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A Swan Lake: Exploring the Materiality of Water in Alexander Ekman's Ballet

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses Ekman's ballet *A Swan Lake* from the perspective of new materialism, which is understood as the agency of the non-human, particularly the role of water in the creation of movement and in the script of the ballet. The question guiding this article concerns how the materiality of water takes place in Ekman's ballet. I propose that by paying attention to the corporeality of dance itself as a discursive practice (Barad 2003), it is possible to appreciate the creation of a kind of language or code that can be interpreted. Following Barad, a discursive practice not only is language or what is said but allows certain things to be said. Here, both the bodies of the dancers and the water allow things to be said. In other words, encounters of the materiality of the human, that is, the bodies of the dancers with the non-human agency of the water, provoke new ways of moving and therefore form part of the choreographic composition, thus co-creating the ballet itself.

Keywords: new materialism, modern ballet, non-human agency, Swan Lake

SAMMENDRAG

I denne artikkelen søker jeg å analysere Ekmans verk med *New Materialism* som perspektiv. *New Materialism* innebærer å se på det ikke-menneskelige og ikke-menneskelig agens med særlig blikk på vannets rolle i både bevegelse og i ballettens handling. Hovedspørsmålet i artikkelen er på hvilke måter vannets materialitet er til stede i balletten *A Swan Lake*?

Jeg vil foreslå at vi ved å ta hensyn til selve dansens kroppslighet som en diskursiv praksis (Barad, 2003), kan se verdi i et slags språk eller en slags koder som igjen kan tolkes. Ifølge Barad er en diskursiv praksis ikke synonymt med språk eller noe som blir uttalt, men heller det som gjør at visse ting kan sies. Her er det ikke bare danserens kropp, men også vannet i seg selv som uttrykker noe. Sagt med andre ord er det møtet mellom menneskelig materialitet, altså dansernes kropper, og det ikke-menneskelige, nemlig vannet, som fremprovoserer nye måter å bevege seg på og dermed bidrar i den koreografiske komposisjonen og er med på skapingen av selve balletten. Det er nettopp det som står for den ikke-menneskelige agens.

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Introduction

Alexander Ekman's *A Swan Lake* tells a story about the creation of the ballet in both classical and contemporary versions, creating a version in which a *lake* is put on the stage and the dancers are swans that swim in it. The ballet was first performed in 2014 at the Oslo Opera House by the Norwegian National Ballet. I first encountered this ballet while watching television in 2016, and the water captured my perception immediately. I again encountered this work on an online platform during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article is based on my dissertation for my bachelor's degree in aesthetics in the research project New Materialisms in Literary and Audiovisual Narratives of the Southern Cone.[1] In the analysis, I aim to examine Ekman's work from the perspective of new materialisms, that is, by focussing on the agency of the non-human, which in this case is the role of water in the creation of movement and in the script of the ballet. The question guiding this article is, "How does the materiality of water take place in the ballet *A Swan Lake?*" I aim to answer this question by referring to the feminist theorists Karen Barad and Nikki Sullivan and the dance scholars Nigel Stewart, Paula Montecinos Oliva and Marie Bardet. The study is based on audio-visual materials, including a recording of the premiere of the ballet (Tudor 2014) and the documentary *Rare Birds* (Rives 2014), which provide insights into the creative process and technical elements involved in bringing ballet to life.

From the classical to the contemporary

In 1877, *Swan Lake* was first performed by the Bolshoi Ballet, with music composed by Tchaikovsky and choreography by Julius Reisinger. This four-act work tells the story of Prince Siegfried, who falls in love with the young Odette, who is transformed into a swan by Rothbart's spell. Although the ending has frequently been modified, the work has a strong tragic charge.[2] In its classical form, the dancers wear pointe shoes, white tutus, and feathered crowns to represent the swans, and the lake is alluded to by lighting effects or scenery. In contrast, Ekman's *A Swan Lake* consists of two acts and a short scene that diverges from the classical narrative. The first act is set in 1877 and portrays the creation of the ballet, blending absurd and mimetic elements related to swans. This act plays with temporality, incorporating mid-twentieth-century style elements such as a television set and pastel pink costumes. The second act, set 137 years later, features dancers in aquatic costumes performing on a stage that has been transformed into a lake. They shift between dancing in the water and engaging in everyday activities, emphasising the diverse ways in which we interact with water in our lives. The third act introduces a dancer dressed as a swan-winged robot, adding a contemporary twist to the narrative.

New materialism and new approaches to dance

In my analysis, I take the perspective of new materialisms from Barad (2003) and Sullivan (2012). They pay particular attention to the capacity of the

non-human to generate effects, whether by encounters between bodies or by the adaptation of a body to a certain materiality and the consequent development of a technique. In particular, I am interested in the contact of the dancers' bodies with the water and vice versa, as the confluence of human and non-human materialities from which dance emerges. The concepts of *discursive practices*, *intra-activity* and *somatechnics* allow us to understand the relationship between the human and the non-human, that is, the dancers and the water.

Discursive practices, as proposed by Barad (2003), refer to the performative nature of meaning and the continuous performance of the world's differential intelligibility.[3] Barad emphasises that agency is not limited to humans and that the distinction between subject and object is dissolved, as both human and non-human entities possess agency and therefore contribute to the shaping of meaning. Intra-activity, according to Barad, refers to the causal material enactments of human and non-human corporealities that come into contact with each other, highlighting the possibility of an open future.

Sullivan's concept of somatechnics[4] concerns the inseparability of the soma (body) and techné (techniques), emphasising that bodily-being-in-the-world and the materialities encountered shape corporealities, identities and differences. This perspective acknowledges the effects of the environment and specific materialities on the body, which lead to the transformation of corporeality and the development of bodily techniques that respond to contextual needs. For Sullivan, technés are not tools that we manipulate for a purpose, but techniques and/or *orientations* in the Heideggerian sense that we learn within a particular tradition or *ontological contex*t. This means that technés develop situationally, referring to modes and responding to contextual needs.

Although the authors presented here do not study dance, I find their theoretical approaches useful for shedding light on the agential relations between water and dancing. Nevertheless, some authors have worked specifically on the relationship between the agency of the non-human and dance, including Nigel Stewart (2010), Paula Montecinos Oliva (2018) and Marie Bardet (2012). The first two specifically studied the role of water in dancing.

Stewart's concept of environmental dance[5] highlights the connections between the human body and the natural environment, including animals and plants. He argues that the environment influences how we move, transforming our bodies into landscapes or *bodyscapes*[6] and highlighting the mutual influences of human and non-human entities. The agency of the non-human is not only what an object guides someone to do or is a mere response to exterior inputs, but also the connections between different bodies (human and non-human) that, by mutual influence, provoke and create something new.

Montecinos Oliva conducted dance workshops on the shores of lakes in Argentina, exploring bodily perceptions and living environments. Her approach resonates with Ekman's creative process in *A Swan Lake*, as both seek to integrate movements that go beyond disciplinary constraints to engage with the materiality of water. Montecinos Oliva also seeks to incorporate movement that escapes from a specific disciplinary conception and goes beyond a single category of dance style by combining techniques and creating new ones. Montecinos Oliva's research demonstrates how human bodies in water adapt and respond to their properties, developing a somatic intelligence that emerges from embodied experience.[7]

Bardet (2012) explores the intersection of dance and philosophy, emphasising the importance of the dancer's body and its engagement with the environment. She suggests that dance involves more than just inventing something entirely new; it involves a mindful approach that allows for reengaging with familiar habits in diverse ways and attending to

the context. Dancing entails transforming sensory experiences into movement and noticing what may have previously gone unnoticed in everyday life. Bardet highlights the dynamic nature of bodies in motion, constantly shaping and reshaping them through their own deformations.[8] In shaping dance, it is essential to combine various movements, enabling the body to influence and be influenced by others and ultimately creating new ways of moving in and with space. Additionally, Bardet perceives dance as a practice that challenges the limitations imposed on the body, aiming to deactivate restrictive logics. Rather than moving in impossible ways, dance involves pushing the boundaries of the body and discovering movements that are not impossible but have yet to be realised.[9]

Swans dancing

This analysis focuses on the recording of the ballet's premiere. The first act is a meta-narrative exercise in the origin of *Swan Lake*. In a parodic tone, the "producers" of the ballet ask why a prince would be in love with a swan. In contrast, they also propose a scientific approach to the mobility of birds, the character of the ornithologist, and her explanations of the behaviour and movements of the swans. At this point, it is interesting that the dancers show the aggressiveness of the swans, moving away from the idyllic notion presented in classical ballet. The first act sets the stage for the new interpretation of *Swan Lake*.

In the second act, a 6,000-litre pool transforms the stage into a lake. Unlike other versions of the ballet, such as Mikhail Fokine's *Dying Swan* or Balanchine's *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux*, in this version, water plays a major role because it forces a different mobility and creates a choreography in which new swans are presented. At the same time, it shows aspects of everyday life by which we relate to water: showering, drinking, playing and swimming. An important aspect is the sound of water and how the dancers' movement connects with water, provoking not only a particular rhythm but also a sonority. Hence, both the orchestra and the dancers' bodies produce sound.

Act II of the ballet introduces everyday interactions with water, diverging from the traditional focus on dancing swans and ballerinas. It shows children playing, a couple on a water tricycle, a person showering and a woman drying her hair, which leads to a blackout when her hairdryer falls into the water. The scene includes rubber ducks, playful water activities and the practical use of water for hygiene. The ballet breaks free from its traditional swan-centric focus, transcending the prince–swan princess storyline. It explores new territories beyond its original boundaries, inviting us to reconsider our sensory experience of water and our understanding of animality.

Co-creation with water

The process of creating Ekman's ballet is portrayed in the documentary *Rare Birds*, which shows how the choreographer tried to create "some kind of bird" that would be his own swan. In the documentary, he pays attention to the movements of these birds, their wings in flight, their long necks and open chests when they face each other to fight. In the documentary, Ekman mentions that he tried to capture the generality of the movement, to imitate the intention of the movement, whether aggressive or attractive. One dancer says that by incorporating such movements and dancing them, he becomes more than a human being; he becomes one of the animals.

As observed in the documentary, *Rare Birds*, while creating the script and choreography, Ekman and the corps de ballet had to learn to move in the water and relearn how to dance. First, exercises were performed to break the habitual axis of the dancers, which then had to be reconstructed or regained until they were able to dance in the water. First, they had to learn to fall on wet plastic in the rehearsal room to lose their fear. They were then able to explore and learn new movements by increasing the amount of water. In



Fig. 1. Ornithologist in A Swan Lake (minutes 31.01)

addition, Henrik Vibskov, the costume designer, had to create costumes using permeable materials and design shoes that would allow the dancers to slide without slipping to prevent them from falling. To understand the process of the creation and incorporation of water mobility, the concepts of discursive practice and somathecnics are helpful analytical keys.

I propose that the water in *A Swan Lake* encounters other materialities, such as the dancers' bodies, which provokes actions or discursive practices, such as sounds, movements and choreographies. According to Barad's concept of discursive practices,[10] they are not exclusive to human activities but involve the (re)configuring of the world by establishing boundaries, properties and meanings. Based on Barad´s concept, I consider that the intra-action of the water with the dancers' bodies produces a discursive practice that consists of dance and sound. Instead of focusing on what things are, it explores the possibilities arising from the encounter of distinct materialities that are mutually influential. In this context, the dance itself can be considered a discursive practice in which the dancers' bodies affect one another. The physical space in which they perform, whether it is a wooden stage, a concrete street, or, in this case, a "lake", also influences them.

Sullivan's (2012) somatechnics can be distinguished according to the dance style (e.g., classical, modern or contemporary) to the extent that dancing on tiptoe or barefoot leads to a distinct bodily and cultural mobility and identity. An orientation learned in a particular style, a certain mobility is the ontological context, leading the dancers to move in a specific way.

Following Stewart's concept of the bodyscape, the ballet shows the interweaving of the dancers' bodies with the environment, particularly at the beginning of the second act, when the black-clad swans glide through the water, slapping their jackets to create visual images of splashing drops and producing sounds. This points to a deeper understanding of dance. Following Bardet, dance is not about moving in an impossible way but rather about playing with the limits of the skin to find movements that are not impossible but have not yet been put into practice. This can be clearly seen in Ekman's ballet and the dancers' exploration of

Fig. 2. Swan water tricycle. A Swan Lake (1.20.09)





Fig. 3. Practicing. Rare Birds

water, how they learn to move with and in water, and how they seek to incorporate the animality of birds, including the aggressiveness of swans. In brief, the choreography explores the actualisation of this not-impossible mobility.

Concluding considerations

In this article, I utilise the theory of new materialisms to study the effects of working with new surfaces, specifically water, in dance. The documentary *Rare Birds* (Rive 2014) portrays initial encounters with a wet surface, which results in instability and falls. Because *A Swan Lake* is a version of *Swan Lake* that has a "lake" onstage, the challenge extends beyond maintaining balance on a slippery stage; it also involves presenting animal-like mobility. Ekman's ballet intertwines the corporealities of water, birds and dancers, creating a discursive practice and a novel interpretation of Swan Lake.

The question that guided this article was "How does the materiality of water take place in the ballet *A Swan Lake*?" The materiality of water is observed in the process of creation, particularly the possibilities of movement realised by the swans and the dancers to create Ekman's ballet. Furthermore, in scenes that allude to everyday activities, there is an appeal to a sensual experience of water that is often disregarded. The ballet shows us that we can recognise everyday aspects that might go unnoticed but that, when staged, generate empathy or, in Bardet's (2012) words,[11] allow us to be touched by movement.

Fig. 4. A Swan Lake (minute 48.19).



Endnotes

1 With the guidance of Dr. Valeria de los Ríos and the framework of the research project Fondecyt Nº1180552: "Nuevos materialismos en narrativas literarias y audiovisuales del Cono Sur" (New materialisms in literary and audiovisual narratives of the Southern Cone).

2 In the first act it is announced that the queen commissions her son, on his birthday, to find a wife. In the second act the prince goes hunting near the lake and meets Odette as she transforms from swan to human. Siegfried falls in love with her, and it is reciprocated, but he does not know that to break the spell he must promise her his love. In the third act, a ball is held to present candidates for the prince's wife, and Rothbart arrives with his daughter Odile. They trick Siegfried into thinking Odile is Odette, and he mistakenly declares his love for her. The fourth act takes place at the lake, and the ending varies according to the version. In some versions, Odette dies because the spell is not broken, and in other versions they live happily ever after.

3 "…meaning is not a property of individual words or groups, but a continuous performance of the world in its differential intelligibility" (821).

4 "…the inextricability of soma and techné, of bodily-being-in-the world, and the dispositifs in and through which corporealities, identities and difference(s) are formed and transformed, come to matter, if you like" (302).

5 "…the plethora of dance and somatic practices concerned with the human body's relationship to landscape and environment, including the other-than-human world of animals and plants" (2010, 32).

6 "…here the dancing body develops into a symptom (not merely a sign) of the landscape, and therefore into not just a body moving in a landscape but rather a 'bodyscape' or 'body topography'" (2010, 35).

7 "El agua conecta materialidades desde el contacto con una movilidad interna que está siempre fluyendo, migrando, inestabilizando hábitos y saberes cristalizados u "objetivos", y dando una nueva comprensión a los estados de incertidumbre." (Montecinos Oliva 2018, 148).

8 "Para la danza, el carácter dinámico de los cuerpos en movimiento da y toma forma, al reencontrar sin cesar su propia deformación." (Bardet 2012, 222)

9 "El trabajo de exploración de la danza en su realización no pasaría por un repertorio de todos los gestos posibles en un cuerpo... sino que más bien se consagraría más bien a desactivar ciertas lógicas que los vuelven imposibles" (Bardet 2012, 219).

10 "…are not human-based activities but rather specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted" (828).

11 "El movimiento del otro pone en juego la propia experiencia del movimiento del observador: la información visual genera, en el espectador, una experiencia cinestésica (sensación interna de los movimientos de su propio cuerpo) inmediata" (Bardet, 2012, 229)

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