

The Body and its Representations: Uncanny Embodiments of Modernity

***Abstract:** In this paper, I am investigating the body as an area of the discourse, a site of multiplicity of events, and an object of transference. I looking into the body- reinvented through the play of the imaginary and experienced real, as a space where wills and powers become activated. Here the historical realities are set in motion, and endowed with meanings. I have encountered two types of historical narratives and choreographed movement inscriptions which articulate the artistic responses, and take on the forms of the grotesque, uncanny, and surreal handling of the body. The first type can, in broad terms, be understood as a first-person account, and relies on the re-experiencing, retelling, describing, and elucidating the psycho-physical realities. The second type is told from the point of view of the observing subject. It presupposes a clear subject/object division. Through the second type, the attempt is put forward to comprehend the perceived body by bestowing upon it a unity endowed with a specific symbolic significance. In the latter, there is an apparent methodological effort to classify the multiplicity of perceptual information into the categorical groupings. This effort is intended to bring about an understanding of the particular as a segment of the general pattern. Rather than looking into these two types of narratives about the body as enclosed unities, this paper examines ‘zones of intensity’, and perceptible ambiguities, occurring through the representational activation of the impulses that direct the historical structuring of the elusive events.*

Keywords: The Body, Conceptual Framing, Power of Representation, Modernity, Ideals, Movement in Modernity, Displacement, Rational and Irrational, Normal and Pathological, Grotesque, Poetry and Choreographed Time

Modernity¹ and Urban Dystopia²

How do authors purposefully disturb inner/outer dichotomies on which the bourgeois morality relies to preserve a social order? Taking negativity of the expelled, questionable, murky activities and modes of being present, artists of the modern era frequently engaged with the illegible aspects of the human psyche. Walter Benjamin analyzed Baudelaire's poetic expression of the social anxieties, and his positioning as an accursed poet—*poète maudit* of the late 19th century Paris. Through Baudelaire's

¹ Adjective modern, from 'modo' meaning 'recently' in Latin, implies a break with tradition. 'Modernity' is closely related to the legacies of Enlightenment, trust in the reason and natural science which could end both the darkness of mystification attached to religious authority, and the oppressive tendencies. It is linked to the notion of industrialization on the level of material progress, and to subject's ability to conquer and possess the unruly nature through affirming existence as an independent thinker (Cartesian duality of body seen as mechanism vs. thinking subject) on the philosophical level. From Marxist point of view, Modernity is characterized by rapid production of commodities, and by the unleashing of the productive forces contingent on the capital. 'Modernism' in the arts is characterized by an interest in the medium itself, in this case the body, abstraction of the subjective expressions of Romanticism and, often, necessity to destroy the attachments to the past, and follow the rhythms of the future, thus emphasizing the efficiency in relationship to time and space.

² Here, I am using the term 'dystopia' as a paradoxical designation for a repressive, overcontrolled state, usually under the guise of being an ideal. The term itself was coined by John Stuart Mill in 1868 and is, in terms of its multiple narrative implications, intertwined with its opposite—utopia. The term 'utopia' was invented by Thomas More in 1551 and stands for the principles of equality, social harmony, economic prosperity, and stability. Dystopia literally distorts the elements of the utopian society. The intention to repress negativity through careful planning turns into the totalitarian oppression of difference. Representations of dystopian societies in nineteenth and twentieth centuries are characterized by the main protagonist's suggestive sense of entrapment, omnipresent surveillance, technological hegemony, and extensions of bureaucratic institutions into various aspects of life, resulting in the all encompassing claustrophobia. Literature examples include: *The Iron Heel* (London, 1908)—described by Erich Fromm as the earliest modern dystopia, *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932), *1984* (Orwell, 1949), and *Handmaid Tales* (Atwood, 1984)—depicting religious theocracy, and modes of resistance. In this paper, there are references to the construction of combined fictional and factual identities specific to the late Modernity, and ways these participate in engendering zones of intensity in the bodies of the urban dwellers, and within the space of the city itself.

language, he ‘apprehended [...] the productive energy of the individual alienated from himself’ (Benjamin: 557).³ An artist is a link between the rhythms of modernity, and heroism of the antiquity. Benjamin speaks about the reiteration of the suicidal, self-annihilating impulses devoid of sentimental impressionism. The artist is not ignoring socio-economic tensions of the environment he inhabits. Conversely, he stays involved in the productive cycle, but literally produces excesses of expression which destabilize the rhetoric of the mainstream culture.

Commodity capitalism generated a new kind of poverty. This poverty was contingent on the surplus activity caused by novel possibilities for movement and increased productivity engendering excesses in the labor force. The impetus to move, leave family in the countryside and start a new life was begot by the promises of: equality, employment, and even, the individual capital accumulation. These hopes were often met with the immediate brutality, and palpable social and class contradictions apparent within the urban liberal economy. Baudelaire was ‘a prisoner of the myths of his age’ and yet, he imposed ‘his own aesthetic logic’⁴ onto the perceived potentialities and agitations inside an urban environment. The increased appetites stemming from the variety of sensual stimuli, the speed of satisfaction made possible through the immediate accessibility of goods and ideas, and the loss of historical memory in a rush to meet the

³ This quote is from Benjamin’s *Correspondence*, 1910-1940. Baudelaire was of ‘unique importance’ for Benjamin. Benjamin finds that the poet predicts the logic of the later capitalism in which a human actor literally faces the technological apparatus of representation, such as camera, and loses intuitive sense of identity. Baudelaire, through whose language Benjamin spoke of an aspect of himself, shows, via poetic truth procedure, how an individual becomes caught in the image. For him, Baudelaire functioned as a symptom of the era, inseparable from the nineteenth century phantasmagoria.

⁴ Rainer Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin* (1996: 196). Rochlitz emphasizes that Benjamin was one of the thinkers wishing to put an end to the ‘myth of interiority’. In relation to the body in modernity, his effort towards materialization of the spirit, points towards the potentials for relaxing the boundaries between the conceptual and embodied knowledge.

new on an equal footing, engendered repetitive cycles ostensibly liberated from the religious rites of the old times. What in the quotidian experience did not correspond with the utilitarian orientation, and the morality modeled on the legal system—the physical and psychic zones in which the intensity became almost tangible, rendered awkwardness of the modern embodiment accessible for the artistic documentation.

Blanchot⁵ writes that literature is unquestionably illegitimate. Inscriptions—written and choreographic, are intertwined with the desire to legitimize thought and movement surpluses. Once they are translated into a signifying system, mental and bodily movements lose their elusiveness thus initiating an elaborate exegesis: process of offering medical elucidation, and social meaning. But, writing which purposefully stays self-involved, questioning its own nature as it arises, does not serve as an immediate source for the canonical knowledge. This kind of writing exposes wounds in the functioning of the apparatuses. Language bound to the experiences of the body reveals multiplicity of processes and through the negation of the common assumptions challenges the coherency of totalizing systemic solution.

The movement produced in the body appearing on the margins of the subject construction along with the field within which it was objectified is cast as the pathologized otherness. The movement which is deemed unnecessary (non-instrumental), free of the economic or psycho-social motivation, propelled by the forces of production but not apparently productive in itself, as it gains visibility, becomes a site of the discursive uncertainty against which the culture defines its positive values. When

⁵ In this paper, I refer to two theoretical works by Maurice Blanchot: *La Part du feu* (1949) and *L'Espace Littéraire* (1955). His writing radically challenges binary divisions of modernity, emphasizing 'the disjunctive, the paratactic, and the fragmentary'.

the contrast between dreams of progress and cyclical irrationality is intensified, a critical investigation of the effects of the productive and representational pressures on the live bodies is made possible. The conflict between the oppressive forces and the historically subjugated elements activated through the participation in the processes of production, generates new physicality. The body on the fringes of the regulating structures reproduces and distorts the majoritarian imperatives. Eventually, it meets a social invitation to endow the interdictions and resistances with a personal dimension. Here, personal is a modern categorical determination for an alienated, autonomous subject. Blurred memories, reactivity through senses, justifications of the unresolved impulses, and fragmented stories are amalgamated, leading to the unique modes of expression. Personal, when propelled into a self-definition *in extremis*, becomes an obscure zone where the contours of subject's incessant re-invention can be touched upon, and erasures of previously formed subjectivities apperceived. The vagabond body of the urban dweller, without standard employment and regulated social status, becomes a source for grotesque depictions. The material remnants of the elusive physical and psychic activity render accessible to the senses process of combining the inner and the outer on the plane of the body, and activate the tensions stemming from the dictum for the objective vision.

Body and Rise of Pathology

The experience of the normal does not conform to a specific rule. However, the assumed knowledge of normality will start and end at a specific point. From a certain

point on, the expectations for normality are not met. This means that the experience deviates from the norm in a way that does not match anymore the relative fluidity of the socially recognizable normal. Nevertheless, when the knowledge of the normal is already in circulation, the manifestation of deviations does not imply an *a priori* understanding of the point at which the normality ends. Deviations appear independent of the norm. Canguilhem asserts that ‘Norm’ is scholastic and that ‘Normal’ is ‘cosmic or popular’.⁶ A norm imposes ‘requirement on an existence’.⁷ On its own, it is not pertinent within the everyday social exchange. It has to be activated through a specific contextual frame, and can serve, once it is exposed, to determine precisely what is not to be considered normal. An instant when the axiological precision of a reality determination meets an immediately felt, intuitive truth can generate a new field for inquiry, and produce surprising reversals of the previously held beliefs.

Based on the two types of textual traces mentioned in the introductory paragraph, the zone of the representation of the experience is being perpetually re-invented. These representations do not allow a fully independent existence for the bodily subjectivity. They interfere with an attempt to isolate and deliver as real the experience of the body.

Beginning with Modernity, the body, magnified by the means of the sense extensions, cannot circumvent repeated doubling. New rips appear on the social fabric. Surfaces can be sewed together, but the discrepancies in the experiential field aggravated by new speeds and directions, persistent allegorical readings from the past, yearnings for pure subjectivity, and universal truth-procedures, endure.

⁶ Canguilhem (1991: 237)

⁷ Ibid. p. 239

The body of a runner in an urban environment is indebted to the antique ideal of a unified, healthy human. The Greco-Roman saying: *Mens sana in corpore sano*, favored by athletes, implies the obedience to the rules of healthy life. Through often not-fully-conscious encounters with the history of representations of the human body, specifically the Spartan body that exerts in order to bring about sanity that is contingent on the ascetic severity of a continuous physical discipline, in this case equated with the resulting moral purity, the urban jogger contests the negativity of non-productive movement during leisure hours. The labor of a jogger is not substantial, except, a posteriori, through reshaping of the bodily form, and capacities. The athletic body, which recognizes its idealized doubles in the media, fulfills the promise of the unity of the inner and the outer, achievable solely through the disciplined effort and highly specialized system of nutrition and care. This moving corporality strives towards the Apollonian beauty realized in space and time. However, it encounters obstacles as it struggles with the modern temporality characterized by fluctuations, and dissonances. Through locomotion the body of a runner gains contradictory representational power. It can appear that the runner is escaping constraints of the professional time fragmentation, or even, that he is competing with the automatization, literally with the speed of vehicles. Savvy, scientifically informed observers, who have inherited Enlightenment's empirical rationality, recognize running as a physiological occurrence manifesting through the mechanics of the body. The breath, the heartbeat, and the muscle engagement take precedent over the mental activity which, through its ability to achieve quick reasoning, reigns over the excessive embodiments of modernity. The jogger is both a fashionable icon of the twentieth century, and a sign for the return to the

immediate physicality where one does not resist the incitement to compete. This competition continues beyond the boundaries of the competitive situation produced by the market. One competes with the ideal-self, latently present in the cultural imaginary or the imagined other with origins in the personal fantasies of rivalry and victory. Displays of strength, endurance, and force appear as inalienable attributes of the body which is, with its affects and expressive force, rendered transparent through the performed action and, then, brought to full visibility via representational apparatus. For the early twentieth century poet Céline, the beauty of a healthy, strong body of an athlete is more profound than all the poetry of Baudelaire. He declares: ‘Je donnerai tout Baudelaire pour une nageuse olympique.’ (In translation: ‘I would give up all of Baudelaire for an Olympic swimmer.’)⁸

In *The Normal and the Pathological* (written in 1966), Georges Canguilhem examines the effects that the institutional power and the practices of the medical normalization have on the bodies. According to Canguilhem, normalization is ‘at once the extension and the exhibition of the norm. It increases the rule at the same time that it points it out.’ (1991: 239). Thus, regular, intuitive embodiment reflects back to an individual the norm determined by the medical establishment, and reproduced by the mechanisms of representation. However, this reflection is not automatically integrated into the subject’s sense of the real. It is more often exhibited through the unconscious excesses in the expressivity, mobility, and consumption. The existence of the rule both underscores the necessity of repression in relation to the development of the ability to control, and

⁸ In the chapter four of *Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine* (1998) Felicia McCarren gives an account of: Céline’s fascination with dancing bodies, condemnation of bourgeois decadence, and bohemian impurity, and theory of material positive—*positivité matérielle*, the substance through which Family, Nation, Race and Body can incarnate (McCarren: 178-90).

generates proclivity towards ‘madness’⁹ in cases when the inhibiting factor cannot exercise its power of normalization.

The acceleration of the speed in the production during the modern age, and the increased power of the representational apparatuses, impacted the body in ways that challenged the experiential knowledge of the old times. The sentimental desire to preserve archaic truths and identities is exposed in the encounter with the side-effects of the technological progress. Is the screaming, aching, vomiting, non-stop talking body a metonymy for the excesses of the modern civilization? How does this multifocal embodiment become trapped in the gap between theory and practice? Are the notions of excess, mistake and incoherence indispensable in assessing phenomena that challenge established truths and identities within the functioning society?

The body with its somatic memory residues is a site where the subjective truths are articulated, prior to their codification as the independent fields for scientific investigation. In order to generate new spheres of knowledge, these experiential fields are severed from the unifying experience of the self which was formulated in the relationship to the ideal of individual autonomy. Thus, a body that does not represent the harmonious functioning of a state and economical apparatuses in relationship to its subjects and does not demonstrate smooth physiological and psychological functioning,

⁹ Madness ‘as a cultural construct’ is dependent on regulating practices. According to Roy Porter, already in the early Modernity madness ‘donned many disguises and acted out multiplicity of parts’ (Porter: 69). It was, at times, inseparable from: poverty (e.g. former patients from Bethlem Hospital needed license to beg in order to compete with the sane beggars), jester’s unusual ways of attracting attention, and the poetic inspiration that could distinguish a poet from the mediocrity of the ordinary people. Michael Drayton complimented Kit Marlowe with the following verse:

For that fine madness still he did retain;
Which rightly should possess a poet’s brain.
(Porter: 66)

is a field for critical re-evaluation. Here, oppression is apparent, taking place within a perceptual reach. Questions challenging the epistemological basis of the common sense of the era are brought back to the experiential field once the wound of the feeling/perceiving/thinking body is rendered discernible and revealed as unbearable. Without a desire to communicate, and the unavoidable surfacing of the traces of the illegible bodily articulations with their concomitant subjectivities, the dream of the undisturbed interiority continues. It can persist through the spectacle of magnified otherness, outside the scope of normal perception mechanism.

Body and Modern Understanding of Subjects and Objects in Motion

The modern body comes into existence when the ideological constructs overlap and start to operate through physical activation as new realities. Bodies mirror back to the spectators' prevalent theories, and their distortions. They transgress the expectations set forth by the scientific disciplines, and aesthetic ideals. When the body encounters fragmentation¹⁰, disease, and representational confusion, it begins to resist the imposed rhythms. With the slowing down of the physical acts, the buried historical traces which eluded the gaze within everyday routines in the consumerist society are exposed as ruptures, distortions, and wounds. The body seen without an overt inner/outer separation discloses its imperfections. Representation activates the discursive field. It both confirms

¹⁰ In this paper I am referring to the mirror-phase from 1949 Jacques Lacan He writes about 'corps morcelé' translated as body-in-pieces or fragmented body. This concept refers to subject's feeling that the body does not have a substantial unity. Consequently, the subject strives to identify with the unified image reflected in the mirror. The term can be easily linked with the images by Bosch and later Surrealists, in which somatic sensitivity is translated into hallucinatory anatomy.

and challenges the normative body which is 'supposed-to-be' obedient to the explicit and implicit prerogatives of the governing apparatus. Fragmented, and frozen in representational frames, body loses the original illusion of the innate freedom:

For Modernity the human body– the elementary unit of nature as well as of society is, in Newton's famous designation, a 'solid, massy, hard, impenetrable, movable particle,' which, endowed with inertial properties, remains identical with itself irrespective of time and space (Newton 1931, 400). This universal body interacts with other such bodies according to simple underlying laws, so that large structures result (Ferguson: 39).

The resistance to the subordination to the scientific laws that constitute credo of Modernity is actualized through the attempts to evade those structures of knowledge and power that are sustained by the empirical gaze¹¹. In Modernity, a rational worldview which organizes the gaze belongs to the educated, civilized individual. Thus, a vagabond presence in the city–the apparently unmotivated mover who does not obey the logic of productive cycles, disrupts the self-evident assurance of the syllogistic reasoning about the appropriate responses to stimuli. These adequate responses would be contingent on the empirical observations of the independent individual, and would meet the criteria of instrumentality and functionality. The internal life of the displaced subject is reflected through the body in form of residues and echoes of desires, unfinished productive actions, interruptions in the productive cycles, and prolonged waiting intervals. The

¹¹ Empiricism–epistemological formation which claims that all knowledge is based on the dispassionate experience through the five senses. According to the author of the *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690), John Locke, all knowledge is derived from experience through the senses. However, reason makes connections between ideas which originate in sense-data. Locke defines idea as 'the object of understanding' when thinking. From empiricist point of view, there are no innate ideas.

dissonant rhythmical structures produced through the movement of those on the outside of the civilized coherency of the city, do not appear as independent from the surpluses generated by the exchange market. Once the body of the displaced, fragmented subject is exposed, he/she can disrupt the common combinations of surface signification. The movement of an isolated body is not propelled exclusively through its rational aims, but is subjected to the invented needs, desires, and fantasies which gain volume, expand range, and become reified through the belief in the autonomy of a single organism. In order to win its objective reality, a subject is supposed to endure working of the modern apparatuses. With the enlightened attitude towards life, the trust in the absolute power of the divine intervention vanishes. The compliant body of a modern subject is aware of the requirements for the precision of movement of specific parts of the body and of the temporal designations based on a previously determined expectation for the fulfillment of a task at hand.

A sort of anatomo-chronological schema of behavior is defined. The act is broken down into its elements; the position of the body, limbs, articulations is defined; to each movement are assigned a direction, an aptitude, a duration; their order of successions is inscribed. Time penetrates the body with all the meticulous controls of power (Foucault: 152).

The Enlightenment has engendered a social and political choreography determinable through structural analysis of an elaborate cognitive web. The precision expected from the moving body is dependent on the division of time into past, present, and future. Here, the future is controlled through pre-conception, and through the utilitarian interpretation of historical development. The bodies that strive towards perfection of the teleological

order of modernity can be seen as rational automatons following prescriptive regulations of bodily functions.

The regulation imposed by power is at the same time the law of construction of the operation. Thus disciplinary power appears to have the function not so much of deduction as of synthesis, not so much of exploitation of the product as of coercive link with the apparatus of production (Foucault: 153).

Disciplined bodies of the 20th and 21st centuries are in their practices and adherence to listening the subliminal rhythms of modernity indebted to the ascetic and esthetic practices from the previous eras¹². The power of symbolic identification can even give rise to the cultic sense of belonging to a group. Urban icons of physical practice—joggers, yogis, dance practitioner, and permanent students—are motivated by means of the forces reifying signification systems within a culture. However, they are propelled into visibility through the productive apparatuses and the images of collective, self-motivated motion that the market utilizes.

Space becomes ‘public’ as the events in it mold apprehension, producing social meaning. Dance can organize space to configure or reconfigure the relationships of bodies in just such an ephemeral, but also public, manner. (Franko: 12)¹³

¹² I am referring here mainly to the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment, era beginning roughly in the seventeenth century. Kant’s famous dictum inviting individuals to have courage to listen to their own understanding, presupposed a unified subject through whom the universal humanity could be revealed. The truth processes are not separated from the technological progress. Thus, there appears implicit criticism pointing towards the passivity and blind faith characteristic of the absolutism, feudal system, and specifically, of the behavior of the lowest class within the hierarchical systems of government who endured the *status quo* in a slave like manner. For the Enlightenment thinkers, Enlightenment is one directional process of truth elucidation. Ideas such as ‘natural law’ encourages progress and expansion in all the areas of human knowledge.

¹³ From Ch. 1 entitled *Expressing the Inexpressible in Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics*.

The moving bodies generate meanings which are recognizable and classifiable. In cases, when the organization of the bodies in space is transient, prone to dissipation, the semantic potentials might waver on the edge of comprehension. Dance engenders possibilities of associating the fleeting movement defying representational framing with the establishment of the public sphere proper. It challenges normative interpretations of the appropriate bodily responses within the relational structuring of the public encounter.

The excesses and residues from the new forms of coercion and unification appear in a non-reflective manner as pathologies, illnesses, and anti-social behaviors. When informed by self-awareness, these disturbances of Modernity's inner/outer delineations gain both esthetic and critical dimension. They initiate a reading and open the gates for an interpretative maze: one that the enlightened rational critic attempted to reduce for the sake of pure understanding. Thus, the subjectivity of a viewer reappears in a self-reflective encounter.

Proust and Jiří Kylián's¹⁴—Body and Time

¹⁴ Jiří Kylián was born in Prague in 1947. He began his physical training with acrobatics, and continued developing as a dancer at Prague Conservatory. At the age of twenty he moved to London and studied under John Cranko at the Royal Ballet School. In 1973 he set his first choreographic work in the Netherlands Dans Theater. From 1975 till 2009 he made over hundred works exploring extremes of physicality. In 1992 he started his own chamber company for dancers over forty. Relevant to the themes explored in the paper, besides *Last Touch First*, are these three important works by the choreographer.

Forgotten Land (1981) is inspired by the Munch's painting of women on a beach. Perpetual loss and expressionistic imagery dominate the work.

Falling Angels (1989) is a piece set to a percussion score based on the ritual music from West Africa. Thematically it engages the aspects and stages of female experience with the minimalist aesthetic sensibility.

Petite Mort (1991) The title refers to the orgasm, literally small death. The work is set to the stanzas in slow tempo from the two piano concertos by Mozart. The author explains: 'This deliberate choice should not be seen as a provocation or thoughtlessness—rather as my way to acknowledge the fact that I am living and

An instance of body consciousness, described by Proust, examines via written language resistances to the inner/outer dichotomies, and engages the erasures of spatial organization and the attempts to re-inscribe it. This occurs in an interval between active presence and recollection:

My body, too benumbed to move, would try to locate, according to the form of its fatigue, the position of its limbs so as to deduce from this the direction of the wall, the placement of the furniture, so as to reconstruct and name the dwelling in which it found itself. (Proust: 6)¹⁵

Commenting on the complexity of Proust's language, Deleuze writes that for Proust qualities function 'as components of deterritorialization¹⁶ passing from one assemblage to another' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 307).

When Blanchot speaks of the abstract negativity, he extends beyond the common sense negation. Through abstract negativity the author 'bypasses time'. Dynamics brought about by the defiance of the boundaries imposed by the rules of everyday life lend authority to a thinking individual. A materialized thought—committed to the paper, radically rejecting prevalent ideological formations through insistence on inscription, awakens a desire for freedom. Poetic experience of time challenges notions about the

working as part of a world where nothing is sacred, where brutality and arbitrariness are commonplace. It should convey the idea of two antique torsos, heads and limbs cut off—evidence of intended mutilation—without being able to destroy their beauty reflecting the spiritual power of their creator.' (from Notes 2003, www.abt.org)

¹⁵ *Swarm's Way* (*Du côté de chez Swarm*, 1913); translation by Lydia Davis, 2002

¹⁶ Gregg Lambert elaborates on the notion of deterritorialization:

'[In deterritorialization] the formal property of the assemblage becomes an edge that is given motion and cuts through both bodies and statements. Only exceptional states of language cause language to enter into variation, or continuous variation, which is expressive of a state of the body as becoming.' (Lambert: 38)

movement of the body in relationship to the established epistemological structures. The structures based on the observable data and social predictions, in accord with the compartmentalization of knowledge into binary categories, gain their representational activation through the labor/leisure divide serving as a bourgeois substitution for the sacred/secular divisions of time. The apparent dissonance with the zeitgeist disguises as the disease, degeneration, and dislocation (*enstellung*).¹⁷ The unclassifiable phenomena; once inscribed into the cultural landscape; display contradictions in thought formations. The explicit manifestations of the opposite physical forces at work with their contradictory ideological underpinnings resist implicit prerogative for the uniformity in the service of efficiency.

Poetic imagination resists timings produced through the regulating mechanisms. It frames and reframes excesses and residues of the quotidian life. It endows with meaning that which resists articulation within rational systems for organizing thoughts and feelings. Already in 1919 Freud felt impelled to turn to the subject from aesthetics (Freud: 122). He attempted to unravel the meaning and contradictory connotations of the term uncanny (*unheimlich*; literally unhomely). He offered following elucidation: ‘the ‘uncanny’ is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar’ (Freud: 124). Intellectual uncertainty is the key aspect of the uncanny. Following Jentsch, Freud concludes that uncanny is related to the sense of disorientation. Poetic flights into what does not correspond to the common sense of the era gain their momentum in the clashes between overblown romantic identifications, and absentmindedness propelled by the rapidity of change/repetition cycles. A particular

¹⁷ This is a German word, literally translates as distortion; as a psychoanalytic term refers to the displacement of the latent thoughts, their transition into manifested forms by the way of dream-work.

meaning, born out of the mystification of the personal identity, rather than religious hierarchy, is displaced when the subject is separated from its imagined origins. The blatant sense of displacement in Kylián's choreography is not unlike the feelings Freud analyses in his essay and Proust depicts in the portrayal above.



Image from *Last Touch First*

Last Touch First (2008 collaboration by Jiří Kylián and Michael Schumacher)¹⁸ presents the uncanny embodiment of temporal elongations engendering subjective dimension. Movement animates lethargic bodies of subjects, whose individualities have reached their peak, cannot go any further within the systems of control they inhabit and,

thus, burst their identities into the multiplicity of references, initiating new semantic bonds. The piece begins with an intimate scene in the *fin de siècle* salon. Objects through presence of which six performers establish their existence as embodied subjects with specific histories, emerge as potent, multivalent, symbolic evocations, and irresolvable narrative instigators. Mirror appears as the symbol of doubling; rocking chair promises *joissance*¹⁹ representing the lack of stable ground; book is a knowledge source to be decoded; wine glass stands for pleasure and likely addiction in the face of the lack of 'real' substance; table cloth and sheets obscure the desire for real producing a metonymy

¹⁸ *Last Touch First* (at the Joyce Theater, April 10th through 15th, 2012) by Jiří Kylián and American choreographer Michael Schumacher is the elaboration of the 2003 version, created by Kylián for the Nederlands Dans Theater III.

¹⁹ *Joissance* is a Lacanian term usually translated as pleasure or enjoyment. Slavoj Žižek writes about the traumatic loss of pleasure causing the fantasy to jump in. He writes: 'translators of Lacan often leave it in French in order to render palpable its excessive, properly traumatic character...' (Žižek: 79)

for multiplicity of histrionic devices and pretenses. Objects are displayed in a highly charged space of slow-motion and hyperbolic identifications within the theatrical space that resonates with gestures, gazes and impulses. Momentary correspondences between sound, gaze, and psychological lapses open-up interpretative and contextual possibilities short of defined action motivators which would advance coherency of the plot. Humor and acrobatics turn what could be deemed as pathology and perversion into a surreal landscape of dream-like behaviors, where objects (candle, mirror, book, and wine glass) gain allegorical potentials, and specific aspects of bodily presence (a naked leg, a foot in a high-heel shoe, fingers moving a card, mouth devouring a page, and eyes glued to a distant point in space as if awaiting someone) become the fetish projections—remnants of the nineteenth century in the imagination of the spectators from the twentieth. The analysis of social habits is brought to surface through the prolonged encounters between eyes of the performers and objects of the gaze. Through recognition of the particularity one can trace tendencies in the observation of objects of vision. If the eye is directed, as it is in a choreographed event, the previously unnoticed can be transformed into a focal point, and then taken away, revealing the perceptual gap in between. The lack of real is exposed when the fragmentation continues without offering a new stable ground for identification. Signs of representations take lives of their own. A disorienting reality distilled from the atomic awareness of the details of psycho-physical events stimulates an intellectual questioning of ideas about the ‘real’ bodies, expectations from them, symbolic values attached to them, and projections accompanying them.

Grotesque and Aestheticized Politics: Socioeconomic Contingencies, Real, and Symbolic

The grotesque reinterpretations of 20th century appear in a metonymical relationship to the body of Modernity with its imperatives, technological extensions, and coiling back into the romanticized past. Relevant for the research of the aesthetic phenomena is the genealogy of discursive formations embedded in the topography of culture. The androgynous grotesque performances of Valeska Gert²⁰ present a critical commentary on the Weimar society while engaging physically with the paradox of



Canaille by Käte Ruppel

²⁰ Valeska Gert was born in 1892 in Berlin. In terms of her family life, we know that her father held an artificial flower and jewelry factory, that she was close to her mother, and had one brother. Her grandfather died in an insane hospital, which might explain her fear from inheriting mental illness. She was enrolled in dance school by her mother at the age of seven. She studied with Otto Zorn at the Royal Opera House. In her autobiography, she wrote about her experiences dancing: ‘I spun and lost all consciousness. The movements came from themselves; they flowed out of my body...’ (1968: 20). Early on she admired Russian prima ballerina and Fokine’s muse Anna Pavlova (Howe: 195). She continued to study acting with Maria Moissi and Alfred Breiderhoff. In 1917 and 1918 she was employed at the German theater (under the direction of Max Reinhardt) and got mostly ‘eccentric roles’; notably, she played a parrot in Oskar Kokoschka’s production. Her modern dance pantomimes, which started developing in early 1920s, were ‘works of social criticism’. She worked at the Sound and Smoke (*Schall und Rauch*) cabaret. Soon she began touring outside Germany, and was a first dancer invited to perform in Communist Russia (Howe: 201). In late 1930s, after a divorce, she left Germany. She performed in Paris, while on a tour, with a Raymond Duncan Theater. She was able to get an engagement in London, prior to the exile to America in 1939 under the support of an American manager who unfortunately died soon after (Norton: 106-7). While in United States she searched for work in Hollywood as an actress. Eventually, she was able to perform in California and New York. In 1941 she opened Beggar Bar in the city which lasted till 1945. She returned to Germany in 1947. She opened another cabaret: Café Valeska and her Kitchen Personnel in Zürich. She was able to move back to her native Berlin in 1948 where she opened *Bei Valeska* (At Valeska’s Place), in the basement of an opera house (Norton: 111). In 1950s she performed highly critical political work commenting on the ‘mental patterns of former Nazis’. Probably the most powerful is her portrayal of Ilse Koch—female commander of Buchenwald. In 1960s and 70s members of the new wave of German Cinema got interested in the recent history. Filmmakers Ulrike Ottinger, who shared Gert’s grotesque sensibility, and Fassbinder who, not unlike Gert, utilized exaggeration to point out mechanisms of power within everyday interactions, were both involved

intimacy within the capitalist economy. A paradox of a singular isolated, intimate replication rendered into a public event, turns the attention to the socioeconomic inconsistencies of an entire era. Dance historian Ramsay Burt explains how Gert's performance work in 1920s in Germany reflected the financial crisis and heightened feelings of inequality. He writes: '... her [Gert's] presentation on stage constituted an attack by Gert that was aimed in particular at the provincial conservatism of Wilhelmine bourgeois society'.²¹ In *Canaille* she enacts a street prostitute, attracting customers, and engaging in sexual activities. Inspired by the artistic portrayals of prostitutes, Gert extends the mere reproduction of common stereotypes into the zone of physical reenactment. She introduces mirror-like hyper-realism as she performs details of a 'real' sexual encounter, portraying both pleasure and pain. Finally, she leaves her customer 'either acting satisfied, dissatisfied or angry with him'.²² Burt emphasizes that Gert focused on the experiences of female sexuality in the political climate in which masculinity of the bourgeois men was challenged by the new, experimental ideologies, and by the lack of security in the clear-cut binaries of the socially predictable gender role-play. Burt further asserts that Gert 'made a shocking intervention [...] by desentimentalizing the image of the prostitute and through it attacking bourgeois sexual hypocrisy'.²³ Against the heterosexual pathos of the revived mythology of national

with Gert's oeuvre. Gert died, still an active artist at the age of eighty six, in 1978. Valeska was from the inceptions of her career concerned with timeliness, and appropriate response to the moral challenges of the age she lived in. In 1926 she wrote in the magazine *Der Querschnitt*:

'In my dances I have expressed all the appearances of our time and all the excesses which are capable of being expressed through the body. But my ethic, which is characterized as the will to be true under all circumstances, is by far not valued as much as the common person's ethic which above all things wants to be moralistic.' (quoted in *Individuality and Expression: The Aesthetics of the New German Dance, 1908-1936* by Dianne S. Howe)

²¹ Burt: 53

²² Burt: 51

²³ Ibid, 53

renewal which championed the patriarchal family as its symbolic matrix, Gert embodied antagonism of the oppressed, overworked women. The feeling bodies of men and women, motivated by the psychoanalytic encouragement to understand their experiences beyond religious prohibitions, reflected conflicts between desires and injunctions. These were exposed through the heightened visibility brought about by the machinery of the industrial era. Bodies are seen on the screen, frozen on photographs, and examined through the evolving medical technology. Their subjectivity is juxtaposed to their idealized images and competitive requirements from the consumerist market. A lack of the real identification in the society where gods are mortal, is initially acutely felt due to the increase of leisure time, and heightened expectations for having good, comfortable life. During the interbellum, emotions were reactivated as a result of the assimilation of sentimental symbols, aesthetic ideals, and essentialist identifications from the mythic past. Valeska resisted this aesthetic transformation of the politics into the legendary struggle between good and evil. She articulated the anxieties and tensions together with the socioeconomic contingencies. Rather than transforming a sexual act into a physical correlative to the mystical reunion with a divine essence, she portrays it as a consequence of inhabiting a milieu dominated by the impulses unleashed through the economical struggle of young women, and the search for affordable pleasures by male customers.

In *Staging the Nation's Rebirth* Roger Griffin writes about the myth of rebirth—'a radical crusade *against* decadence' and the re-emergence of symbolic forms in politics during the times of economical hardships.

Clearly, the triumph of a new life over decadence and decay, the imminent rebirth from literal or figurative death, is a theme so universal within manifestations of the human religious, artistic, emotional and social imagination throughout history, that it is in itself inadequate to define a political ideology.

(Griffin: 13)

For clusters of meanings and symbols to be re-activated, new corporality was to be produced by attaching individual to a group entity. This needed to be followed by the activation via naming and myth restoring within social apparatuses. For activation to take place 'a present condition' had to be portrayed as unbearable. As the right wing nationalist leaders offered final solutions to the pain in society by mobilizing legendary eternal identifications with the ideal bodies and heroic stories with roots in powerful archetypes, leftist artists entered spaces of negativity informed by consciousness of the historical processes. The grotesque body of a leftist artist/performer sees itself reflected in a public display of cold voyeurism, reactivity, and mimesis. The artist responds to the social oppression through movement on the outside of the normative divisions. In a gap between experienced and perceived, a potential for social change sneaks in. This gap does not allow for the unbearable sense of suffering to grow to the point of climactic joining with the entire national being. In a moment when such a union would be accessible, the boundaries between the individual existence and the ideological construct would be lost. A myth produces the effect of real which would otherwise remain removed from the corporeal experience of a being caught in the autonomy of modern subjecthood. Deconstructed mythic structures and archetypes turned into role-play teasers disappoint the dream of restoring ideal, mythic unions.

The divisions of labor, and class determination, resulting from the developments of the modes of production, gave rise to the displaced identities for those who did not fit into the productive cycle. The speed, the relative abundance of goods, and new kinds of technological landscapes with heterogeneous excesses and wastes, transformed outcasts into dandies, voyeurs, wanderers, and bohemians of a previously unknown kind. The ‘negative’ body of the nomadic elements such as beggars, petite thieves, bohemians, prostitutes and recent emigrants, gains its representational presence against the ideal of independent, ethical, progressive, forward-moving citizen striving to spread good in the world, trusting in the advancements of civilization but still, for the emotional support, relying on the formations which carry with them the traditional values, such as family, church, nation, and state.

Within a prolonged temporal interval, a singular body inevitably displays both harmony and dissonance. A body exhibits the signs of a specific era even when the person does not notice technological additions as extensions of the real body but rather integrates them immediately. The genealogies of representations do not only follow the main currents, they also point out the frictions between teleological orientation and the experiencing body with its mirror awareness. The points of friction become emphasized when ‘the time is out of joint’ and the unforeseen outbursts cannot be prevented. The body momentarily ceases to follow the obvious, and traces its own unique thought trajectories. Isolated instances captured by the conscious subject stand against a tendency of the representation apparatuses to generate mystical symbols out of expressions, movements, and incoherencies dodging rationality. On the other hand,

when the irrational is essentialized, hyperbolized, and multiplied, it gains resounding force that can be utilized for the political aims.

Conclusion

With the rise of medical science, the inner/outer dichotomy is disturbed. The bodies can now be read as medical texts. The artists transform these threshold subjectivities into performative acts par excellence. Questions about nature of the presence of the body arise at the juncture between the fictional and the factual. Can the experience of the body be separated from the history of representation, especially once the material traces of centuries of bodily representations become reactivated via new technologies rendering the imagined palpable? How is the body recorded through texts; how is it conceptualized, poeticized? When does a body become transgressive? The body is both a source of the specific knowledge about reality, and an allegorical presence within a conceptual field. The loss of the firm ground of theism led towards an intensification of the interest in the supernatural, and to the resurgence of theatrical representations of the uncanny. In the nineteenth century, ghosts, apparitions and monsters began flooding artistic imagination, and psychoanalytic sessions. The 'pathological' phenomena mentioned, the embodiments of residual impressions, are transformed into poetic tropes. The repetition of the phenomena interpreted as integral to the newly construed conceptual field of the unconscious, started to become accessible via innovative techniques of symbolization. Manifold representations produced the uncanny sense of the doubling of the real. The real, sought by the alienated subjects who

in the late Modernity missed the direct contact with the productive apparatuses, was reproduced in such a skillful way that in the instances of historical rupture the inner/outer dichotomy became completely eclipsed. Now, within the constant turmoil of Modernity, an avant-garde artist contested the hegemony of the mainstream culture by interpolating poetic tropes into the live body. The urgency of art making propelled by, on the one hand, the increase in the speed of production and reproducibility of artifacts and even bodies and body parts, and on the other hand, the desperate humanistic desire to preserve the sanity of the individual subjects and entities taking on the role of a subject, supported by the curing endeavors of psychoanalysis and the theories proposed by philosophers and sociologists, was intensified by narrowing the focus on the singular experience. Since, the experience now included knowledge of the body which combined exact with human sciences, the search for truth, identity, and essence could be situated in the body itself. However, the body was discovered as multiplicity without any hidden interiority to rely on. Thus, the modernist search for the pure essence via abstraction opens the way for post-modern deconstruction and self-conscious construction of meanings and interpretative grids. The body in between two world wars is inseparable from its proficiency in movement, and thus linked to the requirement of labor efficiency (Franko: xi).²⁴ It both mimics abstracted processes of industrialization, and resists their

²⁴ In the introduction to *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics* Mark Franko explains the relationship of Modernism to its predecessor Romanticism. He defines expression 'as the outwarding of inwardness'. This romantic notion of expression 'forcibly conflicts with aesthetic modernism's absolute: the reduction of art to the essence of its own formal means' (Franko: x). The modernist strive towards the universality appears to parallel the fascination with the progress of the entire era. However, the left-wing avant-garde introduces 'an overtly emotional and personal body'. Mark Franko argues 'that the new stylistic practices emerge from internal critiques of expression theory', and do not have to be imagined as pure progress (Franko x-xi). The expression theory is linked to the socio-political positioning of the performer, especially in relationship to physical labor and gender. Franko explains that '[w]hen expression theory...catches itself by the tail, a deferment of gesture's delineated connotations ensues'. Since the dancing becomes hermetic, linking the inner and the outer happens in a non-expressive manner. The body is 'not productive, but reproductive'. The

destructive potentials through sentimental identifications with icons from the history of the representations of expressive corporality.

The grotesque and uncanny embodiments during the times of political uncertainties are unique events of becoming. The poets and poeticized bodies, courageous enough to embody these transitional spaces and temporalities, challenged the fabrication of standardized meanings and aestheticized politics. The notion of an event, as described by the French philosopher Allen Badiou, is an occurrence within the truth process. With the dominance of the representational apparatus aiming to govern the organization of perceptions and mental choices, events challenging consistency of a given situation become not only esthetic exceptions, but also sources for ethical appreciation of lives in their singularity and mutual interconnectedness. The event is something ‘which vanishes as soon as it appears’,²⁵ and is other than that which is accessible through the instituted knowledge.

...the fundamental ontological characteristic of an event is to inscribe, to name, the situated void of that for which it is an event (Badiou: 69).

The embodiment appears as a unique event. What Deleuze and Guattari, borrowing from Antonin Artaud, designate as *Body without Organs* is a battlefield of desires to flee determination. Here, the subversion of social codes and official representations is bound to escapes from the habitual responses to the society’s expectations. The decoding occurs with the unraveling of desires and their disappointments during the encounters

body excluded from the public sphere of productive production, is then committed to ‘bourgeois privacy-as-subjectivity’ (Franko: 9). The powerful centralized sentimentality born out of this kind of creative embodiment, is countered through critical the awareness of the processes of Modernity.

²⁵ Badiou: 67

with the structures of subordination. It is with the experience of disappointment and the discovery of the lack of any solid external realization apparatus that the body can become a source for the creative investigation and rediscover its internal sense of honesty. However, the disappointment which allows for this event to take place also engenders zones of indiscernible intensity.

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