Somaesthetics becomes an effective tool to engage with the fusion of Yoga and Bharatanatyam as a part of a domain studying the living body. While Analytical Somaesthetics lays down the necessary tools to engage with the dancing body, Pragmatic Somaesthetics examines the bodily benefits acquired by incorporating a vocabulary of body shapes inspired from various Yoga Asanas into the choreography of Shree Sankara School of Dance's *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga.* Somaesthetics thus becomes a bridging philosophy between theory and practice, a pragmatist discipline that "studies 'the living, feeling, sentient body' *theoretically*, while also advancing methods to implement *practical* approaches to 'improving specific somatic skills of performance' through 'somatic understanding and awareness'" (Mani, 2020, p.82).

Furthermore, it is Practical Somaesthetics that demonstrates through a comparative study of the two versions of the choreography, performed by both the teacher and her students, that

a dancer's superior muscle memory, movement velocity, body balance and proprioception are not just dependent on knowing how to do it. It is cultivated through rigorous practice over years of training and exposure to the dance form. This habit formation has helped the teacher develop an expanded attentiveness in which she can gauge her body's needs at a vascular level. The comparison between the videos elucidates that the teacher exhibits the required movement velocity, perfect balancing of the poses, better recall of movement sequences and a greater degree of excellence in proprioception when compared to her students. By investigating these factors, this paper provides an account of all the demands on the body for the Bharatanatyam performance to reach its classical plenitude.

From a pragmatic and somaesthetic examination of the convergence of Yoga and Bharatanatyam in the choreography, it is perceptible that both blend seamlessly to create a union awakening the spirit of *Kundalini*. The elements of Yoga incorporated into the dance choreography, along with Bharatanatyam in itself, awaken *Kundalini* (Mother God) "by practising the Mudras, then *Prana* moves through the *Sushumna*, and having aroused all the Chakras" (Gherwal, 1930, p.73). This proves that the performance of *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga* is a beautiful amalgamation of the dancer's ability to portray the spirit of *Kundalini* as a summation of the creation of life and life forces after death through divine union.

The theoretical application of Somaesthetics thus helps shed light on bodily awareness and the need for refinement of dance movements for the performance to reach perfection. With the incorporation of Yoga Asanas into Bharatnatyam, a meditative approach is brought in which later maps out the dancer's journey towards Kundalini awakening. The comparative study of the teacher's and students' performances of the same choreography highlights the importance of consistent somatic practice and training. In closing, *Kundalini Pattu: A Dance-Yoga* serves as a testament to the interweaving of Yoga and Bharatanatyam as a means to awaken the spirit of Kundalini and for a somaesthetic understanding of the dancer's body to achieve mastery of the choreography through habitual and persistent training.

Appendix

Transliteration and Translation of *Kundalini Pattu* by Sree Narayana Guru from Malayalam

ɑːɭupɑːmpeː! punəⁿ t̪eːɭu pɑːmpeː! jəru...	Dance, cobra, dance!
ɭɑːnənd̪əkkuːt̪̪u kəɳɭɑːɭupɑːmpeː!	Thy burrow seeks and witness
t̪iŋkəɭuⁿ knnəjuⁿ cuːɭumiːɕənpəd̪ə-	The bliss of grace in wild display.
pəŋkəɟəⁿ ceːrnnuninnɑːɭupɑːmpeː	Dance, cobra, dance!
	Keep close the foot so lotus red
	Sacred of the Lord who dons
	The crescent moon and cassia bloom, and
	(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! . . .

vɳɳiːrɳiɲɲu viɭŋŋuⁿ t̪irumeːni
kəɳɳiːrɹukəkkəɳʈaːɭu paːmpeː!
ɑːjirəⁿ koːʈi ənən̪tən niː ɑːnənd̪ə-
maːjirəvuⁿ t̪urnnaːɭu paːmpeː!

Besmeared with ash and bright His holy form shines.
Thy tears for Him in streams do shed,
And thus steadily
(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! ...
Upon this burning ground
Where ghost and corpse are born
United well with what subsists, its counterpart supreme
(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! . . .

oːmnn t̪ʈʈru koːʈi mən̪trəppruɭ
naːmnnəriɲɲukɳʈaːɭu paːmpeː!
puɭɭippuliʈ̪ʈoːl puʈ̪əjkkuⁿ puːmeːnij-
nnuɭɭil kəɭikkumnnaːɭu paːmpeː!

The tresses of hair so fragrant
Excelling flowers of sweet aroma
In shade they lie within you
Beside this beauteous form, which view, and
(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! . . .
A spotted leopard skin surround
His form of tender bloom.
'Within the Self he dances' say, and
(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! ...

peːjuⁿ piɳəvuⁿ pirkkuⁿ cuʈukaːʈ
meːjuⁿ pərəmpruɭaːɭu paːmpeː!
puːməɳəkkuⁿkuɹlaːɭkəⁿpuːkumaː-
koːməɭmeːni kəɳʈaːɭu paːmpeː!

Upon the silver hill what gleams
As Vedic wisdom's quintessence,
Say 'That in me is dancing too', and
(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! …
He for whom a sportive snake
An ornament becomes
His home it is in us; so
(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! ...

naːd̪ət̪ʈiluɳʈaːⁿ nəməɕ̡ɕ̡ivaːjəppru-
ɭaːd̪ijaːjuɭɭt̪nnaːɭu paːmpeː!
puːməloːnuⁿ t̪irumaːluməːruⁿ pn-
puːmeːni kəɳʈillnnaːɭu paːmpeː!

No one has seen, not he of blossom's bloom
Nor even that holy garlanded one,
This flower-form of thine, so
(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! ...
Aum and all the rest that form
The essence of ten million charms
We now do know and so keep on, and
(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! . .

kaːmənccuʈʈə kəɳɳuɭɭ kaːlaːri t̪ən
naːməⁿ nukərnnuninnaːɭu paːmpeː!
vɭɭimələjil viɭŋŋuⁿ veːd̪əppru-
ɭuɭɭilkəɭikkumnnaːɭu paːmpeː!

To the One who conjures down
Who all things here bring out
To His leaf-tender foot adhere, and
(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! ...
From lettered charm of Shiva-praise
To every formula of truth -
Even from sound do they come out, so
(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! . .

ellaːmirkkijʈukkumeːkən pəɖə-	Ten thousand million
pəlləvəⁿ pərri ninnaːʈu paːmpeː!	Of that Ananta snake art, Thou.
ellaːjərivuⁿ rviɹuŋŋi vruⁿ vʟi-	Thy million hoods then open out, and
jlləjileːri ninnaːʈu paːmpeː!	(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! ...
ellaːⁿ viɹuŋŋijʈirərrɹunnru	This body here no truth it has.
cllŋŋumunʈu ninnaːʈu paːmpeː!	Owner another in it resides.
clllaːmunʈ cuʈəraːjɹuⁿ pru-	Such wisdom does thou gain, and thus
ʟlləjileːr ninnaːʈu paːmpeː!	(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! .
ɖeːɦəⁿ niɟəməllə ɖeːɦijruvəniː	Uniting body and owner too,
ɖeːɦəʈʈilunʈəriɲɲiːʈu paːmpeː!	Radiant, who abides as one,
naːʈuⁿ nəgərəvumnnaːj naːvilni-	Such there is to know, as well, so
nnaːʈu nin naːməmoːʈiːʈu paːmpeː!	(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! . . .
	What swallows all, with rival none
	Such is the omnipresent Word
	Which swallow thou, and steadily
	(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! . .
ɖeːɦəvuⁿ ɖeːɦijumnnaːj viɹuŋŋiːʈu-	Consuming all the words there are
meːkənumunʈəriɲɲiːʈu paːmpeː!	As the supporting wall for all
peːriŋkəlninnu peːruvʟijnnəllə	Even on such do take thy stand, and
paːraːɖi ʈoːnnijnnaːʈu paːmpeː!	(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! . . .
ceːrnnunilkkumpruvllaːⁿ cɳaːrʈu	From very name this great expanse
neːrnnupoːmmaːru ninnoːʈu paːmpeː!	And even earth as well did come
	As a presentiment in thought, so
	(repeat refrain) Dance, cobra, dance! . . .

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

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

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. The Metaphysics of the Artist in Nietzsche

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

proposing new ones.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Freud and the Death Drive

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

shape in Freud's work?

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. The Dark Troika and Transgressive Art

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. The prestige of transgression

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Desire and Eroticism on the Stage of Pál Frenák

Nóra Horváth

"The human spirit is prey to the most astounding impulses. Man goes constantly in fear of himself. His erotic urges terrify him."
(Georges Bataille)[1]

"Had he noticed I was ready not just to yield but to mold into his body?"
(André Aciman)[2]

Abstract: *Since 2018, I have been a philosophical consultant for the Compagnie Pál Frenák, and, more recently a dramaturg (Cage*[3]*, Spid_er*[4]*, Fig_Ht*[5]*, Secret_ Off Man, Crazy Runners – Parad_IS_e*[6]*). Simultaneously with my research on somaesthetics, I became familiar with Frenák's unique organic movement system, which developed from the sign system of the deaf and hard of hearing and, over decades, evolved into a completely individual means of expression. Because Frenák, the best-known choreographer of Hungarian contemporary dance, considers Deleuze's philosophy a point of alignment, Deleuze's Abécédaire and Shusterman's aesthetics both played a role in my 2022 book about him (Horváth 2022). However, Frenák is an autonomous creator who never uses the books he reads as a concrete reference, rather, he extracts the essence of what he reads and takes inspiration from them by placing them in a totally different context.*

Anyone familiar with Frenák's works knows that his central theme is the libidinal energy that controls people. He researches how to express erotic radiance, repressed desire or the resonance that exists or never develops between people. Frenák opens something up to audiences, who are either drawn in or pushed away. Frenák's native language is sign language, due to his deaf mother. In the world of the deaf

1 Bataille, 1962, p. 7

2 Aciman, 2017, p. 24

3 Trailer: https://hu.frenak.hu/cage

4 Trailer: https://hu.frenak.hu/spider

5 Trailer: https://hu.frenak.hu/fight

6 Trailer: https://hu.frenak.hu/crazyrunners

and hard of hearing, only continuous and intense attention is natural. His perfect knowledge of this medium and communication system adds a unique dimension to Frenák's somatic style. Frenák's work is special because since childhood, he has been experimenting with a unique language of movement, with which generations of dancers have been able to identify in joint productions over the decades. But his art is much more than that. He has been able to do what very few people do: he constantly builds and enriches the unique world in which certain themes, motifs, and emotions regularly appear.

Only the harmony between the body and the soul is capable of representing the homogeneous artistic style that has characterized Frenák's style for decades. Perhaps this is partly why we perceive that his pieces are the various manifestations of a homogeneous whole and rather than isolated choreographies, despite their fragmented nature.

In my study, I examine how Frenák delves into the depths of human nature. How does his work address the myth of marriage or love triangles? How can such a feeling be realized on stage when two figures are not even touching, yet we know, we feel in our guts, that they belong together. Frenák is not satisfied with portraying superficial relationships, and he disregards patterns and norms. He is a diver delving into the depths of the soul frightened of itself, a soul that must grapple with itself to overcome its fears and its own shadows. During this investigation, the question arises: is it is possible to put into words the erotic experience that art can only partially convey? "The philosopher can speak of everything he feels. Erotic experience will commit us to silence" says Bataille in Eroticism (Bataille, 1962, p. 252.). That is the advantage that art possesses and that is why the feeling that the protracted utterance of the word "Silence" in Frenák's pieces (e.g., in The Hidden Men) may convey. Philosophy is unable to free itself of language and, what Bataille considers the most important, "it uses language in such a way that silence never follows", the silence of that last moment where consciousness forsakes you (Ibid, p. 274.). The atmosphere of Frenák's plays can reproduce exactly those states of mind in which awareness fails, where nothing remains but silence or madness. The question, therefore, is: how to grasp passion rendered with artistic corporality from the perspective of somaesthetics.

Keywords: *organic movement language, sign-language, contemporary dance.*

1. Style and More – Study of Existence

"My pieces have neither a beginning
nor an end. It is not as if I create
a piece that is about something and then
another piece that is about something else:
rather, the entire thing is a process, and I, we,
generally always talk about the same thing."
(Pál Frenák)[7]

7 Varga, 2008, p. 206

"I live a 'foraging' lifestyle: I store information
and inspirations in my soul in the form of fragments,
and then I make use of them: words, ideas,
snippets of sound, portraits, or the profile of a face:
sometimes it takes 30 years for them to come together.
Divine sparks and breaths that touch people.
That requires me to have a peripheral way of
seeing things, assisted by my mother's sing
language and even confinement as one starts
paying attention to the outside world. Looking
back, the manner in which I try to chew my
way through the bars spiritually, mentally,
and intellectually is also important."
(Pál Frenák)[8]

Dance can be realized only through the dancers' bodies, meaning they must feel the choreographer's unique style and goals. Frenák believes the true content of the developing performance and the essential emotions can be conveyed to the dancers only at the level of corporality; words are insufficient. Without the artists' intuition, it would be impossible grasping the choreographer's driving concept or aspect would be impossible. First, everyone has to work on an emotional level, movement combinations are built from emotions. For Frenák, the most important aspect is credibility, the harmony between the external and the internal, as well as what is experienced during the movement itself, at the rehearsal or the performance—you have to experience something there, in the present moment. What makes the rehearsal process especially difficult for dancers is that it's not simply a series of movements to perfect; during each rehearsal and performance, they must attune themselves with a feeling that gives meaning to the movement. "Emotion is not like a movement. It cannot be continued where you left off," stated the Portuguese dancer Anibal Dos Santos regarding the challenges of performance preparation (Horváth, 2021). Frenák always motivates his dancers to find the "juste" point within themselves that helps them truly experience the given moment. His own solos are also developed along this logic. As he explained for me in an interview: "Experiment with something! Either regarding the topic, the scenographic feeling, an idea, or using a philosophical thought: it doesn't matter what, just find an emotional point within yourself! This can be a pulsating erotic energy or it can come from the bottom of the hip, the sternum or someone's mind: the point is that I feel the start of a process, that something is driving you, just as Henri Michaux was driven by whoever entered the labyrinth, which led to the creation of something accidental that ended up becoming more important than what he had so strongly desired" (Horváth, 2021). This kind of construction in rehearsal is unfamiliar and intimidating to many dancers – especially those who have performed in classical pieces before. When Frenák brought Bartók's *The Wooden Prince* to the stage, he also involved some of the ballet artists of the Budapest Opera House in the work, for whom it was a serious challenge to break away from the familiar forms of expression. Viktória Rohonci, for example, said after working together that she had never worked with a choreographer who was curious about her as a person and who gave her the confidence to dare to give herself on stage. Rohonci felt that it was very difficult for her to relax and move without rules on stage, but it gave

8 Horváth, 2022, p. 150

her a sense of freedom that made her see herself differently, even in her ordinary life. It was as if she had begun to learn self-respect.[9]

Frenák makes the ideas that inspired his choreography visible through the bodies of his dancers' bodies, using them as mediums, but in a way that requires them to embark on a significant personal journey, coupled with self-knowledge and self-creation. As he states: "I project something on them – something I am already immersed in. I drag them in with me, and then there's no escape. For all of us, choreography work is also a study of our existences" (Péter, 2009, p. 27.).

In the case of artists who, through their unique style, are able to authentically convey fragments of the same consistent, characteristic world in each of their works, it can be assumed that they have a homogeneous aesthetic of existence with deeper content. This unique, individual style formulates the oeuvre. In my study, I will refer to the pieces created by the FrenAk Company, but I will place the emphasis on the choreographer's personality and unique style, because he embodies such a strong and distinct world, which makes his works unmistakable. The movement, style, and attention-defining effect of the sign language used by the deaf and the hard of hearing influences the entire body, as it has evidently shaped Frenák's relationship to the body. According to Shusterman's philosophy dictionary, the essence of the central term somatic style is that it provides signals even from those who have never engaged in dance—definitive spiritual impacts are integrated into the individual's bodily language, ultimately forming their style. Furthermore those who dedicates their lives to dance owe the development of their professional movement of culture to their somatic style. Frenák's somatic style, determined by the use of sign language, defines not only his unique dance language, which draws from the organic language of movement, but also all his overall communication.[10] Therefore, it is crucial to examine certain events in Frenák's life more thoroughly, as, according to somaesthetic theory, these experiences (e.g., sign language and his time in the orphanage) significantly shaped his somatic style. Between a deaf or hard of hearing mother and her child, intersomatic attunement is stronger than average. Through intersomatic memories associated to the mother, children develop early, ingrained patterns of how to interact with other bodies. These potential connections are incorporated into the child's muscle memory and become a fundamental part of their personality (Shusterman, 2012, p. 97). Daniel Stern's studies have demonstrated that we develop intersomatic interaction patterns from infancy, learning to navigate the world through these early schemes, even before mastering linguistic expression (Ibid.). For Frenák, who spent his early life in close proximity to his deaf mother, the separation and new environment represented a more drastic change than usual. The trauma of separation and the feeling of being unworthy of love—a natural consequence of abandonment—had long-term psychological effects and also manifested as immediate physical symptoms (Horváth, 2022, 2024, p. 176).

Frenák's unique movement language naturally draws inspiration from various sources, including the philosophies of transversality and destabilization. These philosophies influence the concept, the dancers' physical and mental work, and the viewer's interpretative process.

When Frenák arrived in Hungary from France with his troupe in the early 1990s, he completely revolutionized the dance scene. His performances shocked audiences, and he introduced unprecedented scenographic elements, sound and lighting effects to the stage. His

9 see the interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhiWO5VhDQc

10 The key is the level of corporality: "[...] but if somatic style, through our body schemata, extends into the deepest habits of feelings, perceptions, and actions that constitute the self, then it should be seen as an integral dimension of the individual, the expression of his particular spirit. Spirit indeed seems fundamental to the notion of style. If style is the man himself, then it includes his spirit," ready Thinking Through the Body (Shusterman, 2012, pp. 333-334.)

iconic style quickly became evident: the organic language of movement, the dynamism escalates to extremes in both movement and music, the sense of a familiar, almost cozy home within a chaotic system, the confrontation with stark nakedness symbolizing individual self-acceptance, the use of specialized lighting technology that appears to fragment movement, the destabilization of dancers and, consequently, audiences, the conveyance of an affinity for Japanese culture through Butoh-inspired elements, the incorporation of sign language, and the extraordinary ability to fuse bodies in motion. These features define the truly unique style of the intellectual founder of the Hungarian company, which collaborates with internationally renowned dancers and has presented performances continuously since 1991, both in Hungary and abroad.

Twenty years ago, I saw my first Frenák performance live, and it left such a profound impression on me that years later, when my philosophical research shifted to somaesthetics, it was clear I wanted to study Frenák's oeuvre. In 2017, during the Hungarian Dance Festival, I organized a meeting at Széchenyi University with the participation of Frenák and Richard Shusterman, after which I began to examine his entire oeuvre from a philosophical perspective. For Frenák, the philosophical foundations of somaesthetics and "thinking through the body" are self-evident, as demonstrated by both his work and his commentary on the subject. His entire oeuvre is an exemplifies our capacity to convey our essence—our emotions and thoughts—without relying on verbal communication.

As his parents were deaf, Frenák learned to socialize in a signal-based environment where certain nonverbal signals determined his instinctive gestures at a subconscious level. Therefore, he always understood that unspoken communication was perfectly clear. In interviews, he stated: "Even as a child, I understood the language of the body, because otherwise I would have been unable to communicate with my mother and her environment, who used their entire bodies in a very refined and sensitive manner" (Halász, 2001). "The sign language used by the deaf and the hard of hearing will accompany me throughout my entire life, as a type of mother tongue paired to the language I use to express myself verbally" (Szentgyörgyi, 2021). After the death of his father, he was separated from his siblings and he spent seven years in a community home. This forceful and unexpected separation left him with indelibly deep wounds. Not only was he torn apart from his family, he was also deprived of the system of communication that he considered his mother tongue and previously used for perfect self-expression. Realizing that his new environment did not understand him and sensing that what happened to him was unacceptable and irreversible, the young Frenák chose to become mute for a time. In his case, listening to the silence can call to mind the feeling at home, with the deepest harmonies and the clearest system of interpretation both revealed in the silence.

Movement freed him from this terrible state of mind. He discovered a huge mirror in the orphanage. At night, he escaped to the mirror to signal and dance with his reflection. He had a secret little life in which he could use his mother tongue again, and at the same time, he began to recognize the potential of his body—sometimes through dancing, sometimes through self-torture. According to Frenák: "In the communal loneliness there, the significance of everything grows out of proportion. Things have much more weight. Even your reflection in the mirror means something else; it's like meeting a stranger. Ideas develop differently, normalcy means something else" (Péter, 2009, p. 19.); "The mirror made it possible for me to go deeper and deeper in myself, and the pity for the blond, skinny little boy was slowly replaced by virility and the will to live! Combat survivre—the struggle for survival has already begun in front of the orphanage mirror."[11] He was allowed to leave the orphanage at the age of 14 and only started to

11 personal conversation

learn dance at the age of 17. Jazz ballet, disco dance, folk dance—he stood his ground everywhere, he even won competitions and his talents were so excellent that within a few years he appeared in high-quality productions, for example in the legendary Rock Theater in Budapest. In the early eighties, he left Hungary illegally to try his luck in Paris. He first danced at the Moulin Rouge for a living, then turned more and more to contemporary dance. Frenák obtained his degree from the Institut de formation des enseignants de la danse et de la musique (IFEDEM) Paris in 1992, in teaching classical ballet and contemporary dance. He had, however, studied in Paris from the early 1980s with masters such as Gilbert Mayer, Germain Silva, François Dupuy, Karine Wener, J. C. Ramseyer, Borisz Bregvadze, Peter Goss, or Janine Charrat, who tailored the role of Domino for Frenák in her legendary performance titled *'adame Miroir*, revived in 1988, based on Jean Genet's libretto and Darius Milhaud's music. His calling card with which Frenák entered the world of contemporary dance as a choreographer is his work *Tricks & Tracks*, which premiered in 1999. He founded a dance company first in France, then in Hungary, and sometimes even today, at the age of 67, he is on stage.

2. The Spiral of Passion

"Nothing but trouble in desire," whispers a voice in Frenák's *Frisson* performance. Perhaps it is precisely this experience, this conclusion, that in Frenák's wordless theater everything is about longing and the consequences of longing: dissatisfaction, suppression, struggles, hiding, madness, murderous instincts, a destabilized state, animality—and almost never happy fulfillment or harmonious living together. Frenák dissects the human soul through the struggles of the individual's erotic being, elevates eroticism to a pedestal, but never vulgarly. Frenák regularly centers on "neither with you nor without you" relationships that are passionate enough to seemingly burn the ground; at the same time, he forces audiences to face relationships based on hypocrisy and lies, which exploit their participants. He pushes the types of relationships in our faces that, although they are clearly present in society, most people think it is unimaginable that they find themselves in one. In *Blue Spring*, the cruel mistress lover strings the yearning partner along, who, succumbing to desire, is willing to undergo any form of humiliation. The same piece shows us a person tired of a loveless, oppressive relationship who, in despair, murders his partner, even if it ends up driving him crazy; and an awkward, indecisive person, who suffers as he clings to a memory and is even scared that the photo of his beloved will become damaged. Driven to despair, he ends up taking his own life. The fog of momentary disturbance strikes unpredictably—Frenák leaves no doubt as to this fact.

The most important motif that inspired Frenák was the spiral, which appears in his work in every imaginable manner and form: in rope networks, at the level of associated emotions, as a labyrinth of passionate love (and as a form of all emotions into which we drive and let ourselves be sucked), and as the costumes for the iconic *MenNonNo*. The spiral motif is also present in all the scenes where dancers rotate with the help of a swing-like rope until they become crazed spirals or when a dancer, suspended by his or her feet, is moved around and twisted by the others until the very limits of tolerance. In *Tricks & Tracks,* the naked bodies of a man and woman rotate, collide, sometimes touching, sometimes drifting apart in the spiral system created using a fly system. This spiral force drives Frenák both in his life and his creative work: according to him, he can see out of it for only moments at a time, but then the chaotic avalanche that wipes it all away returns.

Figure 1 *Tricks & Tracks (Péter Holoda and Erika Vasas) —© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography*

Frenák almost always conveys the mind-absorbing vortex of eroticism, the chaos of the libido's spiral system on stage. His characters are driven and destroyed by passion. He shows such strong emotions, feelings and pains on stage that it wears on the souls of both the dancers and the spectators. Once, during an aesthetic analysis of *InTime*, a university student told me that she couldn't watch the play because it was too much about her. She fully felt what she saw and was unable to face the unresolved moments of her current life. However, this reaction is much stronger and more interesting than when someone cannot imagine that he or she could be in a similar, emotionally unstable state as the character portrayed by the dancer. We cannot know what we are capable of until we get to know someone for whom we would be able to do anything and who arouses desires in us that we never knew we had. Some recognize their true feelings and are sickened; some want to get to the very root of the differences they discover. We can run naked, shouting, with arms outstretched in a bleak land, or we can shout silently, losing our sanity, becoming artists or saints—even Pasolini showed us a few examples in his film *Theorem [Teorema]* (1968), which is one of the films that provided a defining experience for Frenák early on. "I believe that sexuality is a fundamental element of life; the phallus, as a symbol of abstract power, is definitely present in my work. Beyond its obvious function, sexuality interests me as an

energy source" (Péter, 2009, p. 35).

3. The "Erotics of Art"

In Susan Sontag's now world-famous essay "Against Interpretation", she rose up against "stifling" interpretation that makes it impossible to enjoy the "erotics of art" "in place of hermeneutics" (Sontag, 2001, p. 158). The essence: the desire to place emotional impressions first, which often leads to multiple interpretations: "Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction, the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life—its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness—conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. [...] What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more," writes Sontag (Sontag, 2001, p. 158). This is fully in line with the thoughts of Deleuze, according to which man, stemming from his animalistic being, is always instinctively looking outward (or should be engaged in so doing). However, this constant tension that absorbs all vibration and shakes, makes a state of rest impossible, making interpretation unavoidable, reading signs and practically feeling its way through life—all living beings sense their own little worlds and territories. This applies to artists, and Deleuze even described writers and philosophers as being "être aux aguets," or "always on the lookout," just as an animal.[12] There is no doubt that Frenák is guided by intuitive instinct, intuition is the guidance in everything, he can tirelessly react to the resonances that strike him, and that in his defining personal encounters he relies on the same deep, instinctual layer as he does in his creative work: "Artists are like animals, ears twitching, listening all the time, always turning, ready for the impulse to go after something. Yes, this deeply instinctive layer is needed, and one needs to let go, when the finest micro vibrations come to life…" (Péter, 2009, p. 16, 18).

Following instincts, or the sight of instinctive existence on stage, can destabilize the viewer. You need to reexamine your values and feelings—which is why many people feel uncomfortable watching the performances. Instinct is therefore not only needed by the creator, but also by the viewer. From the receiver's point of view, the interpretation of certain movements is not enough to sense the essence behind the surface. Emotional reactions are the best responses—as Kazuo Ohno, Frenák's idol, once noted, "The best thing someone can say to me is that while watching my performance they began to cry. It is not important to understand what I am doing; perhaps it is better if they don't understand, but just respond to the dance" (Childs, 2017). Certain images may become ingrained and may appear in our heads as if to touch upon the same chords in the viewer as those with which they were conceived. The question is whether the viewer can resonate with what they are seeing. That is not to say that he or she has to put the received emotional impulses into words, but it is good if he or she can decide whether the production caused a feeling of attraction or repulsion. The creation first and foremost has to induce emotions and cause an aesthetic experience; it has to be unsettling or at least have some sort of effect that an audience will be forced to deal with it in the future. Frenák is not breaking any taboos or crossing any boundaries. By showing individuals, situations, and relations that, in addition to being able to elicit strong emotions, cause one to think a second time around, it calls attention to the meaninglessness of stereotypes and picks up the gauntlet to fight prejudices. After the initial two slaps in the face—being forced to face something—the viewer is given the possibility to think and interpret. Showing the transversality between the various types of worlds, cultures, and relations, chaos and order, dream and reality, real and unreal, stability and instability,

12 See the entry Animal on the DVD version of L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze (Paris: Éditions Montparnasse, 2004) and the English description by Charles STIVALE: https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/seminars/gilles-deleuze-abc-primer/lecture-recording-1-f.

femininity and masculinity, and human and animal is a recurring element in Frenák's works. The feeling of boundlessness associated with transversality make it impossible to think within the confines of our terms for transgression. The question is whether we are able to make it possible to transition between as many things, locations, and dimensions as possible for ourselves, as that is the only way we can remain open to interpreting the situations of those around us in different ways. All forms of hatred are self-revealing, just as all forms of interpretation are a form of self-interpretation. Frenák is able to make viewers feel uncomfortable because they search only to identify the emotions the performance elicits in them instead of merely thinking "what was he trying to say?" Regarding contemporary performances, Erika Fischer-Lichte, the author of *The Transformative Power of Performance*, remarked on a number of occasions that "a fantastic piece of contemporary work cannot be understood just by comprehension. We have to be open to the entirety of the emotions it generates, after which we can try to understand it and interpret it for ourselves" (Peric 2016). The essence of the idea of what she calls transformative aesthetics is that the power of a work of art is measureable in the slow process that triggers a change in the receiver's way of thinking, which allows them to better understand certain things later on.

Based on all of this, we can say that not only the choreographer and the dancers, but—certainly in Frenák's theater—the audience also have to work on a study of existence. Perhaps the choreographer is confronting them with a side of themselves that they wanted to hide, suppress, bury forever. The silhouette that took on a life of its own, another, an inner self that is not possible to escape from was a recurring motif in *Frisson, Twins* and *MILAN*, and even in *InTimE*. In the promotion of *Frisson* we read that "the shadow is stronger than the body, because passing doesn't touch it, and since it is impossible to bridle it, perhaps we should rather accept it, and dissolve in it".[13] According to Jung's psychological theory making the shadow conscious is a lifelong task for everyone, and not just a part of the analytical psychotherapy work. The shadow is composed of unconscious repressions: "If we do not take note of these dark sides of our personality, or we even radically block them, they might split away from our personality and become autonomous complexes that cause neurosis," writes Jung (Jung, 1997, p. 79). Recognizing our shadow-side and accepting that it is a part of us is at the same time saying yes to the instinct and "undertaking the huge dynamics that threaten from the background" (Jung, 1997, p. 80). However, this dangerous and unpredictable act is essential for self-knowledge. Fighting against the shadow is an integral part of the individuation process. While in *Twins* two real-life figures display the duality, *MILAN's* protagonist directs his emotions towards a life-size puppet. As if the puppet would be a shadow of the past that is not possible to escape from—a memory of a boy who was kind, yet he was doomed to be pushed away, because "shameful" memories are attached to him. For example, an innocent kiss that is tried to be removed from the lips immediately by compulsive wiping. In the flesh and blood duet of *Twins* somehow the two sides of soul can be felt better – due to the fact that one person would do something, but whispering it into the other's ear gets rejected all the time. Finally, the restrained struggling materializes in a loud yell into the rejecting party's ear, and this suffocating fight caused by duality seems only to dissolve when one of the figures skates around the space naked, wearing wings, while the other stays at the wall motionless. Could it be the soul liberated by the shadow-side rendered conscious?

13 Synopsis of Frisson: https://trafo.hu/programok/frisson [12.01.2021]

4. Rezonances – on the Verge of Eroticism – Instincts Above All Else

"all art surely is instinct, and then you can't talk about instinct, because you don't know what it is."
"if you could explain your painting, you would be explaining your instincts."
(Francis Bacon)[14]

Frenák strains the rigid hierarchy and bipolar framework of sexuality (male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, masculine/feminine), breaks down social norms, expectations, and prejudices pertaining to the binary organization of sexuality that define the very essence of our institutions and structures of power. He fights against generalization with every piece: there is no absolute man or woman; rather, there are types, and their presentation emphasizes the senselessness of stereotypes. Both sexes can be strong, unbreakable, fallen, vulnerable, comically confident, or pathetic. The emphasis is rather on the forces (external or internal) that the individual is subjected to, regardless of their sex. This is shown by the fact that when Frenák re-stages a play, he often not only does not keep the original cast, but also the gender of the characters becomes irrelevant. In the aforementioned work Twins, for example, two male dancers originally played, while in the latest version, one man and one woman.

Personality is first and foremost with Frenák; although sex is secondary to it, the relations between the sexes are quite exciting. The battle between man/man, man/woman, and woman/woman is a constantly recurring topic of the pieces. Transversality has become an aesthetic (and ethical) criterion in Frenák's work, the necessity of which he mentions often. In 2008, he stated the following in connection with his work entitled *Instinct*, "if we continuously maintain transversality, we will uphold a ceaseless feeling of 'mystére.'"[15] On another occasion, during a 2021 interview, when answering the question of what transversality means to him, he stated that when everything touches a little, it has a type of "transparence". Transversality indicates a form of free room to maneuver both in space and time as well as on the plane of ideas and emotions. We can be traversed by what we see, the combination of music and sight, and everything we see

14 Sylvester, 2016, p. 112., 114

15 See Nóra TESZÁRI's interview with Pál Frenák, in Kikötő [Harbor], Duna TV, 26.02.2008

on the stage. We should notice that in our everyday lives, and even through our interpersonal relationships, we become filters as we allow the impulses that we receive from others and convey to others to pass through us. But not only those with whom we become closer, lovers or friends, can exert a strong influence on us, but also those whom we only see by chance or only talk to for a short time. It may happen that a look can accompany us for a lifetime, and most of the time we cannot say why we are attached to someone immediately, and why we are never able to like others: "There is a broader communication system in the world than I see you and hear you. This is what we call perception, resonance, palpation" (Szabó G. 2021); "A resonance can be a lifelong source of energy" says Frenák (Horváth, 2022, p. 203).

Emotions can only be elicited, but not forced. The act of accidentally encountering someone creates a form of motion, and resonance becomes palpable—if one is lucky. The beauty of losing one's self in another and the ascesis of moments stolen from glances that remain memorable decades later can both act as munition for continuing life. Whether someone is sympathetic or antipathic depends not only on the type of relationship we want to develop but what we instinctively feel regarding the other person—and that is something suggested by animality. It was undoubtedly Péter Nádas who gave the best explanation for transversality in Hungarian literature as regards the relationship between love and friendship: "I am not saying that there is no difference between a relationship of love and a relationship of friendship. One is one kind; the other is a different kind of relationship. All I am saying is that these are two floors in a building that are not separated by a ceiling. The two floors have no floors. [...] our senses are extremely exact, sometimes making decisions contrary to conventions, and we have no separate senses for one or the other. [...] There is no floor and no ceiling" (Mihancsik, 2006, p. 355). But there is always a chance that someone will come along who will melt away all of our inhibitions.

5. Encounter – Possession – Confinement – the Temptation of Paradise

Frenák's pieces are regularly built from the moments and energy of inexplicable encounters that are thought to be coincidences, but are in fact fatal, leaving a mark forever. The figures of *Tricks & Tracks* working with dynamic, pulsating energies come and go, dreadfully crossing each other's way, but sometimes a stunning encounter appears for a second, if not otherwise, at least for a flash glance. The viewer must realize these defining moments, just like in real life we (should) realize the moments that can have an impact on our lives due to their rich emotional resonance. Because what is life all about? We bump into each other, we cross each other's way, we influence each other consciously and unconsciously. From time to time, a stolen moment, a gift, a sudden exchange of glances occurs that leaves a trace for a lifetime. According to Frenák, our bodies and selves are treasure troves of the traces of our memories, which are born from interactions with materials, spaces, bodies, and scents.

One of the most decisive (philosophy-related) experiences in Frenák's life is connected to Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze's series of interviews with Claire Parnet, called *L'Abécédaire*, contributed to Frenák's linguistic development to an extraordinary degree. Frenák stated these recordings not only helped develop his knowledge of French as a language, but he also encountered an approach that continues to affect his activities as a choreographer to this day. As Frenák says: "*L'Abécédaire*, literally became my schooling. I know many parts of it by heart; it became my path to speech, […] to verbalize things more freely. I feel very at home in his passages, as if he describes my own thoughts" (Péter, 2009, p. 23). In the DVD version of the video material *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, Deleuze's famous example of the tick, which is Frenák's favorite, is presented

under the title *Animal*. Light perception, smell, touch—these three factors determine a tick's life; its reduced world is organized along these three stimuli: it tends toward the extremity of a tree branch attracted by the light, where it can live even for years. It waits and waits until it smells the scent of a living creature passing under its tree branch. Not any creature, but a certain one, on whom it suddenly falls in order to burrow itself under the unlucky chosen's skin (Deleuze, 2004). Frenák often mentions Deleuze's favorite tick example. This feature of the tick's nature can easily be projected onto human situations, when we wait for something in total repression (or with unrecognized properties)—a redeeming thought, person, or moment—to jump, and go blindly into the unknown, even if we perish. Not necessarily for pleasure, but because we absolutely need to do it, because we feel something in it without which we cannot exist. As in the case of the tick, the instinctive reaction is the essence of the personalities depicted by Frenák. The important moment is when we suddenly act. Frenák can show such moments. For example, in the choreography of *MenNonNo*, which is his best-known solo. For more than half an hour, with barely perceptible slowness, he spirals into a huge, round, blue dress. But first, there are a few minutes when he starts naked in the direction of the dress in a strip of light from the back of the stage, and we feel that the moment of getting into the dress is about more than just putting on the costume.

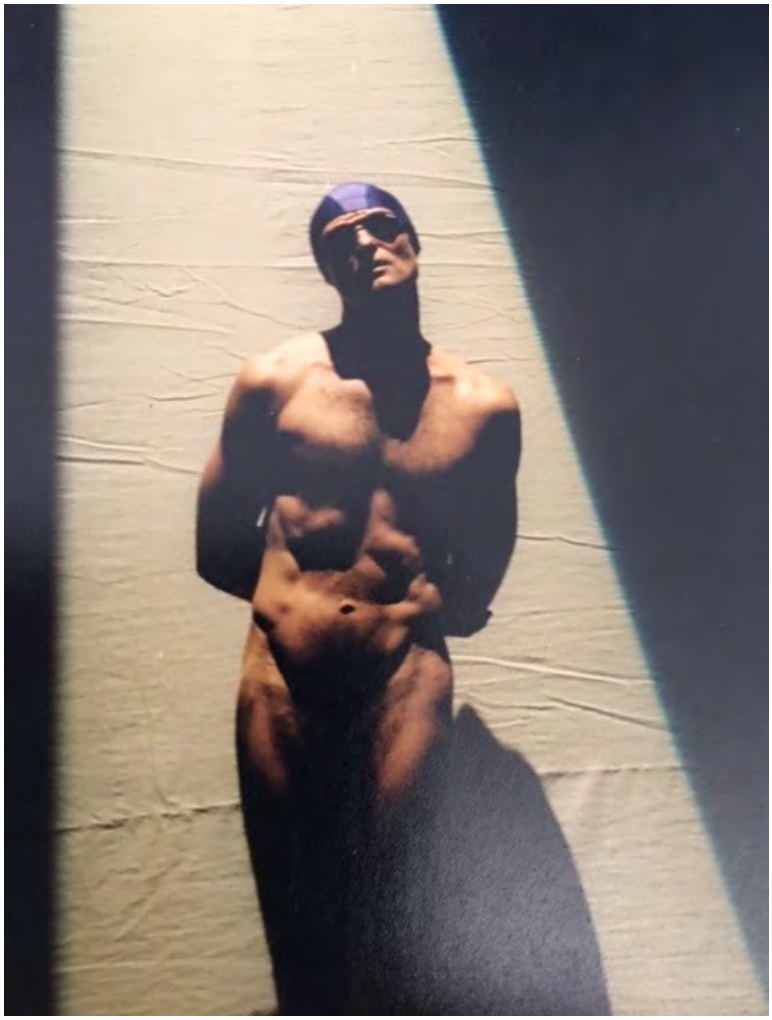

Figure 3 *MenNonNo (Pál Frenák)—© FrenákArchive*

In *MenNonNo*, the essential moment is entering the clothing, when the performer decides to undertake the impossible, i.e., enters the subconscious instead of escaping from himself and from the temptation of the simplicity of routine. In the glowing of ambiguity, emotions take over the controlling role, which force one to take risks and experiment. Either-or: the essence is the act of change, regardless of the consequences of the decision.[16] *MenNonNo* is transformation in itself. While the audience tensely watches the recording of the huge skirt, which is almost as if the dancer is entering a vortex, in the background of the music, a sentence is repeated, repeatedly: "Don't ask me. Ask yourself." So this moment also calls for introspection—would you do it? Ask yourself what you are capable of! For passion, for your life. The essence of the person is what he surrounds himself with over the course of his life, and if he is lucky, he will one day come across himself, maybe when coming across someone else or an experience that cuts deep. We are actually circling continuously around a kind of indefinable internal core that has an elemental force to it. In *MenNoNo*, the dancer in the six-meter diameter blue costume is the very center of the spiral system. In Frenák's pieces, the body that wraps the cylindrical spiral around itself creates its own confinement. There may be a way out of the spiral of eroticism, the chaos of the spiral system of the libido, that sucks in the mind, though we are all capable of truly experiencing only our own spiral paths—however, even we are unable to comprehend and rationally follow our own rings. We will never be the same after we delve deeper and deeper into the discovery of our own feelings by way of the beloved other.

Figure 4 *MenNonNo (Pál Frenák)—© FrenákArchive*

For spiritual development, to create harmony between our visible and hidden (material and spiritual) selves, we have to step into a revolving door (a spiral energy system) which we can use to enter into the kingdom of our preordained goal.

It would take an almost otherworldly miracle to achieve "l'amour totale," to lose oneself

16 watch the video here: https://hu.frenak.hu/ebook-videos/mennonno

in another, and the other person wanting the same as we do; however, the convulsive will to possess breeds only more convulsion. Emotions can only be elicited, but not forced. Frenák showed the intense meeting of body and soul, its total resonance, in many pieces. First, and most powerfully, in *Tricks&Tracks*, where the floating body of the dancer coming from above, suspended, collided with her male partner with force, and merged inseparably with him, and the audience could watch for minutes how they were unable to let go of each other or lose sight of each other, despite the fact that, amidst the killer sparking between them, they were also able to convey a sense of struggle.

Figure 5 *Tricks&Tracks (Péter Holoda, Erika Vasas)—©Tamas Boczko*

The atmosphere of Frenák's plays can reproduce exactly those states of mind where awareness fails, where there is nothing left but silence or madness. I cannot rid myself of the thought that the performances, seen by many as brutal and harsh, are home to the manifestations of deep human relations that are seldom experienced in real life. Frenák shows strong mental and physical connections that can last a lifetime, that can connect two people in any situation. Such relationships are honest, revealing and often consume the energy of the participants, while often drawing strength from each other. Frenák once put it this way in an interview: "I believe everyone desires to blend into the being with whom they share themselves. To fuse together. When two people are able to come together in body, mind, and spirit that they 'can no longer be separated'. These are divine gifts, sparks. These are not everyday things, but if you experience these emotions, you will be able to live your whole life alongside the same person. To me, l'amour éternel [eternal love] is when two people experience a true resonance and they both retain their free, creative lives in parallel. Of course, you cannot receive a divine spark every day, you have to work hard for it—with faith and a kind of honesty towards each other and yourself" (Szabó

G., 2021). These emotions emerge in *InTime* and *Spider* as well. When preparing *InTime*, *the Postman Always Rings Twice* was one of the basics. According to Frenák,

"Jessica Lange and Jack Nicholson go at it on the floury kitchen table with such passion that the two bodies seemingly fuse into one. I want to see the same thing from my dancers. You can see when two people end up in total harmony and when it explodes—when they show the other person what they have not shown anyone else. [...] The real charm rises to the surface in these subconscious moments—the mask comes off and control is lost. That's why I always expect my dancers to add something elementally personal to each piece and yet still make it to the level of universality" (Hegedűs, 2013).

"We use the word eroticism every time a human being behaves in a way strongly contrasted with everyday standards and behaviors. Eroticism shows the other side of a façade of unimpeachable propriety. Behind the façade are revealed the feelings, parts of the body and habits we are normally ashamed of" (Bataille, 1962, p. 109), writes Bataille. This is exactly what can be seen in *InTimE*, where in the first part of the piece we see into the souls of the characters tormented by their passions and desires. They show us every possible relationship type, but the last scene, like a slap in the face, restores the impeccable appearance: an image that most people expect in real life, or at least what they desire for, and they desperately insist even when it can only be brought back as a flickering memory or daydream, because they think that except for them everybody lives a perfect life. All the social media world is based on this feeling, to show something perfect which doesn't exist and never existed. This scene is in a sharp contrast with the pictures showing real harmony, which makes some of the spectators uncomfortable due to their instinctive, animalistic nature and urge them to look away: rhythmic co-movements in *Les Palets* and *Twins* imitating joint masturbation, the erotic scenes torn apart by conflicts, still expressing inseparable togetherness in *InTimE* or *Cage*, show more harmony than any perfectly arranged, glittering romantic scene.

Figure 6 *InTime—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography*

The man and woman smelling each other with animal passion often appear on Frenák's stage. Most recently in *Crazy_Runners – Parad_IS_e*[17], where a man and a woman are inseparably attuned to each other after the initial cautious acquaintance. Their beautiful dance performed to the song *Sag Mir Wo Die Blumen Sind* by Marlene Dietrich is not only a hymn of sensual love shaped on bodies, but also a painful monument to the suffering due to the loss of love.[18] While we see the love of two young people, because of the war history of Dietrich's song, it is impossible not to think of those lovers who were separated by violence. And in today's times of war, when the stories of the suffering of so many people reach us through the media, such a scene is heart-wrenching, the eroticism and beauty of which tries to exclude the outside world and convince the viewers that there is nothing more important than loving and embracing each other.

Figure 7 *Crazy Runners_Parad_IS_e (Zoe Lenzi and David Leonidas Thiel)—© Tamas Boczko*

According to Frenák humanity weaves its web and creates virtual systems in a manner where there is a chance, they will be unable to maintain control, and they will sooner or later end up drowning themselves. This thought was one of the inspirations for the creation of the piece called *Spid_Er*, where the dancers take on the form of spiders. Frenák was interested in metaphorically and in practice, physically, how to hold on to a huge net system. That is why he created perhaps the largest spider web in the history of dance, which resulted in an infinitely destabilized set for the dancers.

17 the date of the premiere: April 9, 2024

18 watch the trailer here: https://hu.frenak.hu/crazyrunners

Spider thematics are inexhaustible—nothing proves this better than the philosophies of Swedenborg and Nietzsche, which were also an inspiration for Frenák.[19] But we cannot ignore the association system inherent in the love life of spiders, which Frenák also brilliantly elaborated in this presentation. The courtship of the male spider is quite a dangerous game: the large female spider often considers the smaller male spiders to simply be its prey. That is why there are species where the male individuals rhythmically vibrate the female's web at the start of the courtship ritual to indicate that a suitor, and not a prey, has arrived. Certain species carry gifts to the female to divert her attention, so copulation can take place while she is preoccupied with consuming the gift. However, if two male spiders end up fighting over a female, the weaker individual who suffered the other's bite and the attacker continue to circle round and round for a long time on a secure thread until the victim is weakened.

The production *Spid_er* contains the passionate battle between the sexes, the various points of connection, and even the systems of various spirals that draw in or throw out. And the background is provided by an exceptional set where the possibilities of relating to the other individual are also toppled, and it is no longer possible to touch each other in the usual manner, standing on one's feet. In the key scene of *Spid_er,* the dominant spider woman spectacularly embraces her lover, with whom, despite all this, she floats on the life-giving thread in amazing harmony. Their rhythmic unison is elevated to a sacral act by the gradual rising with the rope.

Figure 8 *Spid_er (Bettina Jurák and Anibal Dos Santos) —© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography*

19 In my book I also examined the philosophy of Uexküll on spiders: "Philosophers identified centuries ago the analogy between people's systems of relations and struggles and the spider's genius web-building activities. Jakob Von Uexküll published his famous book in 1937, which has been widely cited ever since. One of the chapters of *A Foray Into the Worlds of Animals and Humans—With a Theory of Meaning* is entitled "The Interpretation of the Spider's Web". The author explains the connection between the world of people and the spider's web-spinning technique. Just as the spider weaves its web, all living organisms weave their relationships with the environment that surrounds them. Deleuze then adds, continuing Uexküll's theory, that the spider even creates its web, tailored to the fly, even without any knowledge of its prey. The spider metaphor of Swedish philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) is even older than Uexküll's" (Horváth, 2022, 2024, pp. 198-199).

Frenák is able to show that as incredible and rare as passionate encounters and vibrations are together, separations are so desperate and unacceptable. In the perhaps most moving duet of *InTimE*, the two male dancers are capable of rendering the same unity formed by two souls. The manipulation of the seemingly lifeless body by the other is not aggressive, but rather carefully protective, and at the same time desperate and incredulous, since we see the struggle of a man who doesn't want to believe and cannot accept that something is over, someone died or is just gone, as a result of which he must leave once and for all the fixed point, a source of happiness. The most painful of human emotions materializes in the suffering of the powerful man struggling with a motionless body. In the version revised in 2021, the unsurpassed harmony between the dancers can express all our losses and irresolvable hopelessness, which stems from some kind of incurable and inevitable grief connected to an irretrievable person or memory.[20]

Figure 9 *InTime, (Milán Maurer and Attila Emődi) —© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography*

Frenák often shows struggles and conflicts when someone cannot escape from a relationship, a situation, or from the bars he has built himself. Confinement into desire, passion, love, family bonds, illness, sorrow, illusion or obsession may also take a good direction, and may result in renewal, rebirth, such as in *Chaos*, in Frenák's solo, by the rejection of madness. One must go to hell in order to get into heaven, says Frenák, and sometimes spectators follow this path, too, if due to their memories, associations or current states of mind they are able to resonate with the spectacle and other sensations evoked by the piece. Philosophers have been professing for

20 watch the video here: https://hu.frenak.hu/ebook-videos/intime

thousands of years that philosophy starts with understanding our weakness and incorrigibility (e.g., Epictetus), and that the feeling of loneliness and fear turn man's investigation towards himself. When you come to think of it, disturbing questions of freedom and confinement appear in a person's life much more often than one could specifically express them. We might feel confined for a number of reasons, strangled by external or internal, spiritual, mental or physical shackles.

In his/her own cage, everyone is alone, at least he/she remains alone with his/her fears and doubts, which he/she cannot or does not want to put into words. In the 2019 *Cage*, Frenák presented the cage in concrete form for the first time as a stage for human comedies. In *Cage*, being locked up together is an important motif driving the characters' acts. The Other bursting into the uncertain fright of solitude or into an established system of relations from time to time redraws perceived and real systems of relations. The love triangle formed by a trio of two men and one woman turns into a real drama to the tunes of "Hiába menekülsz, hiába futsz, a sorsod elől futni úgyse tudsz" (Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, you can't escape your fate) sang by Katalin Karády. The running dancers (a man and a woman) around the cage evoke some kind of real harmony, and last but not least letting go for love that reinforces the impossibility of separation. Because at a certain moment, the woman pushes the man into the cage, where another man is eagerly waiting for him. We see a love triangle where a woman, out of love, pushes the man she loves into the arms of another man after the attraction between the two men becomes clear to her. Only the greatest attachment and love can do this, the idea of "go, enjoy yourself, but you can always come back to me." And the story continues with another twist, when we see that the man pushed into the cage, after all, needs guardianship, and also gives a serious task to the one who waited for him in the cage, because the uncertainty after the initial passion of the pushed man destroys everything.

The seeming transparency of space, the certainty of outside and inside is always illusory. We never really know who is actually closed in, the person who is running around outside, or the one who, having recognized his own feelings, keeps suffering inside? Taking various roles, we obediently (and sometimes cheerfully) become prisoners, or believe that by shaking off certain bonds we might be liberated. The brutal reality of the metal cage on the stage embodies those invisible, ghostly spiritual cages that might hold people captive and make them vulnerable. We can never predict who will have the fortitude to protect, comfort and lift the other, who will be willing to accept any role and situation for his/her love, and who will be the person immediately exhibiting the signs of madness, hiding in the safety of his/her own imagination.

Figure 10 *Cage (Eoin Mac Donncha, Fanni Esterházy, Anibal Dos Santos)—© Orsolya Véner*

In *InTime* we can also experience the impossible torment of a love triangle. The dynamic of the erotic trio taking place on the stage's only setting, the red sofa, is almost impossible to follow. Perfectly contrived lighting never allows us to see everything. Arms, legs, twisted trunks fight each other until suffocation. Someone else is always in a leadership position, someone is always lifted up and adored, but then they start tearing each other apart again. The joint movement of the three characters is so fast, wild, and passionate that the fact of the conscious, precisely developed choreography is almost unbelievable. Frenák can wrap the horror caused by the madness of passion in beauty. Such a raging struggle cannot be followed by happiness—Frenák is the master of showing destructive love and shameless savagery. When someone experiences relationships like the ones we see in *InTime*, sooner or later they reach their limits. We saw the explosive physical manifestation of something that we could no longer process on our own, for example in the scene where, at the end of one of the dancers' gagging, blood suddenly spewed out of her mouth. It is impossible for unbearable things not to surface in some physical symptom.

Figure 11 *InTime—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography*

Figure 12 *InTime—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography*

Frenák's representation of violence is never arbitrary—it draws attention to the cries for help of women pulled by their hair, of people dragged by their partners and the characters trying again and again and pushed back all the time. So that silent screams do not stay unnoticed. The impossibility of escape is felt in one of the most powerful scenes of *Cage*, where Fanni Esterházy rages to Janis Joplin's epic song, captured by a piece of bar trapped between her back and her faux

fur bolero jacket, initially neglecting the tight fetter that becomes truly torturous when a man from the cage starts to twist around her like an octopus. The soundless scream, the silent mouth shaping an O is a regularly recurring element in Frenák's pieces. The soundless scream is the liberation from the suffocating oppression of any limits and forms—even if only for a moment. An attempt to escape the feeling of confinement, but silent, since the person screaming has no strength to scream, or maybe because often nobody hears the screams of desperate people or at least a great part of people pretends not to see what led someone to the endpoint.

Figure 12 *Cage (Fanni Esterhazy and Eoin MacDonncha)—© István Huisz*

In Frenák's plays, we can often meet characters who do not jump into the vortex after a sudden, instinctive decision, but who consciously enjoy life and don't even know which pleasure to indulge in. They don't suffer deathly because of a love passion, they don't kill themselves in their grief, they just take their chances and enjoy everything that is superficial and simple. In Frenák's latest piece, *Crazy_Runners – Parad_IS_e*, there is a boy who comes on stage juggling apples. He bites into one, then the other, he doesn't even know which one, and dances across the square with pleasure. He is in stark contrast to the girl dancer, whose movements show that she barely drags herself. It shows that he can no longer exist under the weight of mental burdens. We hear as if a voice (God's or Satan's) tells her not to kill herself, it's not worth it, because she's so beautiful—and then, after the mysterious outside observer is satisfied with all the torture, shouts at her, "Kill yourself!", just let it be over. In this short scene of a few seconds, the insensitivity of the society is also shown, which cannot bear the mental state, the depressive state, even though today's conditions produce the most depressed people in the Western world.

Figure 13 *Crazy_Runners_Parad_IS_e (Gergely Cserháti and Eoin Mac Donncha)—© Csaba Mészáros*

The apple, which is primarily a symbol of sin for Christians, plays a particularly important role in this play. It evokes the world of Paradise, but it is also a symbol of the greatest sin committed by the first human couple. Humanity's history of thousands of years is overshadowed by an apple tree, with which humanity acquired divine knowledge. But what can you do with knowledge? *Parad_Is_E* refers to the archaic roots of the human form of existence, balanced on the boundary between reality and illusion, past and future, and flashes the ever-changing but never-disappearing bubbles of ignorance, isolation, confinement and exclusion. The basic question of the concept is: "How to proceed?" Millions of Adam and Eve wander the streets alone—they need each other, but it doesn't matter how they connect with each other. What if artificial intelligence takes the place of common sense and spontaneous emotions? That's why we are responsible, because AI is also programmed by people, it learns from us, it builds from our patterns. A big question is whether emotional development can catch up with the technical development that promises us the limitlessness of knowledge? Can we take advantage of the opportunity to access knowledge? Everyone is doing everything they can to ostensibly connect with something or someone while societies are in a heightened, seething, tumultuous state all over the world. In the new communication system resulting from the development of telecommunications, our relationships become impersonal due to the constant rush. On the stage, it is symbolized by a treadmill that is constantly working and always gives others an opportunity, a parade or a rush. Everyone rushes, searches, researches, unsatisfied. Helplessness prevails.

Figure 14 *Crazy_Runners_Parad_IS_e (Eoin Mac Donncha)—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography*

People are open to all temptations – "Eat too! Although you are happy, you can be happier!" It is as if we only hear the words of the serpent, Satan, in Milton's work, which awakens longing in the human soul. The dancers hide in the conceited attitude of today's man who wants to rule the world, and with the pulsating energy of movement dictated by the dynamics of the music and the lights, they create more and more chaos on the stage. They march like they're on the catwalk of a fashion show. They no longer meet or bump into each other, they just rush forward without paying attention to anyone. A huge transparent ball rolls in front of them, in which a girl is wrestling with a giant lifelike snake. As she rolls with the ball, the snake sometimes falls on her head, sometimes twists around her, sometimes she can even push him away–we can't be sure if the snake here is a symbol of the sin in Paradise or of a phallus, which often appears in different but never specific forms in the pieces of Frenák, or Kundalini, a fiery, sensual energy, and the Sanskrit symbol of magical creative power.

Figure 15 *Crazy_Runners_Parad_IS_e—© György Jókuti*

At the height of the madness, while the mysterious outside observer is running on the treadmill screaming "Stop!", darkness suddenly falls upon them. We feel that the Adams and Eves running around the world with different corporealities and spirits can only break out of the emptiness of apparent connections with their deeply experienced sincere feelings. This would perhaps be the recovery of Paradise. That is why Frenák chose the song *Les Paradis Perdus* sung by the French singers Christophe & Arno as the frame of the performance. At the beginning of the play, a man running at a crazy pace on a treadmill says out of breath in different languages: "One fine day I would like to find the lost Paradise with you." And during the performance, it's as if we really see the attempts that people are able to try on their own. They yearn for sincere touch, for loving relationships, they escape into marriage, they struggle, they find their place, and for a fleeting moment we can believe that this can be achieved, perhaps with the marriage of two innocent young people, but then Frenák makes it clear that women and the divine punishment that befalls men is a real entanglement. Suffering cannot be avoided. But something happens at the very end of the performance. After the sudden darkness, *Paradis perdus* is played and Frenák arrives on the lighted stage, conveying the lyrics of the song with the gestures and organic movement of deaf sign language. The magnified, exaggerated gestures are soon taken over by the other dancers and eventually they march back to "Paradise" together with the spectators randomly selected from the audience. After the music stops, there is still silence for a few moments—the audience is waiting in surprise: what will happen next? Where did they go? And in this case, usually a sudden burst of applause in the silence starts the storm of applause, and the dancers escort the spectators back to their seats, many of whom are so touched by the whole scene that they stumble back to their seats with tears in their eyes. The spiritual content that the combination of lights, sounds, and coordinated movement combinations evokes in the majority of viewers cannot be expressed in words. "Christophe's song 'Les paradis perdus' is a melancholic reflection on the passage of time. The opening lines, 'Dans ma veste de soie rose / Je déambule morose / Le crépuscule est grandiose,' set the tone for the song, with the protagonist wandering aimlessly in a luxurious yet empty world, feeling a deep sense of melancholy as the day turns to dusk. The refrain, 'Mais peut-être un beau jour voudras-tu / Retrouver avec moi / Les paradis perdus,' expresses a longing to recapture the lost paradises of the past. This desire

to return to a time of innocence and joy is a central theme of the song. Christophe's evocative lyrics and haunting melody create a powerful emotional experience that resonates with listeners, reminding us all of the fleeting nature of time and the preciousness of our memories."[21]

Figure 16 *Crazy_Runners_Parad_IS_e (Pál Frenák)—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography*

6. Erotic Radiance - Desired and Desirable Bodies

"Anyone who uses the art of movement to heal or choreograph, or just dances, gains all sorts of information from the resonances and physical experimentations he experiences, which they then have to become aware of. When we use the released energies in a creative manner, we will do so not in a sexual form of manifestation but in a form of creation, which requires a knowledge of the sources of the energies, the libido, the chakras, etc."
(Pál Frenák)

Everyone should know their own body, their body's reactions, their physical limits, but despite the fact that people living in the 21st century Western world have almost every opportunity to gain experience and learn, we know painfully little. The majority of people are not even aware of the most basic things, and still very few people admit that there may be serious psychological

21 https://www.lyricslayers.com/christophe/1326942/

factors behind the symptoms of their illnesses. According to Frenák, it is strange that in addition to the cult of physicality, the tendency to reject the body and to separate the body and the spirit is also growing, even though it should be obvious that the body cannot be separated from the soul/spirit: "I nurture my body through my mind, and the intellect gives the body its physical characteristics, its posture" (Péter, 2009, p. 41); "Mental firmness determines one's posture. The body is the cover of the soul. Everything leaks through, even the things we want to hold inside with concrete walls." —says Frenák. For an artist of movement the body is a constant presence and a permanent challenge. For someone working with the art of movement, curiosity, the discovery and unearthing of tantric energies, and the handling of energy is essential for creating a balance between body and the soul just as for the deep, functional understanding that promotes self-healing. Understanding this requires a global way of seeing things—Frenák had this in mind even at a young age. When he presented his thesis in Paris, the world-famous movement anatomy professor Hubert Godard said, "Frenák's novel form of movement, is the ABC of anatomy.". The somatic style therefore tells the discerning eye everything about the individual. A person who does not hear anything observes movement and physical reactions much better—Frenák instinctively learned this from his mother.

Frenák even selected his dancers based on what they radiate. The performances where he can freely decide on the performing artists always come across stronger. Certain roles are defined by their erotic charge, the natural occurrence of which cannot be substituted with anything. If there is no resonance between the audience and the artists and the dancers, the communication will fail. If the artist is unable to continuously maintain the tension, the scene becomes empty. That is why it is important that Frenák wants to work with personalities and not with bodies. He takes to the stage content that can only be built using emotions: technical aptitude is insufficient, and the artists must actively participate in the portrayal of the characters they play. "The relationship between corporality and content is fundamentally important: the form of expression is the projection of internal content, and the two are closely connected and based on each other. For someone to have strength on the stage, to be able to create tension, to give you a knot in your stomach when they run and then suddenly stop, that requires a great deal of internal substance. Artists have to project the energy frothing inside of them: the same energy that feeds the libido. Picasso also believed that the source of energy for art and eroticism is the same. It is important for all artists to find the balance", says Frenák (Horváth 2022).

Of course, erotic radiance is not about nudity. Someone either has it or they don't. People are instinctively able to perceive each other's erotic radiance. There are those in whom this arouses a sense of rivalry and who want to defeat the individual who causes excitement at all costs. It doesn't matter if the person is male or female. In Frenák's plays, the scenes in which a group of men begin to treat someone in a vile way as a sexual toy, in an exclusionary manner, are always decisive. The desire-inducing body can be a man's or a woman's—they are equally trying to gain power over it and thereby own it. They see another man's masculinity as a threat to themselves. Frenák mocks the "masculinity" of men prone to committing such violence. The trilogy of productions *The Hidden Men (Fiúk), Girls (Csajok)* and *Frisson* examined the role of gender and their relationship system. In an interview, Frenák analyzed his own play as follows: "In *The Hidden Men*, I was interested in the varieties of masculinity: how we live our manliness in our everyday lives and what social expectations are linked to it. I also wanted to explore how a man can integrate his own feminine side and experience himself as a complete unit. If someone pays close attention to the piece, they will be able to see the female sex even though it is not directly present. The rope, a symbol of the phallus, plays an important role in the performance: it shows

that most men are capable of standing straight only as long as they hang on to the rope. But as soon as they let go, they become fallen because they end up missing spiritual and intellectual stability. That is how an aggressive, macho man can become a helpless, thumb-sucking baby from one moment to the next" (Ménesi 2013).

Figure 17 *Fiúk (The Hidden Men)—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography*

In *The Hidden Men* "we gain an in-depth study of the basic types of the young male's nature: this is how we see the macho, the Narcissus, and the Hercules types. Frenák alternately portrays hatred, imbecilic demand, and the fragile balance of power between the figures".[22]

22 https://kultura.hu/frenak-pal-tarsulat-fiuk-130122/.

Figure 18 *Fiúk (The Hidden Men)—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography*

The rivalry between men and the torture of their partner, who differs from them in some way, was processed by Frenák in several of his plays. He also often brings up the negative effects of uncontrolled libido in his pieces. It is as if there is always revenge for otherness— especially from that certain feeling of ressentiment, which became known through Nietzsche's philosophy. Anyone who excels at something, mostly with something positive—intelligence, talent, beauty, sensitivity, striking erotic appeal—sooner or later becomes a victim. If such a person "falls" into an unknown environment, everyone tries to destroy him, defending his own position: by mocking him, setting him aside, beating him, ostracizing him, and in the worst case, using violence against him, if they can neither possess him nor defeat him in any other way. Certain scenes of the *Lutte* and *Fig_Ht* performances reflect this communal brutality most powerfully.

Figure 18 *Fig_Ht (Theo Pendle, Patrik Keresztes, Milán Maurer)—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography*

Figure 19 *Lutte (Patrik Keresztes, Milán Maurer, Kristóf Várnagy)—© Tamas Boczko*

But while in *Lutte*, the dancer suspended with straps attached to their back and the abdomen floats almost like an angel above those who want to pull him down, the character in *Fig_Ht* hanged by his ankles has no chance to defend against the raging of the three violent men jolting him and throwing him around, who are able to use their sexual energies only for demolition and insensible destruction. In *Fig_Ht*, the three machos' disorientation is particularly spectacular, when they lose sight of their toy, who still retains his elegance despite his condition. Frenák often portrays unbreakable spirits, people who others try to exploit and torment both spiritually and physically. Despite the suffering they bear, these people still remain vulnerable and steadfast. They rise above those who are morally far beneath them, such as the soaring figures portrayed in *Lutte* or *Fig_Ht*, or the female figures who do not reveal their true selves to their partners even after the brutal struggles they undergo, forever keeping their true emotions, true strength, and values to themselves. The doll-like female figure in *Instinct*, whose face portrays no emotion whatsoever, and the seemingly fragile woman in *Fig_Ht* endure a lot more than their environment would ever expect of them. They are those who never fully reveal themselves, to whom everyone else is an open book; and sometimes they end a destructive relationship with a decisiveness from which there is no turning back.

7. The Eroticism of the Kissless Mouths

The aesthetic of the eroticism of air or cigarette smoke inhaled from the other's mouth since the emblematic examples of cinematography—e.g., *Un chant d'amour* based on Genet's writings—is not unknown in the cultural history of audiovisual art either. In the performance *Festen*, the overwhelming intimacy of the few moments long scene by Pál Frenák and Attila Gergely stands in stark contrast with the violent scenes of the piece's soulless, aggressive characters. It could cause confusion to a stable and accepted personality when the spectator sees this on the stage, because they are forced to review their own personality: does the scene arouse a desire in them to do anything? And if the sight disgusts them, what's the reason for that? Only those can overcome their fears who dare to face them, at first as a spectator, and later on as an insider. Thus, in Bataille's writings, the mouth is the central place of eroticism, the possibility of violence and animality, just as it is on Frenák's stage, without references to Bataille. The same feeling as reading *Erotism* by Bataille. "Nothing is more closed off to us than this animal life that we emerged from," writes Bataille, according to whom the metaphor for animality is the mouth, to which he dedicated a separate essay. According to Bataille, the mouth is the most terrifying, most prominent, and most living part of animals. Among civilized men, the mouth has even lost the relatively prominent character that it still has among primitive men, but Bataille thinks that on important occasions, human life is still concentrated in the mouth: for example, grinning teeth may indicate fury, and in case of suffering and pain the face is distorted by a scream. The terrible scream ending the safety implied by the closed mouth eliminates stable identity (Bataille, 1986, pp. 59-60).

Figure 20 *Lakoma/Festen (Attila Gergely and Pál Frenák)—© FrenákArchive*

We never see a kiss in Frenák's performances. Intimacy manifests itself in other ways. As I mentioned before, in sudden encounters, glances, pauses. And the mouth has a special role. There is something in every opening mouth that causes disruption and anxiety, we could say, referring to Bataille's writings on eroticism, where the impact of animality resulting from instinct on human eroticism is clearly demonstrated: "We are animals anyway. Men and spirits we may be, but we cannot help the animal in us persisting and often overwhelming us. Opposite the spiritual pole stands the pole of sexual exuberance demonstrating how animal life persists in us," he writes (Bataille 1962, p. 150). Bataille presents kiss and eroticism as the opportunities for the mouth to rebel: mouth is the human zone where absurd animality condenses in an ecstatic and heightened emotional state, incomprehensible sounds that are the main features of human animality come out of the mouth. In the moment of a loud or silent scream coming out from the open mouth of the face distorted by pain or pleasure, stable identity that has been controlled disappears and is called into question.[23]

23 For a more detailed analysis of animality see: (Horváth 2022, 2024, pp. 201-209).

Figure 21 *Hymen (Nelson Reguera, Erika Vasas)—© Csaba Mészáros*

8. Symbols of Male and Female Togetherness

8.1 The Wedding Dress Slipped Aside

When Frenák touches upon the myth of marriage, such as in *Hymen* (the title of which is a reference to both Hymenaeus, the patron of marriage, and the name of the virginal membrane [the hymen vaginae], he paints no billowy clouds but rather takes a peek at the reality behind the white bridal dress, a more realistic version of the images of desire, the struggle between the families of the united persons, the tension stemming from social differences, and spiritual and physical pain, which are the natural parts of a shared life of a couple, of raising children, and of loss. The characters are startled by the sight of the projected image of the elderly lady dressed in her wedding dress, as if they were afraid of age and the possibility that the body will undergo transformations. Frenák asked his own mother to play in the video, who, with her life of struggles and eight children, is herself the symbol of strength, of saying yes to life, and of knowledge gained from experience. Rather than calling the audience to account, her appearance in the video is rather an encouragement: she has already accepted what the younger generation may not have yet, that, to quote Kierkegaard, life can only be understood by looking backward; but it must be lived looking forward.

The wedding dress is a symbol of everything a woman goes through in marriage, in a relationship, becoming a mother and giving birth. A symbol of desires, dreams and disappointments. Since Frenák's dancers always wear wedding dresses that have slipped to one side, we sense that something is wrong in the character's life, that something did not work out as planned. The tattered wedding dress is also a symbol of the loss of innocence, and when we look at this interpretation, it becomes clear why it is often seen on male dancers. The wedding dress also appears in the latest performance, *Parad_IS_e*. The girl performing solo in a wedding

dress is also looking for opportunities, but in the end she tries to commit suicide. In the duet he danced with his partner, we feel his thrashing, the suffocating situation, the man's violent expressions, and his masculine energies. This is also a kind of relationship 'neither with you nor without you', which can only end with a drastic breakup.

Figure 22 *Crazy Runners_Parad_IS_e (Vivian Ferencz and Viktor Banga)—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography*

8.2 Blood and Mud

Perhaps Frenák has never consecrated the union of two people as much as in *Parad_IS_e*. In a duet inspired by the wedding scene of Zefirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, we see the vows of two young, innocent beings. They arrive on stage with a carefully folded white sheet and two small bowls. The two bowls are gently placed next to each other, and then the sheet is spread exactly on the square, which is the only brightly lit small space on the stage. They kneel on the neatly arranged sheet, take the bowls in front of them, and then, listening to the voice of an imaginary priest, they they take wedding vows. Although the viewer only sees the two kneeling dancers with strings of lights above their heads, based on the priest's voice, he can fully immerse himself in the ceremony, its sacred power, and its uniqueness. All of a sudden the *Ave Maria* is played, the lovers look at each other cautiously, their innocence is almost palpable. They gently discover each other, but after a few hugs and freer movements, they crouch down to the small bowls that were placed earlier and begin to apply its contents to themselves. It takes a few moments for us to realize that the girl smears blood and the boy dirt, as if they were only taking the punishment of the couple expelled from Paradise. The woman gives birth to her child with blood and pain, and the man cultivates the land with his sweat, which ensures his livelihood. Both of them are doomed to fight, no matter how well their fates started. Although the *Ave Maria* is still playing, they are already pushing each other bloody and muddy. The mixing of blood and mud melts the man and the woman together. They cannot ignore each other, because they bear each other's "signs" and

colors. When they walk across the painted sheet and off the canvas, they leave their traces on the stage. The main director, the mysterious outside observer, who now suddenly jumps off the treadmill, finds his soiled garden unbearable. How can they believe that imagining themselves to be brilliant painters, they leave the colorful canvas there? Suddenly, a figure running onto the stage, wallowing in the couple's prints, takes their memory with him along with the sheet. They didn't disappear without a trace, because someone took their memories.

Figure 23 *Crazy Runners_Parad_IS_e (Zoe Lenzi and David Leonidas Thiel)—© Katalin Bobál, bobal photography*

Blood and mud have appeared in Frenák's plays before, for example in the closing scene of *Cage*, in the love scene of the two dancers, where the two find each other sliding in the muddy mud, and their entanglement knocks down the huge metal cage in which they existed for the entire length of the performance. As if only the power of their fusion could knock down even the external barriers, all the obstacles that used to be their limits. One of the bloodiest scenes can be seen in *Frisson*. Márta Péter writes in her analysis on *Frisson* that Frenák plays on the verge of tragedy and comedy, therefore it's not possible to take the scene seriously where three figures dance samba, while a female figure tries to balance in the middle of the tilted stage covered in blood (Péter, 2009, p. 169-170). This scene is immensely sad to me, although laughter can always be heard from the audience. Instead of relieving the horror of the situation, the three figures dancing samba merely intensify it, because this shows real indifference: while one person is writing his own story with blood, others are carelessly having fun. It is as if this scene also shows two types of people: on the one hand, the one who constantly suffers under the burdens of life, torments himself and others torment him, and cannot escape from the traps of life. On the other hand, those who take obstacles easily and never go so deep into anything that they have to crawl

in blood, concretely or symbolically.

9. Conclusion

Frenák clearly sympathizes with those who instinctively and deeply live their lives and relationships and are never prudish, hypocritical or comfortable. He respects those who face difficulties in life, who have to fight for their well-being and for their families. He respects women who can rise from anything, who don't let life beat them down. "Sometimes the chaotic systems of life create perfection", he states, so no wonder that he not only enters into chaos, but, if necessary, he even creates it in order to break a complacent or untruthful order, from which nothing authentic can be born. The philosophical thought of breaking the order, the statement/acceptance of chaos, facing with chaos—the itemization of contingency is the most inherent essence of the philosophy of Deleuze respected by Frenák and the Japanese Butoh. Frenák's pieces dive into chaos, they "struggle against the clichés of opinion" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 204)[24] He transforms perceived chaos—according to the Deleuzean conception—into composed chaos, thus "from the chaos he extracts a chaoid sensation as variety" (Ibid.).

The real dance embodies the inner voice. This is why Kazuo Ohno always said at his workshops: "Listen with your whole body and spirit. In doing so, the core of the body, your soul, will open itself up and embrace the music. Your movements will start coming to life as soon as you listen with your body and soul" (Ohno and Ohno, 2004, p. 28).

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24 Reference to Deleuze's statement that "artists struggle less against chaos (that, in a certain manner, all their wishes summon forth) that against the »clichés« of opinion", see: Deleuze and Guattari, What is philosophy?, p. 204.

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Erotics in Lacan's Schema L

Tomasz Gil

Abstract: *Lacanian theory of the subjective is based on the idea that Desire is a lack that arises in the subject in the process of introduction into the symbolic world of society where all interactions are mediated by language. The subject is evicted from the immediacy and intimacy of the world of the Mother and pushed into the symbolic world of the Father. The loss translates into a condition of lack and constitutes desire as a feature/faculty of the psyche. Desire resides in the unconscious where access to it is interpolated by language. Lacanian theory of the subject provides concepts allowing us to understand the mechanisms of desire and how they play out internally within the psyche as well as socially between subjects. A principal axis of these interactions is speech — connecting the individual to the social aspect of the psyche — the Big Other. Other such axes realize the function of imagination, sublimation and unconscious construction of a path of desire navigating the subject toward the Real. The Real is the lost world of the Mother, which had been once present at the time of birth, and which the subject attempts to recover. They are represented and described graphically in Lacan's Schema L where the main points of interest relate to language. The chief goal of the paper is to demonstrate how erotic experience participates in the structure of the subject and how it fits into the interactions of Schema L. Specifically, the erotic experience is found on the axis of interaction of the Real with object a (objet petit a). In order to relate erotics to performance arts (and dance specifically), we will situate the latter within Schema L as well..*

Keywords: *"object a", Lacan, erotic, "the Real", desire, symbolic, "imaginary relationship", "Schema L".*

1. Introduction

In Freud's theory (Freud, Freud Reader 1989) the subject of mental life constitutes itself in response to being immersed in social conditions as a sexual being. The individual — called the **subject** in psychoanalysis — emerges in the social world in the process of being separated from the embrace of the mother. He is forever losing the boundless intimacy of her embrace and is introduced into the world where all functions need to be performed according to the rules of the world. The definitive loss of the mother's embrace is felt by the subject as the lack marking his desire and directing his "drives" which are pathways toward the repair of the loss or restoration of the lost intimacy. Mostly, these pathways are plotted across the unconscious knowledge accumulated in the process of coming out of the mother's embrace and into the grip of the rules of the world. In Freud's theory, the subject chiefly falls on obstacles in efforts

to realize his sexuality as the world offers few solutions — unacceptable to many individuals. In the conflict between sexuality and society the "drives" become frustrated and repressed — meaning pushed down to reside in the unconscious.

Lacan formalizes and modernizes Freud's theory by shifting emphasis from sexuality toward language and the formalism of signification that pervades and conditions the mental aspects of functioning of individuals in the world. "Lacan's faithfulness to Freud produced something that goes way beyond Freud" writes Leupin (Leupin, p.xxiii) referring to his formal structuralist rigor which then yielded additional results like a mathematical theory.

This article is focused on the most structuralist aspect of Lacan — which is Schema L. In my view Lacan's achievement lies in a theory of the subjective rather than in developing clinical psychoanalytic techniques. Had he completely succeeded, his theory would be supported by solid mathematical constructs which are formalizations of fundamental intuitions. Lacan did not receive suitable support from actual mathematicians to achieve that.

Leupin aims to extract the most profound insights in Lacan's theoretical thought. Schema L is one of such attempts — and, in my view, is also the most important. I regard the work of Leupin as an attempt to formulate a Lacan doctrine, which is a teachable form of a theory, and to provide an outline of a handbook or manual. Leupin's book is like a handbook in that it firmly articulates major tenets of Lacan's theory of the subjective. I am aiming for a minor addition to his handbook, namely, situating the erotic within Schema L.

Lacan never mentions the erotic as a dimension of experience or mental life of the subject, consequently, there is hardly anything to quote from Lacan on the topic. Nevertheless, Lacan leaves the unlabeled arc in Schema L that seems to fit this function.

2. Schema L

Lacan introduced Schema L early on to illustrate the functioning of the psyche in its capacities of imaginary, symbolic and unconscious functions (Lacan, Écrits, Seminar on the Purloined Letter, p40). Schema L attempts to provide a view of interdependencies between these functions and a structural interpretation.

Schema L is a network structure representing the psychic organization of the subject that emphasizes the contrasts between what seems to be internal vs external and immanent vs transcendent. There are four nodes (in graph theory called "vertices"), with only some connected, representing positions of the subject. The links between nodes (in graph theory "edges") are to represent mental functions of the subject.

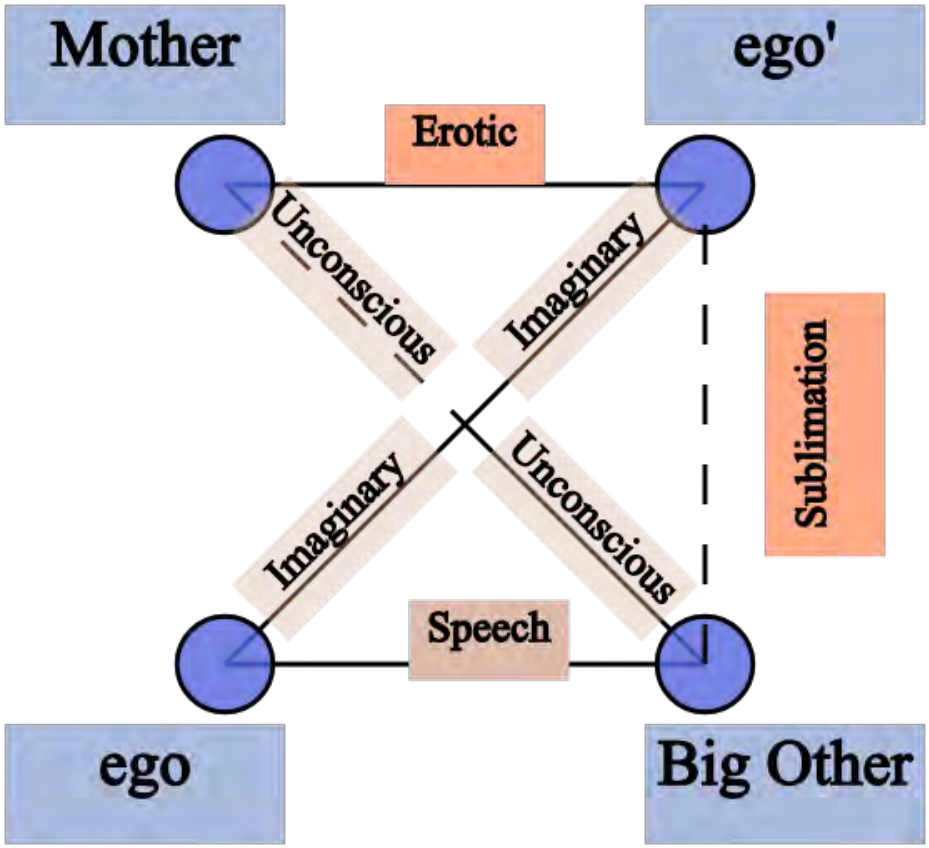

Figure 2 *Lacan's Schema L. Legend of other terms approximately equivalent: Mother is also Desire, the Thing, the Real, id, Es, Sacred; ego is also Subject, I, Ich, $; Big Other is also Logos, the Symbolic, l'Autre, Superego; ego' is also object a, constitutive of the Imaginary order, fetish, fantasy. In orange: two new labels introduced in this work: Erotic and Sublimation.*

Let's start with the subject at the place of the *ego* or *I* — the lower left node, which is the place where the subject stands equipped with language to deal with the world. The subject comes to this place in the process of child development involving separation from the embrace of the mother — just like in Freud. The place of the Mother is in the upper left node. Lacan draws no link connecting the ego and Mother apparently to represent the finality of the separation.

The position of *ego* of ordinary experience where the subject is embedded in the world is seen as the world of speech — the Logos. I, the subject, need to present myself to the world using speech, adopt its techniques and acquire power to get what I want. The first words and formulas have been given to me by my mother — "I am a young boy, I am five years old." Every day I learn more from the world and get more from it. At a point I learn that there is a documentation trail about my existence, that I am part of the Logos, that it creates stories about me and enforces rules about me. My *ego* is built up as a pact of coexistence with the Logos — the world of signifiers supported by language and speech.

The Logos is designated by Lacan as the Big Other or *l'Autre* (written with capital A or O) and is also called the Symbolic order. Within the Symbolic order the subject functions as an artifact of signification through language. The Symbolic order names objects, creates rules and

distinctions and so regulates access to objects that we want. It supports power and its institutions. It purports to provide pathways to fulfillment, but they are narrow and ultimately ineffective because they direct the subject toward signifiers buried in the unconscious. The process of creation of the ego by separation from the Mother assures that knowledge of desire is lost and needs to be rediscovered through the interaction with others — both in the guise of Big Other (Logos) as well as small other (*object a, ego*'). In Schema L, the Symbolic is represented by the node in the right bottom corner. Lacan frequently refers to the link between *ego* and Big Other as the function of language and speech.

The upper two nodes are positions where the subject touches immanence — we already mentioned the position of the Mother — an echo of Freudian ideas of return to the mother. More poignantly, the Mother represents the very touchstone of reality, as the place where being originates and quite possibly expires — without recourse to the world of signifiers. Lacan calls it the Real, the Thing and the place of Desire which now gets substituted for the Freudian Mother. Freudian "return to the Mother" becomes in Lacan a separation from the Mother which leaves the subject with a loss, which he attempts to fill throughout his life in the process of pursuing his Desire. I'll talk more about the Real in the following, as well as about the position of the *object a*, which I also wish to call *ego*'. This is the position of the harbinger of the Real that the subject senses through the Imaginary register which develops on the axis *ego* — *ego*'. In Schema L the Imaginary order connects the *ego* not with the Big Other but with the *ego*' or *object a* placed in the upper right corner. *ego*' and its function is the main topic of this article.

The diagram in Fig. 1 introduces the additions to Schema L proposed here. The arc between the *ego*' and Mother/Desire is labeled as **Erotic** since, as will be argued, it corresponds to our grasp of this concept. A by-product of our considerations we have a new arc and label — **Sublimation** — designating the process where ego' is elaborated by the Symbolic order.

3. Oedipal eviction

Lacan sees the process of separation from the mother as fundamentally shifting the subject from the sexual reality of being a child toward the Symbolic world from where the subject needs to find a way to inhabit his sexual being — among other matters of desire. The intimacy with the mother disappears as a consequence of the process of initiation into the world of language. Language, speech and the law — the Symbolic order — are the new external systems that the subject is expected to embrace. One could say that an *extimacy* with the Logos replaces the intimacy with the Mother and that sexuality tends toward the Symbolic — becoming a feature of the Logos. This is the Oedipal cut where the mother is actually the one that pushes the child subject away from herself toward the Logos in a way evicting him from the place of original intimacy. The eviction from the mother and initiation into the Symbolic and Imaginary order set the young subject on the path of reconstruction of the lost intimacy. This eviction or estrangement from the unified mother-child body proceeds gradually at the same time that the reconstitution along other paths is being prepared.

The Symbolic order is predicated on distinction and difference (Leupin, p13) — as it is the space of language and the law. Yet, as the introduction into the Symbolic is the main mechanism of repression, much of its content is placed in the unconscious. Lacan has famously stated: "the unconscious has the structure of language." (Lacan, public statements)

However, this also means that much of what the subject knows and desires cannot be uttered unless it happens in the discourse of dreams or in a psychoanalytic session. Lacan posits that the

Symbolic order hosts a master signifier residing in the unconscious and inaccessible to ordinary discourse. The master signifier — also called the Phallus — is the key that answers to the subject's mental structure — aka his Desire. Since this key signifier is unavailable it is seen as the signifier of what is missing — that it is the signifier of Lack. Therefore Desire is constituted by the Lack proceeding from the insufficiency of the Symbolic order. (Lacan, Écrits, Signification of the Phallus, p. 685).

4. Mirror stage and the gaze — awareness of the body

Apart from speech, the subject — as a child — acquires the awareness of the body. Initially, the subject's body is not strongly differentiated from the body of the mother. It emerges from the intimacy with the mother, originating in the deep sexual intimacy of gestation in the womb and birth. However, when the child subject's awareness grows, the relationship with the mother recedes further into the background — it slips away and becomes the material of the unconscious.

The acquisition of body awareness proceeds through the "mirror stage" and happens in concert with the acquisition of speech and symbolic system during the withdrawal of the mother's body. (Lacan, Écrits, Mirror stage as Formative of the I Function, p75)

The mirror stage is the point where the subject, upon seeing the body in a mirror reflection, realizes that he is seen. The subject realizes that he has an image. This comes with an element of jubilation. Lacan says: "The jubilant assumption of his specular image (...) seems to me to manifest (...) in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form." (Lacan, Écrits, Mirror stage as Formative of the I Function, p76) The awareness of being seen and of having an image reinforces the position of the other as the seeing other — in addition to the speaking/symbolic Big Other. Lacan posits the relationship with the seeing other as the imaginary relationship. The subject is seen — but the seeing other is also seen by the subject. The gaze, thus established, is reciprocal as the subject being seen constructs the imaginary other as an object of the gaze.

The subject discovers the capacity of seeing other individuals in the world and treating them as objects of the gaze. These objects are designated by Lacan as *object a* (small a for *le petit autre*). The relationship based on seeing/being seen dynamic is the foundation of the Imaginary order — the second component of the psyche after the Symbolic. The *ego* subject (that is subject in the mode of the ego) relates to *ego*' on the basis of similarity rather than distinction.

Thus the *ego* subject, after being evicted from the body of the mother, is placed on two tracks — the Symbolic, which leads toward the Logos, and Imaginary, which is the track of Eros, as I shall shortly argue.

In his essay "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet" (Lacan, 1977) Lacan lays out the status of *object a* and the principles of entanglement of the Symbolic and Imaginary order on the basis of Shakespeare's Hamlet where he places the chief protagonist in the position of the *ego* subject. This is the closest he comes to addressing the erotic. After asserting that Ophelia is Hamlet's *object a*, he says:

> *With respect to the object a, at once image and pathos, the subject feels himself to be in an imaginary situation of otherness. This object satisfies no need and is itself already relative, i.e. placed in relation to the subject. (...) the subject is present in the fantasy. And the object is object of desire only by virtue of being the end-term of the fantasy. The object takes the place (...) of what the subject is — symbolically — deprived of.*

The last formulation is repeated again in the next paragraph. (p.15) The *object a* is the focus of the search for the lost object of primordial relations. What the Mother has purged away pushing the child subject toward the Symbolic has reappeared in the Imaginary. Indeed, a few pages later, Lacan asserts that Ophelia is the "O phallos" — the surrogate phallus or master signifier (p. 20), and that the *object a* is not so much an object of desire as object **in desire**. (p.28) The *object a* is partaking in desire as it marks the "immanent presence of the phallus" (p.34).

5. The reciprocality of the gaze

The gaze is mutual — because it is based on the similarity principle rather than the symbolic designation. The subject as the *ego* is aware of being seen by the other in the capacity of *object a* — or as *ego*'. Unlike the Big Other, which purports to lay out the interaction in the articulation of speech and partially answers the question "what do you want?" within the Symbolic order, the *object a*, or *ego*', appears to see, or potentially sees, something beyond the symbolic articulation of the subject. The aspect being seen is an unspeakable fascination that *ego*' potentially harbors for *ego* proper. By the mutuality of the gaze, the ego subject also develops a fascination with *ego*'. This can be captured in the formula:

Since you see me like I cannot see myself, then I see you the way you cannot see yourself.

The gaze is a peekaboo game in which both sides imagine to discover something about each other that is otherwise impossible, impossible within the Symbolic order.

What is it about oneself that the *ego* (or *ego*') subject cannot see? It is the connection to the lost intimacy of the child-mother relationship, the vestiges of that relationship that ego still holds on to. The mutuality of the gaze permits the *ego* to see the stem of that lost primordial (pre-Oedipal) immanent world in the *ego*'.

The gaze is always going to capture a partial view, as it is obstructed by the symbolic apparatus of the ego. The lost primordial world is already indicated by the broken symbolic path of unconscious knowledge. It is also negatively indicated by the mother evicting the child from her embrace into the Symbolic order as a young *ego*. *ego*' becomes the glimpse of the world of the primordial intimacy.

These three points: *ego*, symbolic unconscious and *ego*' — are the vantage points into what Lacan calls the Real order and which I have provisionally termed as the primordial intimacy. That last path of accessibility of the Real I will call the Erotic.

The Real is where the lost intimacy resides. In Schema L it is located in the left upper node — already known as the Mother. The Real is the locus of Desire, which is described by the master signifier of lack, the lost object in the process of initiation into the Symbolic order, and accessible apparently through the imaginary *ego*'.

Lacan did not really offer any name for the path I presently call Erotic, but nevertheless the link connecting ego' and the Real is always drawn without much commenting. What is not drawn is the edge representing the vantage point of the ego into the Real on the left side of the diagram — vertically connecting. However, the Real-*ego* edge is quite much talked about as the vector of eviction of a young *ego* from the Mother's body. Perhaps the absence of the edge is designed to indicate the gravity and finality of this eviction.

6. The Real

The Real is more than the primordial intimacy. "The Real is not an agency or an order; it is a set whose contents are unknown." (Leupin, p16) Lacan uses the Freudian concept of *das Ding* (eng. the Thing) to introduce the concept of the Real in Seminar VII (Lacan, Seminar VII, The ethics of psychoanalysis). He contrasts the world of representation, in play in the Symbolic and Imaginary orders, with the nature of the Real as the inexorable "need to live" or in German "*Not des Lebens*." He says: "*Das Ding* is the primordial function that is located at the level of the initial establishment of the gravitation of the unconscious *Vorstellungen*." (eng. representations) (Lacan, Seminar VII, The ethics of psychoanalysis, p62) The Real exists beyond the conscious and unconscious representations of the Symbolic order and beyond the intuitions of the Imaginary order. It is the space where the signifiers are struggling to deploy. Lacan uses St Paul's Epistle to the Romans — substituting the Thing for the Law (Lacan, Seminar VII, The ethics of psychoanalysis, p83):

> *But the Thing finds a way by producing in me all kinds of covetousness thanks to the commandment, for without the Law the Thing is dead. But even without the Law, I was once alive. But when the commandment appeared, the Thing flared up, returned once again, I met my death. And for me, the commandment that was supposed to lead to life turned out to lead to death, for the Thing found a way and thanks to the commandment seduced me; through it I came to desire death.*

The Real is the sense of the ultimate condition of life which appears as unfathomably grounded in the experience of the body yet also placed beyond the direct grasp of that experience. Of course, two types of events of life that slightly evade the grasp of experience are birth and death. And both of them relate to the more reachable experiences of sex and violence.

The Real hosts the limit experiences, which cannot be easily had or repeated without risk of destruction and those that are not easily amenable to representation. The Real order hosts the Desire which itself is a symbolic Lack, a Lack that cannot be approached without risk of destruction.

However, the Erotic is not like that.

The imaginary *ego*' displays glimpses of reality of life in fragments — objects — that are consumed by the gaze. These can be incomplete fragments of the body, like eyes, lips, buttocks, feet, fingers and certainly genitals, — with special attention given to creases, openings and folds of the body that veil the Real and yet promise to reveal it — armpits, groin, hands, arms, breasts. It is not just the actual flesh that functions as a lure of the gaze but its ornaments — clothes, shoes, jewelry, eyewear, surroundings of the body — domestic or theatrical. In other words the *ego*' is a lure that generates fetishes — objects that function outside of the body to grant it meaning. The objects of the gaze external to the body become its extensions — and are quite often actual prosthetic devices — like shoes and eyeglasses.

To be sure, since the imaginary axis connects *ego* and *ego*' in a mutual fashion, the subject as *ego* engaging in the imaginary function will easily engage in the behaviors he sees in *ego*'. *ego*' is the shining lure of the Real beckoning to proceed along a path not provided by signifiers from the Symbolic. This lure, in what is now called the Erotic, illuminates the path toward the Real. The imaginary objects on the Erotic track are magnetized by the presence of the Real rather than mobilized by the Symbolic.

7. Literary realizations of the *ego — ego'* imaginary relationship

Similar to Lacan's exploration of Hamlet, I can think of many well-known examples in literature where the imaginary relationship is in play. Literary creators, authors of novels, have had the intuitive insights into the workings of the human psyche before and outside psychoanalytic theories. The elements of Schema L can be seen at work in the many literary examples reaching much greater length than exceeding the space of this article. I'll mention works such as "Great Gatsby", a 1920s novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Bram Stoker's novel "Dracula" (published 1897), "The Age of Innocence," by Edith Wharton, published in 1920 — all dated within the age of Freud and Lacan.

One example stands out for me as a vivid elaboration of Schema L. Leo Tolstoy's well-known novel "Anna Karenina" (published 1878) presents a near perfect example of the whole Schema L. Anna is settled in St Petersburg with her husband, Karenin, a successful government official, and their young child. She is well settled in the sense of the subject being invested in her *ego* and the Symbolic order. Yet she is not satisfied with her life and is seeking for something. She travels to Moscow to visit with her family and friends. The moment of arrival is very telling. When the train arrives she briefly meets the eye of her future lover, Vronski, of whom she had heard but who is at the station due to another arrangement. Yet something else happens — as if the genius of the writer had an intuition of Schema L. A railroad worker is crushed by the wheels of the train by unfortunate accident — a worker she also had glanced at earlier. The worker was checking the axles of the train cars while she saw his gleaming eyes on a face darkened by coal dust and oil, and hardened by work. That was the Real — the Real which she could not pursue directly. The gaze toward Vronski was also a glance into the Real. To complete the scene, Vronski, being an army officer in uniform, takes command of the situation after the deadly accident.

Vronski is Anna's *ego'* and leads inexorably toward the Real. Once, during the brief initial encounter at the railway station disturbed by the accident. Second, by taking charge and ordering some disposition in the situation post-accident. Third, by being Anna's actual *ego'* that leads her into the disastrous romance ruining her family life and leading her to suicide under the wheels of a train. Vronski is the *ego'* that leads Anna on the path of the Erotic into her death which is the impossible completion of her Desire.

8. Dance and performance arts

Performance arts operate combining the Symbolic and the Imaginary order and exhibiting the *object a*. As the Imaginary is governed by similarity rather than distinction, the subject can access *object a* via the gaze rather than language. This path avails the subject with the capacity of *object a* to unveil the numinosity in which it is rooted — this is erotic ideation. It is especially apparent in dance arts which always reach toward a strong exhibition of the body and its movement which outweighs the presence of signifiers in contrast to theater, which sends the signifiers ahead of the body on the stage.

In addition to being the carrier and exhibitor of *object a*, the body is also the ground of experience. Merleau-Ponty in the "Phenomenology of Perception" talks about the body:

> *The body therefore is not one more among external objects, with the peculiarity of always being there. If it is permanent, the permanence is absolute and is the ground for the relative permanence of disappearing objects, real objects. The presence and absence of external objects are only variations within a field of primordial presence, a perceptual domain over which my body exercises power. (Merleau-Ponty, p.105-106)*

This "field of primordial presence" corresponds to and confirms what Schopenhauer calls the "objectivity of the will" manifested by the presence of the body (Schopenhauer, p100). The body appearing in dance arts, with the significance of the ground of experience, imports a lot of signifiers through the imaginary function of the subject — a lot of material for constructing *ego*'. Furthermore, the body, by virtue of movement, multiplies its presence and interrogates its variability. Erin Manning quotes Brian Massumi on this topic:

> *"When a body is in motion," writes Massumi, "it does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own transition: its own variation.... In motion, a body is an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary" (Manning, Kindle Locations 497-498).*

The dancing body positions the subject in the place of *object a* and amplifies its imaginary functions. Let us look at a few specific examples situating dance in the understanding of Schema L.

9. Butoh and expressionism

The Japanese dance art of Butoh developed after World War II sourcing its inspiration to both traditional Japanese theater and performance art and German expressionism. The chief method of performance is a mental transformation of the body into another body, perhaps dead or nonhuman, and presenting dance according to inner landscape thus developed. The founders of the form talked about the mental condition required for the performance as Ankoku — which means transport to the place where the living meet the dead, a place of very special spiritual qualities.

A founding Butoh artist, Natsu Nakajima, talks about Ankoku, while opposing it to the "dualism of the Occidental culture":

> *I am bewitched, not by the scriptural quest in the field of language, but rather, by learning in the field of the body (Nakajima)*

Further, "Ankoku Butoh (...) is based on the eastern belief of body-mind/body-heart unity. We hold the belief of the total body and the view of "body as the scene of a full life"." (Nakajima)

She recalls the Butoh master Tatsumi Hijikata speaking of the necessity to "shed the skin of our body that has been tamed and domesticated" and refers to "the body that becomes nothing." (Nakajima)

We can very clearly discern the interest in the imaginary function, based in the dancing body, and keeping the Symbolic order at bay. The imaginary body becomes "the ego'" that facilitates the transformation into full life or into nothingness — a place beyond language which we know as the place of Desire or the Real. The Butoh project is thus an erotic project in the sense of the enhanced Schema L.

A Butoh dancer and author, Sondra Horton Fraleigh, talks about expressionist and modern dance connections of Butoh in her book "Dancing into Darkness" (Fraleigh). She acknowledges and elaborates the conflict between the Japanese and Western view of the sublime, where the latter sees it as an overcoming of the body. The Japanese aesthetic would see it in a surrender to the force of nature. She also contrasts "Sankai Juku's aesthetic with the sexually conflicted

sublime of the German expressionist Pina Bausch" whereas Sankai Juku, a renowned Butoh dance company, practices shibui — a Japanese quality of sublime, claimed to be "nondualistic." (Fraleigh, p66)

The work of Pina Bausch, by contrast to Sankai Juku, is full of brutal gendered conflict. Specifically, in the The Rite of Spring (1975) production of Pina Bausch:

> *The thrall of her works summons a terrible sublime. Her aesthetic is not beautiful, nor does it produce the pleasure with associate with this term. She exploits the terror of male impotence in the face of feminine sexuality and plays upon cruelty in both sexes. The virgin's blood sacrifice, her dualistic awakening and resistance, is epitomized in Bausch's riveting choreography. (Fraleigh, p74)*

The dancer performing the virgin sacrifice dance of death is reported speaking about her performance: "I really dance in Sacre, I dance until I die." (Fraleigh, p74)

> *There is a psychological mounting and surmounting of energies, but no sublime overcoming of the body by the mind. There is fate, and there is nature's powerful approach. Spring pulses in the blood. The timpani builds to a breaking point, as the dancer pitches forward. She plunges face down like a piece of timber in the silent air. No one stirs after her fall. (Fraleigh, p74)*

This is a palpable scene of the consumption of an individual life by the Real, seen as indomitable force of nature.

In contrast, the "dualistic" overcoming of the flesh is apparent in ballet. As a side topic, Fraleigh also mentions Balanchine who commented that "ballet is a garden of beautiful women and I am the gardener." (Fraleigh, p76) This is in line with the view of the sublime where "the body is the vehicle of the sublime, but only as it is surpassed. Thus the sublime signals a triumph of reason, or mind over body — a mind that is more than merely mental, one that takes pleasure in both concealing and elevating its power over nature." (Fraleigh, p77)

I am not taking part in the above discussion, but merely exhibiting it in order to show dance through the lens of the Lacanian Schema L concepts discussed here. There is a search for the sublime and the erotic: masculine *jouissance* as well as sacrifice to force of nature that can be equated to a consuming desire that results from identification with *ego*'. In the words of Nakajima we can read attempts to articulate the magnetic attraction of the Real that motivates the erotic. In the work of Pina Bausch we read a struggle and surrender to the erotic force leading to the Real through sacrifice. On the other hand, Balanchine, in his words, gives a very good expression of the symbolic function process capturing the inscrutable Real in the network of sublimation in contrast to Bausch's confrontation of the imaginary *ego*' with the reality of sex and death.

10. Argentine Tango

Argentine Tango is a social partner dance that follows a very specific technique. It is mostly talked about as embrace where the two dancing partners approach each other physically and maintain a space where their interaction unfolds. The dancers state:

> *Central to the art of tango is the embrace, a fundamental component that sets it apart*

> *from other dance forms. The embrace in tango is not merely a physical gesture but a profound means of communication and connection between partners. (Ultimate Tango)*

While the dance is improvised, it follows certain rigorous technical precepts and happens in close physical contact unusual for social dance. The embrace extends beyond the dancing itself into the culture of courtship and partner selection. The space created by the embrace is charged with meaning supplied by this cultural environment. The dancers play with distance and closeness where they create staging for the gaze and sensual pleasure demarcated by the structure of the dance. The music and the lyrical content of the songs adds the context of a romantic gendered love relationship as well as erotic tension. We can see the embrace as having a Symbolic function securing the dancing couple outwardly and embedding it in a culture. Along with the technique it provides rich equipment for masculine, symbolic *jouissance*.

The improvised dance occurring inside the embrace realizes the lures and promises of the imaginary body precisely in the manner of the erotic function leading ego toward the place of Desire. Denniston says:

> *Tango took place not on the level of the floor, but on the level of the hearts. The movement of the feet was a symptom of the movement of the hearts, caused by it, not causing it. It was the followers heart that danced. The leader's job was to make that happen. (Denniston, p30)*

In tango the dancing body is the *object a* that opens the gates of Desire seen as romantic love relationship enacted as an imaginary process.

11. Eroticism vs Sublimation and Exoticism

So far we have elaborated two paths to the Real available to the *ego* subject. One is the path of the Symbolic — through speech the subject can inhabit the Logos and allow himself to follow his Desire through unconscious mental mechanisms. The other is the path of the Imaginary: where the subject generates an *object a* through the gaze — seeing in it something that he himself has lost. That object of the gaze is already partly-immersed in the immanence of Desire and attracts the *ego* subject as well as feeds off of him.

However, the Imaginary and Symbolic paths interact at the midpoint before meeting in the place of Desire. Schema L shows plainly the nodes of Big Other and *object a* as initially unconnected, but it is really there that the interaction takes place. I think this is the sublimation that Lacan talks about in Seminar VII. He says that sublimation "raises an object to the dignity of the Thing" (Lacan, Seminar VII, The ethics of psychoanalysis, p112) surrounding the definition with examples from old literature and history of "courtly love."

Sublimation is the Logos "gazing" at *object a* and converting it into object of beauty. The subject in the place of Logos must justify its gaze, he must not remain silent in awe in front of a noumenal appearance of *object a*. The gaze from the vantage point of the Symbolic order is about production of art. The language resident in the Symbolic is used to attribute, via the resources in the unconscious, a sublime character to *object a*. The term sublimation is correctly chosen as it's associated with the movement upward, where the subject in the Symbolic elevates himself to a place impossible to occupy. The inverse of sublimation I would call exoticism, which signifies a movement downward where object a is reluctant to descend. In exoticism the *object a* is debased

rather than elevated.

Kelley Ross presents a classification of levels of value and levels of knowledge in his dissertation "The Origin of Value in a Transcendent Function" (Ross, 1985). This great post-Kantian theory is pronouncedly a theory of the structure of the Logos. One of the levels of value is beauty which is ranked just below the sacred. It is very much like *object a* being the vestibule of the Real. He considers two principal types of beauty: sublime and erotic, in his discussion of aesthetic attributes (Ross, note on erotic art). The sublime is the elevation of beauty to the level of the sacred. About the erotic he says: "erotic and carnal images and situations have a power, tending even to the numinous, that has spawned various sorts of taboos and special institutions over the centuries"

Hence, about erotic — there is not much that the Logos has to say, other than — it can go too far in the direction of base instincts. Psychoanalytically, we would say it would go too far in the direction of gratuitous unveilings of the phallus.

Given these two types of beauty identified in a solid theory of the Logos I would not hesitate to label the upper edge of Schema L as erotic and the vertical connecting *object a* and the Big Other as sublimation (along with its inverse).

12. The ancient theory of Eros

In ordinary modern usage the term *erotism (*or *erotics, eroticism*) signifies acts, thoughts that satisfy the sexual desire which is anything driven by the reproductive instinct and libido. It is worthwhile to recount here some of the underpinnings of our present theory that can be found in the notions of the ancients.

Ancient Greeks, from whom we have adopted the term, considered Eros as an avatar of Love, Love achieved in variety of ways — including sexual acts. This is consistent with the present theory of the erotic gaze since Love is a condition where the gaze guarantees access to the Real and accompanies the subject in the transport to it. The loved subject is fully seen — truly *witnessed* — by the other (*ego', object a*) in the approach to the Real, which Lacan calls *jouissance*. The loving gaze is a full gaze. It is a condition where the subject is denuded of signifiers and ready to be consumed by his Desire and yet is holding on to the gaze that set him off on the journey of Eros.

Aphrodite and Eros — the primordial couple of Greek mythology — represent the reality of sexual desire and the complexity of the path toward its fulfillment, respectively. According to the foundational myths in Hesiod's Theogony, Eros was one of the first four gods while Aphrodite was born from the sea as a result of castration of the sky god Uranos. Aphrodite is the eternal, and unconstrained by anything, Real whereas Eros is the primordial force of love with his bow and arrows provoking love's incidents. In Lacanian view, Eros aligns with the gaze.

13. Conclusion

I have shown here a Lacanian perspective on the relationship between *object a* and the Real and given arguments to identify it as the Erotic link. It is a capacity that a subject develops as a result of Oedipal eviction and mirror identification.

Art uses the symbolic to arrive at *object a* through sublimation, but the object is known through the imaginary relationship supported by the gaze. Nevertheless, the object a is the core plan of all artistic endeavor as a convergence point of the imaginary and symbolic paths. Art as

such is characterized by object a and by the three paths that touch it — imaginary, sublime and erotic.

The essence of erotics is the transport toward the immanent Real that is offered by *object a*. This erotic capacity of *object a* can function quite apart from sublimation and, based on the imaginary relationship, implement object fascination.

Reaching a bit beyond the material of this article, I would comment on the opposition of the erotic edge on Schema L to the speech edge. In my view, this is the opposition between the categories of transcendence and immanence where speech reflects an interaction between transcendent personas whereas erotism is an interaction between personas attempting to embrace the immanence of the Real.

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Somatic Composition and Embodied Filmmaking – a case study on practice and practitioners through the example of a Creative Lab

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Abstract: *This case study explores the Creative Lab Somatic Composition and Embodied Film , held in Tallinn in March 2024. The workshop applied somatic practices, specifically Body-Mind Centering® (BMC®), to inform both movement and filmmaking. Participants engaged with embodied film theories and explored their somatic selves to create experimental short films. The lab emphasized a low-tech filmmaking approach and provided a space for participants to reflect on their process and the moving image works produced. This study includes insights from both the facilitator and participants.*

Keywords: *body, body-mind centering, embodied film, film theory, somatic practice.*

1. Introduction

As a practice-based researcher engaged in artistic research on embodied filmmaking and somatic film, I cannot – and do not wish to – step away from the practice and experience of being an artist. Therefore, my research is a dialogue between somatic and artistic experimentation and its reflection, where experience not only stands on its own but also enters into dialogue with somatic and film theories. While contemporary film theories and scholarly discussions already address the body, the haptic, and visceral encounters with moving images, I find that definitions in this area remain quite malleable and flexible. Scholars and artists approach embodied filmmaking, somatic film, somatic cinema, embodied meaning, and related concepts from their specific backgrounds and interests. Their theories and questions sometimes overlap or remain distinct as they explore a range of media, from Hollywood films to experimental works. I situate myself among these artists and researchers, mapping the terrain in search of somatic directions and offering my experiences to the reader. These experiences are deeply tied to my background as a contemporary dancer and choreographer, a filmmaker specializing in experimental and "choreographic moving images" (Szücs, 2016), and a somatic practitioner trained in Tai Chi, Qi Gong and Body-Mind Centering®. This paper does not aim to clarify terminology or provide definitions but rather contributes to the discourse with the example of a Creative Lab held in Tallinn, titled *Somatic Composition and Embodied Film – Workshop and Lab*.

As Luke Hockley emphasizes "how meaning […] is not just an intellectual undertaking but is also felt and embodied" (Hockley, 2014, p.1), Anne Cranny-Francis argues that because "viewers

engage fully corporeally (not just conceptually) with film, […] this corporeal engagement is an essential to the production of film narrative" (Cranny-Francis, 2009, p.9). In Hockley's understanding, the psychological meaning of films necessarily involves somatic experience. Further, he argues that the "location of cinematic meaning is a development of the 'third image', which […] is akin to the intersubjective space in therapy between client and therapist" (Hockley, 2014, p.1). This third image resonates with the interaction between the client and therapist, where emotions and thoughts are exchanged in a shared, unconscious space. Hockley connects this idea to a broader therapeutic and psychological context, drawing from Jungian theory, which emphasizes the role of the unconscious in shaping personal and collective experiences. While Hockley acknowledges contemporary film theorists such as Elsaesser, Hagener, Sobchack, and Barker, he critiques them for not incorporating Jungian understandings of the unconscious in their exploration of the body and film. "What none of these authors account for", he writes, "at least in any depth, is the presence of the unconscious. Not, more specifically, do they give a Jungian understanding of the unconscious." (Hockley, 2014, p.6)

My relationship with the individual and collective unconscious developed as a dance performer and choreographer working with improvisation. Later, it was shaped by somatics, especially by the practice of Body-Mind Centering®, which became part of my research methodology and a source of inspiration. "The conscious and unconscious are a continuum of one mind," writes Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. "One of the principal characteristics of my teaching is that I tend to teach both to the unconscious and to the conscious in the student." (Bainbridge Cohen, 2012, p.13) Tuning into the unconscious, into space, and into the affective space-time of a (dance) event is a practice that dancers usually engage in, whether they name it or not. In other words, these skills of listening and connecting are used in improvisation, composition, and creative processes in performing arts, yet they are rarely discussed in the context of filmmaking. In Body-Mind Centering®, we also speak of 'the mind of the room' or 'the mind of the tissue or body structure,' which recognizes different qualities of unconsciousness, anchored in the body – or, from another perspective, acknowledges our cellular or bodily consciousness. But how can this manifest in a filmmaking approach?

2. The structure of the LAB

> *[The] point of view – that one might possibly formulate a perception "more objectively" by excluding from consideration the apparatus delivering the perception – is false. By comparison, it would be the same as regarding the colored edges which an old, nonachromatic lens allows to appear around all contours to be characteristic of the observed object and not characteristic of the lens of the telescope or microscope being used. (Konrad Lorenz, 1983, p.74)*

The structure – or the frame – of the lab serves as the foundation for the experiment: it defines the parameters for the process, and while it opens space for experiences to unfold, it also imposes limitations. As with any other case, this one-week workshop and lab was shaped by the mixture of participants and their diverse backgrounds, as well as by the shared experiences and dialogue of the organizing team. It is important to acknowledge that my current insights – both into my research topic and Body-Mind Centering® – and the stage I was at in my own process at that time,

influenced how I framed the lab and what I could bring to the table. These factors also informed the group process and, consequently, the outcome. Last but not least, it's worth mentioning that the way I structured our shared time, both in the studio and beyond, also had an impact. The result can only be fully understood when considered in conjunction with these circumstances. This paper, therefore, begins with a description of the container, the frame – which might read like a report of an event – so that the content can be examined in relation to the context.

The 5-day workshop and lab took place in Tallinn, Estonia, at the beginning of March 2024. It was preceded by two days of on-site preparation and concluded with a public screening and discussion on the 6th day. These preparation days not only provided the opportunity to meet and talk with my colleagues in person, helping us to connect with each other and the work, but also allowed me to arrive, settle into a new city, and get familiar with my temporary living space. This helped me feel grounded and safe, which provided a solid foundation for starting the week. It was essential to have Joanna Kalm (Doctoral Student at the Estonian Academy of Arts) and Mari Mägi (Body-Mind Centering® teacher, director of Somaatikum) as locals on the organizing team. The participants in the workshop and lab came from diverse fields, including visual arts, media studies, dance, philosophy, anthropology, dance filmmaking, somatics, and dance and movement therapy.

We spent 5 hours together each day, from 10:00 to 15:00, primarily in a dance studio at TantsuRUUM and its surroundings. Each day began with a 90-minute somatic class based on the Body-Mind Centering® approach, which was open to additional participants. In the afternoon, we shifted to a more laboratory-like filmmaking session with the core group of participants. Mari and I alternated leading the morning classes: Mari led 3 of the classes, and I led 2, while I guided the afternoon process. This allowed both of us to experience being 'only' participants, which was very nourishing. It is customary in TantsuRUUM for artists in residence to give open classes on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, and we stepped into this tradition. Therefore, the morning classes on these two days were open to an even larger public. The presence of these additional participants enriched the bodily experiences and it also helped us not to shorten the somatic practice for the sake of the filmmaking process. The afternoons followed a thread: mapping the territory of embodied film, finding a shared ground for the week's work, experimenting with the camera, and practicing presence on both sides of the lens. In the final 2-3 afternoons, we filmed and edited – within and beyond our given frames – and on the 6th day, we shared our 'pearls,' the completed projects in a public screening. On Friday evening and Saturday morning, I made myself available for any individual or group who needed extra time to complete their work. Some took advantage of this opportunity. I also valued our daily conversations within the organizing team, primarily to structure and plan for the following day, but also because it provided additional time and space – outside the 5-hour daily frame – for reflection on what had transpired and what it had brought up.

3. The somatic morning classes // Body-Mind Centering®, as the start of the day

> *I really appreciate the morning practices we did. I think I haven't done systematic movement for such a... no, actually I have. But it's not like an everyday thing that I would be doing some movement every morning and then continue with something else. And I feel like it was a really important part of this workshop and gave a lot of ideas of how to work in general. (Mona; participant of the Lab)*

Doing body-based or movement work as a way to start the day is not a commonly practiced routine, at least not in the West. It is particularly uncommon as a collective experience for a group of people working together throughout the day, especially when it is integrated as a core part of the workday itself. In 2022, at the PAE 30 – The Promise of Pragmatist Aesthetics conference at MOME – Moholy-Nagy University of Art & Design in Budapest, Kristina Höök shared their practice of the Soma Design process. For me, the key element of this process was a daily somatic practice with the designers, which in this case involved the Feldenkrais method, as the opening of the day. As Höök wrote in the abstract of her keynote lecture,

> *First, a Soma Design process foregrounds the lived body of the designer, seeking to develop extensive bodily experience through personal practice. Second, through engaging somatically with the digital materials, their somaesthetic potential is revealed and can be shaped into felt, orchestrated experiences relevant to the design aims. The design aim, ultimately, is to design interactions that lets our users to deepen their aesthetic appreciation and meaning-making from a position as sentient, subjective selves. (Höök, 2022)*

Very similarly, almost word-for-word the same goals can be formulated in a somatic filmmaking (or to say: Soma Film) process, with the aim of having the bodily experience of the film crew interact with the audience to deepen their *aesthetic appreciation and meaning-making from a position as sentient, subjective selves*. In her lecture, Höök pointed out that the somatic or body-awareness practice should be short enough to engage with frequently, but long enough to allow for bodily understanding, or simply to be present with. I would also add that doing it as a team is important because, in that way, we (the group of designers in that case, or the group of film crew in our case) become one body, and through the common practice, we can feel together.

This example of a workflow was one of my inspirations for the structure of the Lab. Although our daily BMC® practice took up nearly a third of the day, so it wasn't short at all, I valued the *being with the body* aspect of this time more. In other words, instead of prioritizing productivity or any standardized result or outcome, I focused on the process itself. For the classes, Mari Mägi and I both selected materials from the BMC® pool as subjects, with two main ideas guiding our choices. First: what was available for us to share, and what our intuition told us would be easy to transmit or guide participants through. Second: considering that these classes would feed into somatic filmmaking or become a source of inspiration. So, we chose materials that could support either connecting us to our interoception and somatic selves (our body-minds) and the space around us, or fostering communication through the senses.

Day 1: Mari chose *Skin* for her first class on Monday: embodying our skin as a sensory organ and as a surface of meeting – a permeable boundary. She also included information about the embryology of the skin and its relationship to the nervous system. This class could support us in connecting our large surface senses with the focused senses, the frontal action, and the peripheral.

Day 2: The next day, referring back to the skin, I led a process that turned our attention inside and outside of the "skin bag," as well as to the space between us. My topic for Tuesday's class was *Fascia*: fascia as fluid, fascia as spatiality (3D), fascia and adaptability, gravity and suspension. This embodiment can support the sense of space, somatic-spatial communication, and organic decision-making within the group as a network.

Day 3: On Wednesday, Mari led us in exploring the Tonic Labyrinthine Reflex and the

Yield and Push, Reach and Pull patterns.[1] We played with switching off or quieting one of the four patterns and tried throwing and catching balls with only three patterns active. Then we experimented with the Yield & Push, Reach & Pull patterns on the senses and did an exercise with our vision going through these patterns. This embodiment challenged our traditional interpretation of vision, and later this score directly turned into a filmic experiment.

Day 4: On Thursday, Mari guided us in an exploration of our *Blood*, bringing a time aspect into focus. Starting with very active and spatially large, dynamic movements, we eventually landed on cellular holding, all together, sitting in a big circle.[2] Embodying different aspects of time can clearly feed into a somatic filmmaking process.

Day 5: For Friday, I decided to shift our attention towards *Ligaments* and addressed the "mind of the ligaments," to offer additional support in editing. According to my experience, working with this body structure can help us move from global to specific, choose with ease, and be clear, to the point, and directional – qualities that are supportive in finalizing our drafts for screening.

The topics of the morning classes were pre-planned, but we left space for change or adjustment as needed. In our daily conversation and check-in with the team, we not only reflected on what had happened, but it also helped us prepare for the next day. My interest in inner and outer spaces and fascia work was clearly evident from the very beginning, and Mari was interested in the connection and communication of the senses, as well as the interplay between the skin and the nervous system. She also wished to introduce and work with the Basic Neurocellular Patterns in relation to the senses, especially vision. It's no surprise that during the filmmaking process, Mari was part of the group making *Calibration* and *of(f)* focus, the two films that emerged from exploring the Yield & Push, Reach & Pull patterns in connection with vision. She also made a short clip, *To Laila*, where performers were asked to connect with their sense of touch and slowly comb their hair with their fingers (see: skin as a sensory organ). My creative process manifested in the film *Wood Ball Floor Woman*, which explores gravity, space, fascia, weight and lightness, as well as our relationship to each other and to the Earth—qualities and topics that were explored in the classes I guided.

1 In Body-Mind Centering, the "Basic Neurocellular Patterns (BNP) are a series of automatic movement sequences that normally emerge and ideally integrate through infancy. […] The BNP have a global influence on our functioning – they establish a foundation on which we build our movement, physical, perceptual, emotional and cognitive processes. They guide our interactions with gravity and space, and underlie the discovery of our sense of self and our relationship to others and environment." (Bainbridge Cohen, 2018, p.1) BNP work is part of the Embodied Developmental Movement studies, and divided into two groups: pre-vertebrate patterns and vertebrate patterns. Yield & Push, Reach & Pull are part of the vertebrate patterns.

2 The arterial and venous blood are both expressed in movements as time: the arterial blood through its repetitive pulse rhythm, is a *constantly changing* now, while the venous blood is a *wavelike swing rhythm, in a continuous cyclical time*. (The School for Body-Mind Centering®, 1992) "Characteristic qualities of blood are earthiness, feeling, heart-felt, full and weighted, having substance and life in the body, relating to earth, energizing and communicative." (Bainbridge Cohen, 1991, p.72) The qualities of blood relate to the earth as it is expressed in movement and actions, and as such it is part of our *doing self*. Cells, cellular fluid, and cellular touch have also a lot to do with gravity and earth, but in a settled, quiet, arrived quality. Cells are connected to our *being self*. In cellular touch and also in cellular holding – which is a large surface contact, with a sense of retention – our focus is to be with the cellular breathing, this ongoing fluid expanding and condensing. Very local, very settled: cells are meeting cells through the touch, nothing else to do. During the class we had a journey from *doing* towards *being*; and at the last part of the class, we sat with the resonance of the previous actions, meanwhile settling in our cells with the help of mutual touch along the circle.

Psychologists in the context of attachment theory also recognize and use the 'being self' and 'doing self'. Liza Lukács in her book *Hogyan szeretsz? – Kötődési sebeink gyógyítása* [How do you love? - Healing our attachment wounds] writes that we get our sense of *being* from the primary relationship, which in most cases is the early relationship with the mother (through lots of holding and touch, and *being with*), and later, with a sense of self-awareness, we can move towards the wider world. This is the time of *doing*, in which the father can play a major role (and this *doing*, which starts with crawling, running, climbing, etc. is very much related to the blood), while the role of the primary relationship of emotional security remains essential for us. (Lukács, 2020, p.143)

4. Professional questions, basic considerations

Authors and filmmakers have long been curious about and conscious of how cinematic works can move the visceral registers beyond the conscious (narrative) level, speak emotionally to the viewer, or, as Cranny-Francic (2009) puts it, how "using the mechanism of synergistic tactility, the viewer deploys the haptic senses in order to participate in the narrative," resulting in a heightened state of sensory involvement. The body—especially the moving body—has often been the focus of interest in moving image works. My specific field of research, when examining the somatic qualities of this medium, lies in the area of independent and experimental films, as well as dance films, or more precisely, in the realm of choreographic moving images (Szűcs, 2016). Réka Szűcs coined this term not only to describe the phenomenon or film genre we call dance film (cinedance, screendance, or dance on screen) but also to articulate the choreography or *choreographicness* of any moving image. In her understanding, the choreography of a moving image extends beyond the choreography of the action (dance scene) itself, encompassing a broader concept of composed movement that affects the viewer. However, not every film with (moving) bodies or composed movements on screen feels somatic. This observation (thesis) was also refined and summarized from the discussions with participants during the Lab. So, what makes me feel that a film has somatic qualities? What makes a film and the filmmaking process embodied?

The widespread interpretation of filmmaking (and text-based theatre) is that it tells a story, making it a narrative genre. Even if the *how-to* of telling that story makes the piece or the film a unique artifact in its own right, the focus remains on storytelling. However, dance, in contrast to this tradition, often aims to appeal directly to emotions and bodily empathy, as the affect of bodies moving in space-time has this potential. In the case of choreographic moving images, the visceral and kinaesthetic effect is usually in the foreground; therefore, storytelling—if there is any—becomes more of an excuse, something to build the choreography around. Often, filmmakers and choreographers start with something other than a narrative: it could be a bodily state, a rhythm, an emotion, etc. Films carry a sense of elusiveness, as Bálint Veres highlighted during our discourse about the relationship between dance films and music videos. According to Veres, music videos represent the essence of films. In this context, where everything seems to have already been decided a long time ago – in the twenties, a hundred years ago – he believes this genre [the music video] is able to expose the elusiveness of motion pictures as such. He asks,

> *what is it exactly: a kind of theatre? Is it the continuation of literature with different devices? Is it the act of making photography move? Is it actually music? Can you interpret the temporality of music in a visual dimension?*
>
> *As a matter of fact, this is the dilemma: is it temporal art or spatial art – just to mention some classic aesthetic paradigms. And music videos stir up this topic, exposing the ambiguity of it. Placing a moving human body in it won't determine the questions, but it will beautifully articulate the controversy."*[3]

3 The documentation of the roundtable discussion is available here: https://onopordum.hu/portfolio-item/mke_kdp_kerekasztal-2-hu/

My interest is in investigating moving images – mainly with, but also without, the screened body – that transmit the quality of the felt sense of the filmmaker(s) addressing the viewer bodily. My personal questions concerning somatic films, are:

How do we film from the body, and how do we embody (moving) images? How do we film, when we invite a somatic approach into filmmaking? How do we exist and act while experiencing the continuously unfolding present tense of space (Morris,1995)[4], body awareness, and kinaesthetic affect?

What do we film, when we film? Is it possible to be objective? Do we need to be? Are we focusing on a certain object(s) in our field of vision or the spacetime which speaks to us, or are we focusing on the affect itself through the moving body? What do we film when we film bodies in motion or stillness? How can we transmit the quality of space around and within the body?

These questions stayed with us throughout the Lab. I'm coming to some conclusions that embodied filmmaking, as such, shares many similarities with documentary filmmaking, or perhaps even more so with the anthropological approach. (Although the latter observes, while somatics assumes, desires, establishes a relationship, and actively participates.) This conclusion may be questioned or disproven, yet it holds true in the sense that, according to a possible understanding of somatic/embodied filmmaking, one key characteristic is that we deal with what is present and attempt to capture the quality of time and space. It is worth comparing this idea with Szűcs' analysis of Eric Pauwels' "half-films," in which she concludes: "On the one hand, the recording camera records and preserves something of what has happened in front of it, as it happened, from an ethnographic point of view. On the other hand, he rewrites, transcribes, captures, condenses, and highlights. He aims to capture the presence, essence, and intensity of what has been experienced through what has happened; therefore, he approaches it from a creative perspective" (Szűcs, 2016, p. 187). So, instead of precisely staged scenes, a shot list, or a scripted filmmaking style, in somatic or embodied filmmaking, there is most often a kind of joint presence of the participants on different sides of the camera during the process. In some ways, this presence is also extended into the editing and post-production phases.[5]

I have to say, though, that it is also possible to make a somatic film or material that feels embodied by shooting according to the classic film workflow. This presupposes, in addition to (or perhaps because of) the professionalism of the performers and photographers, the ability to easily and quickly reconnect with each other throughout the process, scene by scene, in between all the "action"s and "cut"s. This reconnection happens both within the subjective and felt body of each individual and in the interpersonal space. So, it is essential to have everyone connected to their own body, and through that, connected to the shared space, while also possessing the ability to modulate across a wide range according to the situation and the collective.

In each case, the director plays a significant role in framing the process and helping the team stay in tune with themselves and with each other, in order to navigate an embodied process. In

4 Referring to the publication by Robert Morris, titled *The Present Tense of Space, in Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (The MIT Press, 1995), I am not only pointing to Morris' text but also to the thinking about the embodiment process of space, which I have elaborated on in more detail in my own publication entitled Embodying Space: The Inside and the Outside of Soma in a Creative Process. (2024). *Papers in Arts and Humanities*, 4(1). https://doi.org/10.52885/kcbpef02

5 Not in this paper, but it is also worth comparing the aforementioned idea with IMPRINT Documentary Collective's embodied approach to documentary filmmaking, which represents a contemporary trend, as well as with the fiction documentaries of the Budapest School, developed in the mid-seventies. The method that grew out of the documentary film school at the Béla Balázs Studio became the original, specialized direction of the era – an approach that earned the distinguished name of the Budapest School, given to it by foreign critics. For further reading on the Budapest School, see: https://www.iskolakultura.hu/index.php/iskolakultura/article/view/19536/19326

our conversations within the Lab, we consistently returned to themes of honesty, connection, relationship, and acknowledging what is present in the moment, what is willing to manifest through us. But this *beyond human*, this *something larger* than us that seeks to manifest, is present in every process of inspired art-making. The question for the artist is: how can I give space for that to happen? It may seem that we are no closer to defining embodied filmmaking – if that were the goal. As I write this, the difference between art and industry comes to mind: art, as the process of understanding the world, and industry, as craftsmanship (in the best sense) aimed at entertainment and profitability. Maybe that's one point, but by saying so, I should also clarify that inspired creation and channelling something beyond human can and do happen within the frame of the industry too.

5. The process, as our shared ground

The workshop and lab were proposed as a research-oriented platform. I wrote in the description: "Along the questions and encounters, I aim to guide you through an experience that manifests in moving images." Yes… an experience that manifests in moving images. My intention was to explore connections and gateways from the pure (non-applied) somatic work – in this case, Body-Mind Centering® – towards creation and composition with the body and the camera through space and time. I also promised in the workshop call, "These experiences of the morning classes will be transcribed in composition." However, rather than providing a ready-made recipe or a manual on how to do that 'transcription,' I showed examples of a couple of moving image works with the intention to open up a discussion. I also created space for experimentation, encouraging different solutions, while I too was trying things out. Starting from the not-knowing was one of the strategies I followed.

Through this 90-minute daily somatic practice, we were able to dive into the filmmaking part of the laboratory in such a way that our body-minds (or somatic selves) were informed by the practice, enabling us to make decisions from that place. In this way, participants – including myself – discovered personal approaches for integrating somatics into filmmaking. As I attempt to grasp and clarify these options of *how*, I am working from the position of the researcher, analysing the *data* – the details of the process, the thoughts we discussed, and the films we made – from the experiment.

Filming and editing were done using accessible, low-budget technology, such as smartphones (including the iPhone 15 Pro) or digital cameras provided by the participants. We were also able to borrow a few Panasonic Lumix MILC (Mirrorless Interchangeable Lens Camera) cameras from TantsuRUUM. For digital editing, we used DaVinci Resolve, which is one of the most commonly used professional software nowadays, yet it's still available.

Teaming up, creating together, and *using* each other's body-minds in the creative process and production were encouraged and supported, while individual creation was also possible. In most of the works, a small collective developed the film from idea to realization together. In some cases, the artistic vision of a single director manifested with the help of other bodies.

To wrap up the process, on the last evening, we organized a public screening of the freshly made video works, followed by an open discussion to share relevant questions, issues, and experiences from the process. In this way, a creative dialogue was established between practitioners[6] in the fields of dance, somatics, and film. This dialogue was extended not only

6 When I say practitioner, here I mean all individuals and groups who have practiced (and practicing) this way of listening to the body, and acting from within. In the context of Body-Mind Centering® education, the somatic approach developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen

to the participants of the workshop but also to other filmmakers, movers, and members of the audience.

6. The process as decision

We did an exercise: all of us were in the space, but half of the group had cameras in their hands. We moved together, but some had more of the role of the mover (performer), and some had more of the role of the observer or the person behind the camera (photographer). The honesty and authenticity of presence, both in front of the camera and behind it, was one of the observations that kept coming up in our dialogues. Through this exercise, we practiced shared presence, the soft gaze through the camera, and the simplicity of letting myself be watched – which is not simple at all.

Figure 1 *Moments of the group exercise. // a) in the process; b) through the lens*

Besides the very concrete (mundane) practice of how to operate the camera technically and bodily to get the image I want, and also the above-mentioned practice of presence, this exercise provided an opportunity to practice decision-making in the situation of instant composition. Decisions about what we focus on, what we cut out of the frame, and how we film (rhythm, motion or stillness of the camera, zooming in or out, etc.). But on a more global level, each individual approach to filmmaking in our shared time and space is a decision. Consciously deciding or intuitively (unconsciously) navigating with an instinct somewhere in the background, each of us gave our individual answer to the questions: With how many people, or exactly with whom do I want to work? And: What can I do within these 5 days?

In terms of this second question, if we have such limited time to start from zero and aim to share the results at the end, there are several personal and professional choices to make in order to honestly stand behind the work.

1. One decision or choice could be to treat it as an experiment or research, focusing on the process and seeing where it leads. What comes out is a secondary thing; it's a result, not the goal – an imprint. Therefore, you might have unfinished, unpolished material that opens a window to the process. Accepting the vulnerability of this approach requires courage, but this is the basic attitude for practice-based research or art as research, I believe.

2. Another choice is to use this opportunity to create drafts and experiment for a future film – like making sketches.[7]

and her students, 'Practitioner' is a certification level. Other certification levels include SME (Somatic Movement Educator), IDME (Infant Developmental Movement Education), Yoga Immersion Series, etc

7 For me, shooting as I wish and editing only a draft for the sharing falls into this category. The raw material is there, and you can come back to it later when the experience of shooting has already been digested, and we have some distance and an overview of the project. This helps

3. And of course, you can also choose to complete a short film, knowing your capacities and abilities, and understanding what you can realistically accomplish in five days. Let's say: bite off as much as you can digest. It is possible to figure out, shoot, and edit something ready and final, provided you know your capabilities (both superpowers and weaknesses) and synchronize the planned project with the given timeframe.

There were examples of all these choices within the group. There were also examples of collaborative filmmaking and individual artistic visions realized with the help of other bodies. These small groups and crews also formed very organically; it almost felt like we simply fell into our places.

7. Yield & Push, Reach & Pull with vision

A possible direction or entry point was to directly transcribe and apply BMC® principles and/or exercises into a moving image work; and in the case of the films *Calibration* and *of(f) focus,* that's exactly what happened. In both films, the creators worked with the Yield and Push, Reach and Pull principles of the Basic Neurocellular Patterns, which are part of the developmental movement exploration studies of Body-Mind Centering®. Yield, Push, Reach, and Pull are part of the Vertebrate Patterns, and Yield – being strongly connected to postural tone – also underlies every muscle action. As mentioned in the book *Basic Neurocellular Patterns: Exploring Developmental Movements*:

> *Yielding is the process of actively responding to gravity and the supporting surface to engage the underlying postural tone of the whole body. It is also the process of feeling this changing tone as we alter our position to gravity and space. […] Active yielding –* instead of a collapse, when we passively respond to gravity – *offers us both the choice to rest and the choice to move. Through yielding, we perceive the rebounding force of gravity and the resulting grounding strength and buoyant lightness. (Bainbridge Cohen, 2018, p165)*

Integration of active yielding into our movement pattern gives us the foundation to push away, to push from the grounding surface, and also to have "strength and connectivity" (Bainbridge Cohen, 2018, p. 169) in our push, while maintaining our integrity and relationship with ourselves. Yield and Push (Y&P) are condensing movement patterns, while Reach and Pull (R&P) are elongating ones, "which develop lightness in the spine through a relationship with space" (Bainbridge Cohen, 2018, p. 193). Reaching into space, taking hold of something, and pulling in might be either an action of locomotion or an action of gathering an object – both are active interactions with our environment.

Y&P and R&P patterns integrated in a cycle underlie many successful actions, from baby crawling to complex dance movements. In a broader sense, this is also about yielding into the new and settling into each move until we reach our goal and arrive. Or, in other words, it is about digesting what we've consumed in order to truly nourish ourselves. And by digesting, I mean taking in all kinds of experience or information – harvesting and resting until spring comes. For example, staying in Reach without Pull (and than an arrival through yield), or keep Pushing withouth the integrity of Yield can easily lead to burnout..

Working with these movement patterns in the realm of sensing and perception shifts our

us to see the image itself – the reality of the footage – without the interference of our knowledge of the "behind the scenes" and out-of-frame information. Further reading on this can be found in the book In the *Blink of an Eye* by Walter Murch.

understanding of the movement possibilities and activity of each sense organ, greatly enriching how we can work with our senses. Experimenting with Y&P and R&P in vision was used as a movement score and performed in front of the camera in the film *Calibration* and also in *of(f) focus*, as possible applications. A similar exercise with a partner was guided by Mari during a morning class, where we worked with Y&P and R&P with the eyes in front of a partner as an observer. Performing and filming such a tiny shift in movement—while a whole journey happens in the mind—carries a certain risk, but it's a risk worth taking.

Figure 2 *Still images from the films Calibration and of(f) focus a) Calibration [7:19]; team: Mari Mägi (dir.), Ann Mirjam Vaikla, Mona Tärk, Triin Kauber b) of(f) focus [5:22]; team: Ann Mirjam Vaikla (dir.), Triin Kauber, Mari Mägi, Mona Tärk*

After the screening, perhaps the most specific and extensive feedback was given on these short experimental films. One of the viewers expressed a deep emotional reaction and shared that these works reminded her of Marina Abramović's art. Referring to the tiny, almost imperceptible movements of the three women in *Calibration*, she expressed[8]:

> *I don't know, it happened in my eyes, or they somehow came closer and closer. And the one girl, … the smile was in her eyes. And she somehow went further. And this is quite impressive.*

Later, speaking about *of(f) focus*, she shared: "a lot happens inside of me watching the eyes. […] It sounds like a joke, but this was really touching. So, thank you!"

One of the performers explained her personal point of view during the performance to give an inside perspective on the same works. Mirjam:

> *I had this tiny experience working with my gaze because I was curious about how micro-embodied movements would read in the cinematic material. It was different from just doing somatic exercises for myself – it felt like performing this journey of yield, push, pull, and reach, using very small muscles. While looking at the lens, I shifted between being in my body and focusing on the lens and going beyond it. My imagination took me to Ülemiste Pond… [laughter]. And then the journey of coming back from that pond and feeling the texture of the ice with my imagination and my gaze and then flying into the building and into the camera. That moment of bringing my gaze back inside was really powerful – thinking about the texture of my eyes, how the gaze moves in, and then releasing it. It was different from the typical "who can stare longest" exercise we might remember from acting school. I wanted to explore working somatically in front of the camera because it's difficult for me to be there, and*

8 The following dialogue was modified for better clarity and readability. The full roundtable discussion is available online: https://onopordum.hu/en/portfolio-item/somatic-composition-and-embodied-filmmaking-lab-tallinn-2024-en/

this experience gave me a new way to connect with that.

The audience member commented on seeing her own story in everyone's eyes, which felt so present yet so different. In response to the viewer's remark that, although one could sense the exercise behind it, she tried not to acknowledge it, Mirjam replied: "It's not an exercise, it was a journey."

Later she also said: "It's so crazy... Let's say you reach the point where, in front of the camera, you're doing the somatic work, the person behind the camera is doing it somatically, and the editor is as well. But then, it's the viewer who brings their own references, and it ends up feeling like Marina Abramović's work. [laughter] Yes... 20th century."

8. The embodied performer, the embodied photographer, and all in between

To share further examples of approaches, another group created video works inspired by the frustration of how pebbles stuck in the soles of their boots squeaked on the pavement. Their starting point was this physical and sonic phenomenon and the mind-body response to it. Through filming, they experimented with this phenomenon, using the camera as both a research and artistic tool to further develop the topic. This approach expands the understanding of the potential role of sound in embodied filmmaking practice, extending the dual spatiality of sonic tactility (Cranny-Francis, 2009, p. 4-5) and positioning a sonic event – more specifically, the body's response to it – as the central subject of the film.

Figure 3 *Still images from a) Let's rock – working title and b) Looking 4 somatic directions; Team: Triin Kauber, Karolin Poska and Jaana Persidski*

In the case of the film *Landscape*, the artist's goal – her decision in the process – was to complete a short film within the 5-day period. Pakalne was focused on capturing skin, texture, and touch through extreme close-ups, and she built her visual material around this concept. The sound layer, which she was very conscious of, also features a close-up of the body (recorded with a sensitive mic, originally intended for another project, and thus outside the frame of the lab). Both the visual and sound elements capture the body in a way that makes it recognizable as a body, while also abstracting it. She envisioned working with at least two performers, each with different skin textures, to record their touching skins, the small movements, and the distortions of the surfaces, while keeping the identities of the individuals hidden. Although the idea for this film was conceived prior to the lab, the framework of the lab, along with somatic classes like the one on skin, provided the momentum, as well as the time and space, to manifest it in this possible form.

The gaze is a peekaboo game in which both sides imagine to discover something about each other that is otherwise impossible, impossible within the Symbolic order.

Figure 3 *Landscapes [4:51;]Team: Rūta Ronja Pakalne (dir.), Bernadett Jobbágy, Helina Karvak a) Still image from the film, and b) behind-the-scenes photo from the shoot, showing the positions of both the performers and the camera / person behind the camera*

What does it mean to be embodied as a performer, as the person behind the camera, and as the editor of the films? In our discussions with the participants, honesty and authenticity repeatedly emerged as key themes, alongside the importance of presence and shared presence, regardless of role. The movement or stillness of the camera, and the presence of the recording gaze also emerged as themes. One straightforward way to reveal or emphasize the presence of the camera (and even more so, the person behind the lens) is by moving the camera. However, I would caution against overusing this tool. A handheld camera or steadicam, when used unnecessarily or excessively, can induce dizziness in the viewer, break their immersion, or convey a sense of amateurism. On the other hand, when integrated thoughtfully into the texture and dramaturgy of the film, it can help immerse us in a character's point of view or underscore emotions like harassment, persecution, or disturbance. What else fosters a sense of connection between the people in front of and behind the camera? In many cases, a static, fixed camera can create a deeper connection with the image. Therefore, I would recommend planning the camera movement in line with the desired atmosphere and meaning of the shot, while also exploring other ways of creating presence and connectedness.

In somatic filmmaking, there is a quality of listening—rather than doing, performing, or acting—that underlies every action. This quality of listening allows us to remain in the present moment, grounding each action in awareness. The physical and mental state of each participant plays a crucial role and directly influences the outcome. Synchronizing our nervous systems, along with other bodily systems, helps us attune to a shared presence and connect with a collective intuitive field.

9. Wood Ball Floor Women – a dancefilm beyond my regular path

> *The development of language brings the possibility to name and create a mutual experience of meaning. It also allows one to distance oneself from the direct experience. "Language causes a split in the experience of the self" (Stern 1985), as language moves the relatedness into the impersonal. This can be different when one is speaking directly out of the movement experience, because the direct experience is still resonating in the language. (Heike Kuhlmann, 2023)*

The film Wood Ball Floor Women [working title] was shot on the last day of the workshop. This work emerged from the convergence of two inspirations: my attention was drawn by the wooden floor and the place where it lay. I wished to capture the soft crackles of the floor as bodies shift

and transfer weight. I also wanted to sensorially explore the touch of the wood and the encounter between hard and soft as bodies meet the floor and each other. This interest coincided with one of the performers' curiosity: Helina felt for working with a hand-crafted wooden ball created by the artist Viljar Talimaa. She was curious to incorporate the ball into the space and interact with it—exploring the textures of the ball and the floor, and how both respond to the moving bodies. In this process, I filmed their interactions with the floor and the ball, exploring touch, gravity, and the weight of the wooden ball.

Figure 5 *Still images of* Wood Ball Floor Woman – *working title; Team: Bernadett Jobbágy, Helina Karvak and Mona Tärk*

I did not plan to make a "talking dance film." Most of the time, when dancers speak in a soft voice about certain issues or reflect verbally on themselves, and this voiceover is added on top of the material, I don't feel it's organically connected. Very often, it disrupts my experience as an audience member. But in this case, when we finished shooting, Mona casually uttered a sentence with a pleasant exhalation, as a contented sigh: "Ohh, I feel so good in my body after all of this!"

This sentence felt so anchored in the bodily experience; it sounded so honest and authentic, that I grabbed the voice recorder and asked her if she could repeat what she had just said. Of course, she couldn't replicate it as genuinely as she did initially, but a conversation unfolded organically as a continuation (an integral part) of the movement process that had lasted almost an hour. The movement experience was directly resonating in the language, as their dialogue was rooted in the experience, kinaesthetic memory, and embodied associations, all emerging from the body. For the first time in my practice, I felt like using this text as a layer woven into the texture of the moving image.

10. Conclusion

In somatic filmmaking, there is a quality of listening – rather than doing, performing, etc. – behind every action. Listening to space, body, touch, and the present moment. During the *Somatic Composition and Embodied Film Workshop and Lab*, with this quality of listening, we maintained a balance between pre-planned and spontaneous actions, allowing things to emerge along the way. Each morning, we dived into our felt sense with the help of daily Body-Mind Centering® practice, which also established our connection to our cellular consciousness. I prioritized the process through which we shared experiences and questions, rather than pushing for any particular outcome. We followed both the schedule and what felt right in the moment, while paying attention to each other and ourselves. This kind of care is still revolutionary, especially in such an expensive, teamworking art form as filmmaking. The courage of not knowing – or the spirit of the *happy amateur*, as Mari expressed – was welcomed, and from there, we could explore and experiment. Intuition, or inviting the unconscious; listening; action; rest; another

try. While respecting and valuing human needs and connectedness, participants were able to try out somatic viewpoints and BMC®-inspired scores in filmmaking.

Bodily awareness and somatic practice affect our lives, decisions, and ways of being, influencing us as a whole. Therefore, for a filmmaker, this will shape the way they create films, as it already impacts how they perceive the world and connect with people. While this may lead to broader implications, somatic work can be seen as a way of living, rather than merely a movement exercise or body training. Staying grounded in my text, further investigation could explore the connections between choreographic moving images and somatic film, as well as the role of the camera (filmmaking) as both an artistic and research tool. This exploration might also extend to the intersections between documentary filmmaking and somatic filmmaking, as well as between anthropological films and somatic film.

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Playful Somaesthetic Technology Practices
Characteristics, Conditions, and Frameworks across Arts, Games, and Augmentation

Aska Mayer

Abstract: *This paper explores playful instances of somaesthetic technology practices. Based on a multiple case study strategy, a preliminary framework will be provided for playfulness in technology practices which are focused on somaesthetic experience, appreciation, and transformation. To illustrate the understanding of playful somaesthetic technology practices, three selected cases are introduced (Alternative Game Controllers, Medical Performance Art, Human Tail Augmentations), their playful features defined, and their conditions of practice analysed.*

Keywords: *Technology Practice; Design; Somaesthetics; Playfulness; Alternative Game Controllers;Tail Prosthetics; Medical Performance Art.*

1. Introduction

Playfulness is a reappearing term within the discourse on technology practices, typically relating to playfulness as a tool for heightening motivation, productivity, and acceptance of novelty (Abend, Fuchs, & Wenz, 2021; Moon & Kim, 2001). Meanwhile, playful technology practices related to intrinsic user motivation and not primarily concerned with extrinsic outcomes are lesser explored phenomena.

Within this paper, such practices will be centered, with a special focus on aesthetic-oriented practices which connect the appearance of playfulness across games, art, design, and the progressing enhancement of human bodies: *playful somaesthetic technology practices* (PSTP).

This research is aimed at defining the underlying frameworks of those playful technology practices and analyzing the specific conditions of practice evident. Primarily drawing from the field of arts, experimental game design, and artistic design for technological playful activity, cases are selected from fields characterized by their enabling of playful practices involving both real and simulated technologies and explorative behavior.

This specific focus is based on the assumption that experimental technology practices focused primarily on somatic experience provide a framework highly different from the dominant perspective of enhancement as repair or optimization and the connected view on relevance and productivity (Beloff, 2014, p. 59).

All analyzed areas of practice primarily center the somatic experience of the developer/user, unfamiliar interactions, aesthetic qualities of technology, questions of human enhancement, and use of technologies/technological concepts outside their typical field of application.

Three selected case areas of PSTP are introduced in the following, with a focus on development and user interaction, different types of somatic enhancement and activation, as well as the transformation and recontextualization of practices and frameworks.

a) Alternative Game Controllers (AGC): instances of design within a field characterized by playful interaction, disrupting familiar embodied interaction modes of users and modifying somatic experiences of play.
b) Medical Simulation Art (MSA): a field of playful negotiation of medical technologies, adopting practice fragments typically considered as "serious" and recontextualizing those for explorative and reflective purposes, typically focusing on strong somatic activation through sensory elements.
c) Tail prosthetics: instances of playful prosthetics and the appearance of playful practices in larger frameworks typically considered as serious (e.g., institutional prototyping), typically focused on the extension and modification of the somatic state of users.

Within this paper, the objective is to map out the specific aspects and conditions of playful technology practice, based on those selected case areas. Based on a general framework of somatic and playful technology practices, the specific conditions, frameworks, and characteristics of PSTP will be located.

2. Framework

First, the concepts of technology practice, somaesthetic practices, playfulness and their combination in the specific understanding here applied need to be introduced.

Technology Practice: The general definition of technology practice is based on considering the influence of social, cultural, non-institutional, and material aspects on production, application, and reflection of technology (Ghoshal, Mendhekar, & Bruckman, 2020, p. 5). This understanding is further considering technology as being primarily shaped by individualized and subjective practices, rather than being a "neutral entity" (Ghoshal et al., 2020, p. 5).

Ghoshal et al. (2020, p. 6) propose a triangular relation between socio-cultural, organizational, and technological elements, which in combination constitute technology practice. For these practices, involved technologies are not understood primarily as tools, but rather as relational elements, whose development and applications shape the involved socio-cultural and technological elements (Morley, 2017; Shove, Watson, Hand, & Ingram, 2007, p. 13). At the same time, the experience of technologies is both momentary and subjective, changing across users, times, and application areas (Orlikowski, 2000, p. 408). This subjective experience of technologies within a practice framework leads to an individualized and fragmented perception and use of technologies, in which not all features of a technological device are equally relevant to a repeated user (Orlikowski, 2000, p. 408).

Through the interplay of these elements, technology practices are not only defined as mere activities involving technological actors, but rather as "performances, shaped by and constitutive of the complex relations" (Shove et al., 2007, p. 13) of the involved elements and actors.

Playfulness: Due to the diverse uses of the term "playfulness" across different fields, the objective here is to define the specific aspects of playfulness relevant to the selected cases.

A multidisciplinary shared meaning, the focus of playfulness on "engagement over

external consequence, realness, or convention" (Masek & Stenros, 2021, p. 23), provides here a fundamental starting point.

As neuroscientist Kelly Clancy (2024, p. 10) writes, "[p]lay is to intelligence as mutation is to evolution." While adopting playful strategies, we enhance our creative potential and behavioral adaptivity, or – for the case of somatic practices, as it will be shown – consciously activate and improve the body as a site of experience.

A primary and foundational characteristic of playfulness is here a self-determined, intrinsically motivated, autotelic engagement (Fishbach & Woolley, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Interaction is not functional, utilitarian, or aimed at producing an extrinsic outcome like increased pay or optimized performance, but rather at creating and exploring a subjectively meaningful somatic or emotional experience (Korhonen, Montola, & Arrasvuori, 2009, p. 283).

Specific for somatic practices, which center the material modification of the body, playfulness is therefore to be understood as the subversive and explorative focus on somatic experience, bodily impermanence, and affective perception (MacKendrick, 1998, pp. 8–9; Pitts, 2003, p. 14), allowing for "experimenting with bodily sensations without a determinate goal" (Buruk, Matjeka, & Mueller, 2023, p. 3).

Playful experience is typically enabled through a "protective frame", allowing for intense emotional reactions and experimental interactions (Apter, 1991, pp. 15–16). To specify this frame, the additional term of "non-serious framing" (Masek, 2024, p. 15) is applied. It separates the predetermined application of playfulness in inherently serious frames (e.g., workplaces, formalized education) (Masek, 2024, pp. 18, 15) from engagement-centered playfulness located outside of such fields, allowing for non-consequential, fictionalized, and non-productive actions (Masek, 2024, p. 14). Behavior within the playful frame can still be perceived as partially serious by the practitioners themselves (Simon, 2017, p. 611), but as long as the perceived seriousness does not dominate the interaction, it would still be considered playful (Masek, 2024, p. 14).

This protective non-serious frame, in which external consequences do not have to be considered, is typically achieved by creating and experiencing a temporary "non-real reality" (Masek & Stenros, 2021, p. 21), for example achieved through social negotiation, stage setting, prop use, or costuming. This allows for behavior patterns, which would otherwise be considered inefficient, norm-breaking, or risky to the practitioner and their surroundings, or break with material limitations of reality. Cases for those patterns can be found for example in Shusterman's *Golden Man* (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023), performative body modification practices, Live Action Roleplay, interactive experiences such as *Breathless* (Marshall et al., 2011), and the use of a hairbrush as a microphone or sticks as swords.

Within this context, practitioners are allowed to freely act outside the potential limitations of their real identity and reality (Masek & Stenros, 2021, pp. 21–22). Their actions are often (but not exclusively) characterized as non-optimized, counterproductive, disruptive, complicating, or are not "conventionally considered relevant" (Masek & Stenros, 2021, p. 22) outside of the playful framework.

Both the protective framework of play, as well as the potential "strangeness" of actions in playful states mirrors a characterizing element of transformative somaesthetic experiences, the "departing from the habitual" (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023, pp. 286–287).

> *The experience needs to be framed as somehow different from the ordinary, everyday flow of experience in order to engage our attention, to "dramatize" experience, and thus evoke a change of perception and perspective. […] However, the key is not the shock of weirdness but the enticing stimulation through the difference and novelty of the unhabitual. (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023, p. 287)*

While typically the discussion of such experiences is focused on fun and joy as characteristic key-features, also the active search for mentally and physically intense and potentially challenging, even temporarily uncomfortable experiences can be observed (Lucero, Karapanos, Arrasvuori, & Korhonen, 2014). Examples for this can be found in cases of "uncomfortable interactions" (Benford et al., 2012), such as rollercoasters, haunted houses, or specific body modifications and performance art for emotional, social, and cognitive stimulation.

Within this understanding, the individual hedonic experience is centered over social and often technological functionality, compatibility, and often comfortability (Pitts, 2003, p. 33).

To summarize, for the specific context of this work, the following described playful practices are understood as engagement-focused activities, which center the somatic experience of users/practitioners within a non-serious framework, subverting and modifying familiar modes of interaction.

Somaesthetic Practices: Within this research, playful technology practices which are focused on somatic activation and improvement of somatic consciousness (both intentional and unintentional) will be central. Therefore, for the context of this work, the focus will be on experiential (focused on the experiencing body; see previous section), rather than representational (focused on bodily appearance) practices (Shusterman, 1999). As Shusterman describes, such pragmatic experiential practices are utilized "to make the quality of our experience more satisfyingly rich, but also to make our awareness of somatic experience more acute and perceptive" (Shusterman, 1999, p. 305). Activating their soma and increasing their somatic consciousness, such practices are having the potential to increase the quality of experience for practitioners through the involvement of bodily stimuli.

Somatic consciousness is defined for the context of this paper according to Shusterman as the layered consciousness of the own "living, sensing, dynamic, perceptive body" (Shusterman, 2009, p. 133), which can be influenced and modulated by practices influencing the sensory awareness and aesthetic experience of and through the subject's soma.

Somatic activation here describes the processes and factors of aesthetic practices, which foreground the somatic stimulation of users/practitioners and result in an increased conscious and active perception of the own body. Several elements are here relevant to generate a meaningful somatic activation in relation to atmosphere, interaction, and disruption. Atmosphere, similar to the frameworks of interaction for playfulness, here means the emotional and sensory surroundings of an individual, which "cannot be narrowly identified with a particular object in that experience or with the particular subject's personal feelings" (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023, p. 286). Activation through interaction is shaped by the affective qualities of objects and materialities, such as their visuality or haptic qualities. As a third element, the interaction should be a disruption of familiar patterns, practices, and experiences, leading to an irritation which foregrounds the experience of the body (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023).

The use of the term *somaesthetic practice* is deliberately ambiguous and not only includes practices which are actively considering the somatic perception and transformation of the individual, including temporary body modification practices (MacKendrick, 1998), physical movement exercises, or the technological enhancement of bodies (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023, p. 280), but further also those, which are aimed at inducing somatic reactions through perception, including the consumption of music, films, or interactions with games (Gallese & Guerra, 2020; Ryynänen, 2022, pp. 12–13). While these practices are taking diverse forms and follow multiple and sometimes incompatible norms (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023, p. 280), the here applied definition consciously only includes practices, which are designed to transform the momentary somatic experience of users through interactions with technologies. A similar practice-based

definition can be found in somaesthetic appreciation design, previously recognized as inheriting playful qualities for engagement allowing for unfamiliar and enhanced experience (Höök, Jonsson, Ståhl, & Mercurio, 2016, p. 3132), with the difference of here primarily analyzing practices which do not necessarily hold a long term purpose.

PSTP: Based on the introduced frameworks, PSTP are here briefly defined as practices utilizing interactive technologies, following the requirements of playfulness, centering autotelic aesthetic experience, and characterized by their focus on elements of human-technology interaction and the conscious somatic perception of users (W. Lee, Lim, & Shusterman, 2014). While somaesthetic practices can also follow a utilitarian approach, creating somatic activation as a "side-effect" of goal-oriented engagement (e.g., in sports), playful practices are primarily concerned with the novelty and disruptive nature of an experience. The primary goal is a stimulating experience, located outside of a serious framework of interaction. The experience in itself, both emotionally and somatically, becomes the goal of the practice.

From a pragmatic somaesthetic perspective, PSTP can be understood as being aimed at extending an experience of playfulness through the body of the user and potentially leading to individual somaesthetic reflection, as somatic activation potentially intensifies the experience of playful interactions.

Within these practices, the body is centered as a site of technologically mediated action, perception, and reflection of aesthetic experience. These practices are influenced by the combination of cultural and aesthetic preconditions regarding the influence of technology on the body, individual and general ideology, technological artifacts, and organizational contexts of production and application (Brock, 2018, p. 1026; Ghoshal et al., 2020, p. 6).

3. Approach

This study is based on a multi-case analysis. Selection was based on the combined presence of activation of a somatic experience in users through unfamiliar actions and movesets, the sensory experience of somatically activating material, embodied interaction with technologies, and clear contextual frameworks of application. Solitary technology practices were excluded within this process.

The process of case selection and framework building further followed a hermeneutic circle approach (Debesay, Nåden, & Slettebø, 2008). Based on an initial understanding of playfulness and somaesthetics, and a broad review of cases, recognized elements relevant to playfulness were used to adjust the theoretical framework for playfulness and technology practice. Exemplary cases were then selected based on them representing their respective field and encompassing the key-elements of the adjusted theoretical frameworks. As none of the observed cases included all relevant aspects present in their respective field, for the analysis not only the examples, but further the broad review of each field had to be taken into consideration. The analysis of cases included review of supplementary materials as reports, developer notes, and image and video material. While interviews were considered as an additional approach, it was decided to first map out the field within this work and follow up with interviews at a later point.

While cases were primarily approached from an analytical somaesthetic perspective, potential impacts of analyzed features for pragmatic and practical approaches were considered and will be reflected in Section 6.

4. Cases for Playful Technology Practices

Within this segment, three areas of application for PSTP are presented, with illustrating examples provided through selected cases.

Alternative Game Controllers: When playing digital games, players typically utilize a set of established interfaces to navigate the virtual game space, allowing for familiar modes of interaction along different games and platforms. This includes legacy interfaces as well as commercial XR or motion tracking interfaces which are here defined as non-alternative game controllers, aligned with traditional modes of game control.

When utilizing interfaces which break those familiar patterns of interaction through unusual modes of interaction, control sets, or materiality, the term *alternative game controllers* is applied. The use of alternative controllers is typically an expression of interactions with tangible or embodied user interfaces (Fishkin, Moran, & Harrison, 1998; E. Lee, Kafai, Vasudevan, & Davis, 2014). Their application is primarily found in public showcases at conferences, festivals, or game jams and workshops (Granzotto Llagostera, 2019, p. 1), and for the creation of online video content.

According to Pokorný et al., alternative controller design can be separated into three categories, the combination of existing controllers (e.g., game pads, keyboards, dance mats) to create new modes of interaction, the transformation of existing controllers by modifying the embodied interaction and somatic experience (Grace, 2013), and the utilization of everyday objects through combinations with programmable microcontrollers (Pokorný, Kejstova, Rusnak, & Kriglstein, 2023, p. 3). All three categories find application both as part of novel game-specific development and as the modification of interaction with already existing games. Additionally, the first and the third category find their popular application in online video entertainment, typically presenting the construction of AGC and their use, framed as an additional gameplay challenge.

Additional to this framework, a fourth category is the use of modified existing games and utilization of online chat tools for engaging online entertainment.

Especially AGC development embedded in game design typically presents practices which affect both developer and user, activating unusual physical or mental involvement, augmenting the player's experience, and/or reducing "the cognitive distance between a task goal and the human actions needed to accomplish the task" (Fishkin et al., 1998, p. 2). A typical example for this mode of interaction is the arcade game *Sky Ladder Repair* (Qiu et al., 2024), presented at Alt.Ctrl.GDC 2024 (Fig. 1). In the coop-game, players climb and repair virtual buildings. Instead of utilizing an abstracting interface, the game consists of two embodied interfaces, with required input actions approximating the output of virtual actions on two separate screens for each player.

Player 1 uses a stationary life-sized ladder with sliding handles to replicate the act of climbing. To conduct a repair, Player 1 is first required to choose one of three screw attachments and use a drill-shaped controller, pressing it against a metal plate attached to the ladder.

Figure 1 *Sky Ladder Repair (c) 2024 Andrew Qiu, Ben Courtemanche, Hangjiatai Du, Kitty Chen, Sadira Kooblal-Caesar, Suowei Sun, XuanMing Wang*

In parallel, Player 2 utilizes a sliding miniature ladder as a controller to move the virtual ladder from left to right and balance its angle. Players attempt to complete a preset number of repairs as fast and with as less disruptions as possible.

While reducing the cognitive dissonance between input mode and visual output, utilizing simplified simulations of actions, this example will here further illustrate the intensified somatic engagement through unusual interaction, characteristic for AGC.

Medical Simulation Art: As a second case area, the example of *medical simulation art* will be introduced. For the context of this work, MSA should be defined as a form of speculative design practice, which engages primarily artistic methods and objectives, medical practice/theory and technology, and is presented to the public within artistic performances and exhibitions (Jeśman, 2020, p. 55). Similar to speculative design, the narrative practice of MSA is focused on imagining alternative realities or futures of medical technology practices, often extrapolating current practices and theories of medicine, bio-engineering and medical technology (Auger, 2013, p. 12; Jeśman, 2020, p. 55).

The typical objective of these artistic technologically enabled representations is to create multisensory, visceral, and immersive experiences for an audience, in which a curious engagement or relation with (medical) technology can be observed.

Within MSA, such somatic experiences are achieved by utilizing either applied or simulated medical procedures taken from their formal context, combined with elaborate prop making and robotics, contrasting carnal materiality and clinical sterility, and familiar visual elements of science fiction. Artists utilize technology-enabled digital and analogue modes of production

and simulation for immersive experiences of medical technologies and augmentations.

As an example case, *The Anatomy Lesson: Dissecting Medical Futures* by Agi Haines (2016) was selected. The analyzed iteration was exhibited in a former anatomical theater, a historical site for anatomy lessons. In this installation, Haines addresses speculative bio-technological modifications of the human body through simulated medical procedures.

Providing a setting closely related to roleplay practices, the artist invites the audience to take part as students in a futuristic anatomy lesson to reflect on those required practices and technologies through active engagement.

The material part of the work consists of surgical dissection equipment and four artificial body parts. Typical for Haines' works, those parts are developed in cooperation with medical experts, and are almost indistinguishable from real body parts, with realistically reproduced textures and properties. The artifacts are placed on steel tables, positioned in the demonstration space of the anatomical theater.

The four artifacts depict a transparent cranium underneath layers of skin and flesh; a technologically augmented eye; a removeable teratoma functioning as a tooth implant; a nanoparticle filter in a trachea with attached lungs. The audience interacts with those objects within the constructed framework of an anatomical lesson led by the artist, using medical equipment and technologies for examining and operating on the artificial body parts. Members of the audience peel back layers of skin and flesh to visually examine a brain through the transparent cranium; cut open a bleeding cyst caused by an implant on an eyeball; extract a tooth-shaped teratoma from a bone and insert it into a jaw; examine the nanoparticle filter in a trachea with an endoscope.

The required actions are deliberately simplified, not requiring or depicting the multitude of preparatory steps and hygiene procedures theoretically necessary for the simulated surgeries. Audience members actively decide their level of involvement and their acceptance and immersion within the non-real reality of the anatomical theater.

Human Tail Development: The third area consists of the extension of the body through novel artificial limbs, exemplified through tail wearables for human users. While the development of additional artificial limbs found both across the field of arts and engineering are predominantly focused on enabling new hand- and arm-based motoric capabilities and forms of multitasking, the development and use of tail wearables is often not centered on an immediate augmentation of functional capabilities. Rather, tail wearables are typically focused on the exploration and transformation of somatic experience of body, movement, and space (Buruk, Dagan, Isbister, Márquez Segura, & Tanenbaum, 2024, p. 146), as well as on speculations about the "lost tail" of humans and augmentation through tails (Xie, Mitsuhashi, & Torii, 2019).

They primarily find application in explorative prototyping, dance and performance, soma-based research, and visual modification of the body in costuming.

Typically, two different modes of control can be observed, either using direct user input, or utilizing external input as the following introduced *Appendix*.

Figure 2 *Appendix (c) 2011 Laura Beloff*

Beloff's *Appendix* (Fig. 2), the illustrating example categorized as "wearable technology art practice" (Bering Christiansen, Beloff, Jørgensen & Belling, 2020), is a wearable tail, composed of a robotic compartment and attached horse hair, which give the wearable a horse tail-like appearance. Other than some of the earlier referenced cases, the movement of the wearable is not controlled by the user, but by live data received by the networked tail. As described by Beloff, source data was selected based on having no "self-evident meaning for the user" (Beloff, 2014, p. 56). Real-time data of wave heights in the Baltic sea (movement on the vertical axis) and directions in the public transport system of Helsinki (movement on the horizontal axis) are utilized as input (Beloff, 2014, p. 5).

The wearable does not follow an immediately recognizable function, but is rather described as a "playful and aesthetic experiment in which it is not known beforehand […] if it brings benefits for its users" (Beloff, 2016, p. 160) and while "based on technology, it purposely lacks an instrumental technological use" (Beloff, 2014, p. 56). The focus of the wearable is defined as the exploration of the hybrid user affected by networked environments (Beloff, 2014, p. 7; Bering Christiansen et al., 2020, p. 9), by adding external environment-controlled movements which affect the somatic perception of movement. Where user-controlled tails focus on reciprocal interaction and resulting impact on the somatic state, the externally controlled *Appendix* is primarily creating a one-directional relation of the user's soma to technology and networks.

5. Analysis: Playfulness in Somatic Technology Practices

The specific conditions of those elements and their specific approach to somatic engagement are analyzed as follows.

Objectives of Development: The primary objective for getting involved with presented PSTP as a consumer, while highly subjective, can be broadly considered as the desire for temporarily engaging in an intense, pleasurable experience, detached from the individual's regular reality. For design/development, while all cases encompass individual goals, enabling unfamiliar (somatic) experiences and novel modes of interaction can be defined as shared objectives, formative for developed practices and conditions of production.

With general optimization being irrelevant to the selected cases, the individual goals still follow a specific purpose within the playful framework, not resulting in direct extrinsic gain, but rather momentary meaningful experience or long-term reflections caused by explorative behavior.

For AGC, clear objectives for development are rarely publicly formulated. Still, two goals can be observed, both combined and separately: the replication of in-game actions and/or increasing the experience of challenge. For *Sky Ladder Repair*, a game which can only be played by players within the context of public showcases, evoking curious reaction and intrinsically motivated interaction in players can be considered as formative objectives exemplary for AGC development. Novel interfaces here are primarily relying on subverting established expectation structures (Dimbath & Sebald, 2022). Developing unfamiliar but captivating controls results in heightened awareness, attention, and/or challenge, contributing to creating an entertaining experience (Lucero et al., 2014, p. 39).

For both MSA and playful prosthetics, objectives are typically clearly stated by developers in accompanying texts or reports in artistic and academic venues.

MSA allows both artist and audience to "grasp not only the technology or biotechnology itself, but also their epistemological and ethical dimensions" (Jeśman, 2020, p. 67). The objective is therefore to create and enable spaces of potential speculative reflection both for audience and developer.

In comparison, for tail prosthetics, objectives are diverse depending on the specific context of development and recognition of functional purpose, making a generalized definition of objectives difficult. It can be noted that the objectives partially differ greatly from the serious counterpart of prosthetic engineering, not aimed on functional repair, while still sharing the goal of creating augmentations perceived as seamlessly connecting to the user's body.

Additionally, an often-shared element is the emphasis on somatic exploration of use-in-development contexts through actively engaging in temporary "roleplay" as a form of distancing the user-developer from the familiar reality and allowing to be enhanced without a necessary pre-negotiation of consequences or consideration of purpose.

The objective can therefore be considered as enabling and supporting temporary playful transformation or change of identities through technological enhancement and a supporting playful framework (Buruk et al., 2023, p. 15). Extension of the body here becomes a "willing suspension of disbelief […] that allows for a more playful attitude" (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023, pp. 295–296), similar to costuming and roleplay, as further exemplary formulated by Beloff with the concept of the "Hybronaut", a role taken by the technologically enhanced artist to allow a playful inquiry on networked existence (Beloff, 2014).

Based on the analysis of the case areas, besides the initial selection criteria of somatic activation as an objective, three different underlying objectives can be identified. For AGC, the specific objective is the disruption of familiar interaction patterns for a potentially increased short-term increase of entertainment. Reflective behavior is not recognized as a necessary general objective

of user interaction with AGC. MSA and playful tail prosthetics aim on activating explorative behavior and (immediate and non-immediate) reflection on the somatic experience of users and developers. As a shared objective, the analyzed practices are aimed at creating a significant experience in relation to both interaction and soma of users.

Frameworks, Contexts, Venues: The location of the analyzed cases within artistic and experimental practices provides a framework which sets them apart from targeted prototyping, development, and interaction within related, but differently framed areas of technology practice. While elements of those "serious" practice elements (e.g., performance optimization; vocational training; medical prosthetic design) are adopted, they are detached from their original context, applied in modified or simulated ways, located in new practices. Specific to the introduced areas, the context of presentation and interaction additionally contributes to the unserious framework, enabling playful practices. We can here separate between underlying cultural concepts and venues of presentation.

For the specific examples, interactions take place at specific cultural events such as game conferences, festivals, or art spaces and exhibitions. Additionally, for the broader field of AGC, public game livestreams are a typical area of application. For tail prosthetics, additionally theaters and interactive showcases are venues of application, while MSA are almost exclusively found in artistic venues. All these venues can be considered spaces for voluntary leisure activities from an audience's perspective, fostering explorative and engagement-focused behavior. While from a designer/developer perspective these venues are not necessarily spaces of own leisure, the connected expectation structure (audience-perspective) enables a framework in which playful practices can be established temporarily.

Exemplary, in the case of *Sky Ladder Repair*, while partially similar to vocational training simulations, the use within an arcade game creates a non-serious framework, in which the motivation of players for interaction is intrinsic and dominated by curious engagement.

However, especially in comparison to the two other case areas, this non-serious framework seems to be less experimental, as games and devices such as *Dance Dance Revolution Universe* (Hudson Soft, 2007), *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix, 2005) or recent controller accessories for VR games have already established alternative modes of control for domestic play. And similar to *Sky Ladder Repair* those typically rely on the simplification of the simulated activity. Still, the case can be distanced from commercially available and established alternative controllers through the lens of venue and context of play. The typically event-based appearance of AGC establishes a context of use, in which interactions are relatively short, embracing curious interactions over the optimization of gaming practice.

The clear negotiation of context, venues and concepts allows a temporary distance from reality and familiarity, establishing the necessary protective frame and creating a condition for users/audiences in which playful, experimental, and transgressive interaction and discourse become possible.

While enabling playful aspects of practice for audiences and users, the conceptual layer further provides a space for playfulness to developers and practitioners of related areas (e.g., medicine, industrial engineering, commercial game design). The detachment from related serious practices enables practitioners/developers to reassess elements of otherwise familiar practices. For AGC, the typical lack of a driving commercial motive and the temporality of application provides a framework which enables developers to reassess the technologies centered in their practice. While within general commercial digital game design user expectation typically

requires reliance on established interfaces and interaction modes, the AGC application context (e.g., interactive showcases, livestreaming) establishes different structures for unconventional and potentially impractical interactions. With those managed expectation structures, playful utilization of technologies, the material interfaces, is supported.

Similar observations can be made for MSA. Staging medical technology practices and close-to-reality immersive environments, the specific presentation context (e.g., gallery spaces) supports the clear reflective distance between medical reality and playful simulation of the same. Within the described protective framework of play, artist and audience can engage with the potential impacts of novel medical technology and bioengineering without any consequences outside of the applied framework.

For both MSA and tail prosthetics, the artistic context functions as a tool for establishing a framework in which the discussion of ethics and usefulness is not an initial requirement for developing or involving oneself in a practice.

As Beloff notes for the context of human augmentation, the related scientifically centered practices "do not allow playfulness or radical experimentation without a justified objective, such as repair of the body" (2014, p. 59), or in extension its optimization. Related serious practices are delimited by set ethical frameworks and risk-assessments, especially when the user's body is technologically modified. Meanwhile, artistic practices create a space in which "adults can participate in play activity" (Beloff, 2016, p. 158) without considering potential consequences.

For both fields, typically involved medical and engineering practitioners are familiar with those ethical frameworks and their application in their respective field. Through relocating practice fragments into the radically different context of artistic design, simulation of non-real augmented bodies and medical procedures, and application of riskless wearables, those ethical considerations become obsolete (Beloff, 2014, p. 59). Therefore, developers gain a new space for speculation, transgression, and curious exploration without a necessary purpose, which is not typically available or "allowed" in their field of origin (Tharp & Tharp, 2018, p. 131).

To summarize, all three introduced cases contain a distinct non-serious framework, partially enabled and supported by the choice of venue and the socio-cultural context of artistic design and related expectation structures.

Somatic Engagement: Across all three case areas we can observe playful approaches to development and design and recognize practices which are aimed at temporary transformation and modification of bodily experiences. The engaged experience of playfulness is supported by a technologically enabled intensified and significant somatic experience and aesthetic appreciation.

Engagement here not only describes the active interaction of the audience with the functional side of devices and the development of interaction practices, but also the increased somatic activation of users through materiality, further supporting the awareness of a non-serious framework through immersion.

For *Sky Ladder Repair*, a significant somatic experience is tied to embodied interactions with the interface and the resulting unfamiliar bodily activation. Instead of relying on abstracted inputs of familiar interfaces, players have to actively develop movement patterns, which allow them to achieve ingame goals as fast as possible. The brief duration of each game within the earlier introduced event framework here potentially does not allow players to reach a state of routine.

As Shusterman and Svanæs recognized for transformative somaesthetic design, one of

two potential factors for establishing a temporarily changed somatic experience is an "enticing stimulation through the difference and novelty of the unhabitual" (2023, p. 287). Across the cases of AGC this is achieved in two different ways. For cases as *Sky Ladder Repair*, an entirely new gaming experience is created, while for user-based applications of AGC to existing games a novel approach to familiar gameplay is established.

By creating or modifying embodied interfaces, AGC therefore allow for enjoyable, challenging, and temporarily captivating experiences, recognized as key features of experienced playfulness (Lucero & Arrasvuori, 2010).

While AGC activate significant somatic experiences through unfamiliar embodied controls, MSA does so by activating strong somatic reactions as disgust within technologically enabled aesthetic settings.

Somatic experiences are here achieved by intentionally activating strong physical reactions through close interactions with or perception of highly visceral features, as recognized for film (Ryynänen, 2022) and immersive theater practice (Bakk, 2022). Especially disgust here not only has to be understood as an inherently somatic feature (Ryynänen, Kosonen, & Ylönen, 2023, p. 5), but further as a potential motivation for curious and pleasurable engagement (Ryynänen et al., 2023, p. 9)

Haines describes calling up disgust as a somatic key feature within her own work (The Front, n.d.), exemplary for the concept of MSA. While simulated technologies and the direct interaction with them contribute to the experience of the strange and unfamiliar, involved real technological devices as endoscopes further support such experiences. While for three of the involved body parts immediate visual perception would be enough to locate simulated strange technologies, the trachea requires an involved exploration of the object through inserting an endoscope. This active engagement, which can be observed with different intensities based on object and audience member further intensifies the curious experience of disgust.

Additionally, Shusterman's and Svanæs' second factor is here manifest, the "qualitative atmosphere" (2023, p. 286), contributing to the experience of technology practice within this case. For *The Anatomy Lesson*, not only the spatial environment of the anatomical theater, but also the atmospheric setup through lighting and costuming contributes to a "dramatic and creepy effect" (Tharp & Tharp, 2018, p. 266), supporting and intensifying the somatic experience of the audience. Through the combination of these aspects, *The Anatomy Lesson* becomes an instance of intentionally designed "uncomfortable interactions" aimed on increasing "the deep focus or singled-minded immersion" (Benford et al., 2012, p. 2006) by having participants interact with viscerally and culturally unpleasant features.

While for both AGC and MSA the somatic activation is primarily based on interactions with technologies, for tail prosthetics it is the integration with technology. The user's soma is actively and playfully extended, as the tail affects body movement and balance. As a result, as for AGC, new patterns of movement become necessary, however here those are developed individually and undirected by users themselves.

As recognized by Buruk et al. for Svanæs' *Tail*, similar to *Appendix* an inquiry into human-technology integration (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023, p. 294), tail prosthetics modify the experience of both movement and space (Buruk et al., 2024, p. 146), with especially movement in familiar everyday interactions not being the center of awareness. *Tail* can be considered as a somatic "defamiliarization-through-design" (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023, p. 295). For the case of *Appendix*, this is intensified through the external control of the tail. The experience is here

not necessarily primarily one of one-directional somatic extension, but rather a hybrid relation. Where *Tail* or other examples of tail prosthetics require users to develop new movement patterns to consciously control the extension of the body, for *Appendix* users explore ways of bodily reacting to movements which have become part of their own body experience. This focus on exploring movement patterns requires an increased focus on the experiencing body, therefore also foregrounding the somatic consciousness during or after interactions.

Additionally, and rarely centered in previous studies on tail prosthetics, playful materiality seems to play a relevant role for supporting this defamiliarization. For *Appendix* and other tail prosthetics (Nabeshima, Saraiji, & Minamizawa, 2019; Svanæs & Solheim, 2016; Xie et al., 2019), hair, fur, and bonelike structures are combined with mechanical parts, further potentially playfully blurring perceived borders between user and technology.

Based on those three areas, three relevant aspects for technologically modified somatic experience and interaction can be recognized: unfamiliarity of interaction, somatically activating materiality, and technological enhancement of the soma.

Conditions of Development and Functionality: The introduced cases and their individual representation present themselves as specialized practices, located in highly specific contexts, affecting the conditions of material, functional, and technological development. Underlying condition, which shapes necessary technological developments for interaction, is the developer's awareness of "aesthetic sensibility of haptic, dynamic, proprioceptive, and other invisible qualities" (W. Lee et al., 2014, pp. 1–2) to achieve captivating somatic experiences.

Generally being focused on intensified somatic engagement and characterized as playful, they are set apart by the individual conditions of technology in practice and potentially resulting impacts.

Typically designed as unique specialized devices and part of non-commercial practices, AGC development is characterized by low-cost production methods and technologies. Exemplary, for *Sky Ladder Repair*, low-cost Arduino micro controllers, 3D printing, and woodwork are utilized to develop interface compartments. Additionally, atypical use of technical parts can be observed, in this case the use of slide potentiometers for the spatial controls for Player 2. The appearance of atypical use as an instance of playfulness, accompanied by reuse and modification of existing devices, can be also observed along all four categories of AGC development practice, resulting in varying difficulty of development and due to available modular microcontroller systems (e.g., Arduino, Makey Makey) allowing for relatively fast-paced and reproduceable approaches to production. While *Sky Ladder Repair* functions as an elaborate example, AGC development practices do not always require deep knowledge in the field of engineering and programming, due to the ability to reuse existing controllers or utilization of accessible modular systems. Different from the game-specific AGC development of *Sky Ladder Repair*, this aspect seems to allow especially for individual playful rapid development and interaction practices for user-made AGC.

MSA primarily engages existing medical technologies, typically recontextualized and simplified, and simulation technologies. Rarely new fully functional technologies are developed. Rather, technological simulation is applied to both medical devices and to establish lifelikeness, as actual functionality is not required. As in the previous section pointed out, this typically requires the involvement of experts for respective fields, while still allowing partially for theatrical *Wizard of Oz* methods and improvised techniques.

While diverse in application contexts, the conditions for technological development for

tail prosthetics are mostly coherent among different cases. The primary condition here is the seamless extension of the user's body, requiring extended or full functionality of devices, not allowing for improvisation or simulation due to complexity. For tail prosthetics, playfulness therefore does not extend to the conditions for involved technologies and required engineering.

Based on this analysis, for both AGC and MSA playfulness potentially extends towards functional technology development. For AGC, it can be assumed that playfulness through atypicality, reuse, and modification is fostered through a development practice which does not necessarily require a formal expert position of practitioners and allows for a higher grade of improvisation.

6. Discussion: PSTP as a Theoretical Framework and Practical Concept

Based on the introduced initial frameworks, the described playful technology practices are understood as engagement-focused activities, which center the somatic experience of users and practitioners within a non-serious framework, subverting and modifying established modes of interaction and practice. Typically, the soma is not consciously centered in most everyday practices, with unfamiliar experiences increasing an active awareness of the soma (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023, p. 295). Two general motives were detected, breaking with the familiar and related expectation structures, and the creation of and interaction with entirely unfamiliar new practices, for which there are no established expectation structures, typically leading to an increased active focus on interaction and experience. While partially referring to purpose-oriented technology practices, cases create emotionally engaging, pleasurable, or fascinating conditions for interaction, by applying a playful attitude to a typically non-playful areas (Sicart, 2014, p. 27), involving cultural (objectives, motivations, expectations), technical (utilized technologies), and organizational aspects (venues and contextualization) (Ghoshal et al., 2020, p. 54:5).

The presence of playfulness and the involvement of different actors and technologies varies depending on the specific case area, modes of production, and individual objectives. Still, generally it can be observed, that both designers and active audience/users are engaged in a playful practice, with varying degrees of somatic engagement, emotional motivation, reflexive activity, and active involvement of/engagement with technologies.

The introduced framework of PSTP emphasizes the relevance of playfulness and playful elements for somaesthetic practices. While sometimes hinted towards, rarely playfulness is clearly recognized as a formative element of experiential somaesthetic practices. However, as shown, playful frames naturally establish the disruption of habitual experiences, necessary for somaesthetic transformations. Establishing and utilizing playfulness for somaesthetic practices support, what can be considered as "defamiliarization-through-design" (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023, p. 295), bringing forward active somatic consciousness through unfamiliar stimulation.

When considering the impact of PSTP for future theoretical inquiries and applied design, it has to be noted that the emphasis on somaesthetics and playfulness in representation and discussion by designers and users varies. PSTP – for now – is not an established design concept, but rather a broad framework, which encompasses a multitude of practices sharing specific features of playfulness, interactivity, and somatic activation. Additionally, engaging with the described practices is not necessarily motivated by a desire for somatic transformation in the first place. Rather, this might appear as a side effect, only recognized as an unexpected quality of experience in or after the moment of interaction.

Additionally, the potential difference in recognition of purpose and impact within the

introduced practices between developer, developer-user, and user perspectives poses the question of how much some PSTP are considered as playful from an external observer position, and how often they are considered as such by developers and users themselves, as explicitly evident in Beloff's self-perception.

While the analysed cases point to several features relevant to consider when designing for PSTP, repeatability of interactions is not necessarily given, problematizing the understanding of practice. Similar to Shusterman's description of the experience of the *Golden Man*, the transformative somaesthetic potential of MSA lies in a unique temporal and spatial experience. Similarly, the analysed specific case for AGC, *Sky Ladder Repair*, is potentially only experienced once by most players in the context of presentations at events. Designing for/with PSTP should therefore be approached as both developing repeatable experiences, as well as the active creation of unique temporal and spatial frameworks, which allow for temporally limited practices of interaction.

Further, for all three areas both speculative and applied prototyping is a relevant element of development, which has not received attention within this study yet.

While novel practices of technological augmentation are developed, cases based in somatic inquiry and academic prototyping typically project impacts beyond their explorative application. For tails, besides the reflection on human-network relation as presented by Beloff, balance, force feedback and social expression are recognized as typical future areas of application (Buruk et al., 2023; Nabeshima et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2019). While located within prototyping practices and holding potential future qualities, the review of impact still allows for considering this area of practice as playful. Projected impacts are rarely followed up on, presenting the development and application of tails primarily as a tool for imagining futures and alternative human forms. An exception is the commercial equivalent of *Tail* by Svanæs, which finds its application in the playful practice of Cosplay (Buruk et al., 2023) as an instance of augmented performance.

While not necessarily initially reflected as somatically activating and/or play by practitioners and observers, the analyzed cases all still contribute to the same phenomenon as other practices aimed at somaesthetic experience, "to make us 'feel better' in both senses of this ambiguous phrase" (Shusterman, 1999, p. 305).

The focus on somatic activation and somaesthetic reflection in PSTP has the potential to increase the quality of playful experiences. And at same time, playful frameworks allow for increased embracing of somatic activation.

Therefore, an argument is made for the conscious design for PSTP, actively focusing on the interplay of playfulness and somaesthetics in such experiences. Bringing awareness to the specific elements contributing to both a playful frame of experience as well as somatic activation, pragmatic and practical future work can draw on this initial analysis. If the objective of development is designing for PSTP, the aspects of frame, context, and venue, somatic engagement, and the conditions of development and functionality all have to contribute to both the playful and somaesthetic quality of experience. To achieve this, referring back to relevant aspects of cases under the broader theoretical framework of PSTP allows for the development of a practical concept for developing experiences for PSTP.

7. Conclusion

This study characterized PSTP as immersion practices centered around the unfamiliar regarding interaction, materiality, and enhancement. All three introduced fields primarily provide ways of appreciating technologies and practices based on their individual aesthetics. Rather than

being primarily practical or functional applications, they allow us to experience them as art, stimulating experiences, and/or entertainment.

They present a detachment from the user's and developer's reality and familiar practice, breaking with established expectation structures of practice, temporarily creating a speculative non-real reality, or altering the somatic reality and perception of users.

Generally, is has been shown that PSTP can be considered as highly specialized and application-specific practices, customized for and through their individual framework, objective, production conditions. Users interact with unfamiliar practices in a temporarily limited frame, not necessarily allowing for deep familiarization and routinization and not achieving an extrinsic goal detached from the practice itself in the long run.

This is only an initial step for a deeper inquiry into the inherent connections of playfulness and somaesthetics through the lens of technology practices.

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