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## Spiritual corporeality: towards embodied gnosis through a dancing language

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## CHAPTER 2

### Invitation to Join the Dance:

#### bringing together dance theory and academic scholarship on esotericism

In this chapter I invite the academic study of Western esotericism to (metaphorically speaking) join the dance. I will elaborate on how the three key-concepts [\*spiritual corporeality\\*\*](#), [\*altered states of knowing\\*\*](#) and [\*embodied gnosis\\*\*](#) are related to intersecting this research in and through dance with the academic study of esotericism.

In my approach to [\*dance language\\*\*](#) I approximate a performative state of *embodied gnosis* through (among others) a process of blending inner movements of knowing, believing and imagining. To contextualize this experience, I will briefly introduce how the dynamic triangle between reason, faith and gnosis has been questioned in studies on esotericism as mutually interpenetrating foundations for worldviews.<sup>113</sup> I conclude this chapter with conceptually framing my *dance language* in dialogue with esoteric forms of thought and related body-based practices.

### Invitation to dance: Western esotericism

The historical and conceptual foundations of Western esotericism as a field of research can be traced back to the re-emergence of Platonic Orientalism<sup>114</sup> during the Renaissance. Platonic Orientalism considers Plato's philosophy as an expression of supreme spiritual wisdom rooted in ancient Oriental pagan cultures. Its representative thinkers (middle and Neo-Platonists) emphasize the radical religiosity of Plato's thought, where abstract philosophical thinking is left behind in favor of *gnosis* and with the aim of achieving salvation

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<sup>113</sup> I propose an open analogy between knowing and believing as non-verbal performative states and reason and faith. Imagining as a performative state can in my view only approximate an analogy with gnosis when imagination is understood as an epistemic faculty. Hence, I work with the concept of the *imaginal* which is not understood as imaginary in the sense of fiction but as [\*real\\*\*](#) understood as relating to a place of being that is suspended between the sensorial and the intelligible. See below p. 69-71.

<sup>114</sup> The term "Platonic Orientalism" was coined in 2001 by John Walbridge, specialist on Oriental theosopher and mystic Shihāb al-Din ibn Habash al-Suhrawardī (1154-1191). Suhrawardī had re-ignited the theosophical wisdom of ancient Persia in the context of Islam. For a critical edition of Suhrawardī's thought, see Walbridge and Ziai, *Suhrawardī. The Philosophy of Illumination*, 1999. For an impression on Suhrawardī's work in relation to the larger context of a lineage of Oriental Theosophy ranging from 1191-1896 see Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 1989 [1977], 110.

(*soteria*) and spiritual enlightenment.<sup>115</sup> The originators of the religious cultures that were assumed to be the source of Plato's wisdom have been speculatively identified with the Persian Zoroaster, the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus, or the Hebrew Moses throughout the ages. During the Renaissance, Roman Catholic theology, medieval scriptural Jewish hermeneutics and philosophies from late Antiquity had merged into a stream of thought, based on Christian foundations. Elements such as astrology, alchemy and natural magic had entered this stream by the translation of Islamic scholarly materials during the Middle Ages. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, these elements were synthesized into worldviews based on Platonic philosophy, which today are addressed with the terms "Hermeticism" and "occult philosophy." Everything that today is gathered under the disciplinary umbrella of Western esotericism can be historically and conceptually re-traceable to these cultural contexts.<sup>116</sup>

One of the recurring themes in contemporary discourse on dance is the question of how the specific kind of knowledge of dance can be positioned in relation to a society that is strongly focused on knowledge production. A question that often rises in this context is also whether it should be labeled as epistemological. With its dynamic nature, its implicitness, sensuality, affect, dynamic physicality and ephemerality, conveyed through kinetic and kinesthetic empathy and imagination, the knowledge of dance is contrasted with discursive, rational and technical forms of knowledge.<sup>117</sup> It is often understood as a non-classifiable transient knowledge, more related to modalities of experience than to categories of cognition.<sup>118</sup>

Dance as a bodily medium has often been classified as "the other" in relation to theories on modern art. The knowledge of dance is often referred to as another type of knowledge. This implies an idea of what a proper or common kind of knowledge should be, which is usually considered to be equivalent to the modernist rationalistic knowledge paradigm.<sup>119</sup> Seen from the perspective of a rationalistic knowledge paradigm, the knowledge of dance can only be understood as a "negation of modern knowledge".

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<sup>115</sup> Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* 2012, 12, footnote 20.

<sup>116</sup> Hanegraaff, "Teaching Experiential Dimensions of Western Esotericism," 2011, 154-155.

<sup>117</sup> Brandstetter, "Dance as a Culture of Knowledge," 2007, 40.

<sup>118</sup> Klein, "Dance in a Knowledge Society," 2007, 29.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

Yet the dance discourse that has emerged from conceptually oriented dance practice does embrace rational, objective, empirical and intellectual modes of thinking, speaking and writing about dance.

Situated rather in the corporeal discursive than in the verbal discursive realm, and speaking from a perspective of cultural critique, dance knowledge has often been described as an authentic kind of knowledge that needs to be uncovered from underneath the traces inscribed into the body by modern civilization. Authentic knowledge and the idea of dance knowledge as direct, physical, practical, transient and non-classifiable knowledge tends to generate a mythologized idea of dance. This may have contributed to its marginalization as “the other”, separated from the worldly concerns of society or simply as culturally irrelevant.<sup>120</sup>

In tracing the history of how scholars and intellectuals have imagined the domain of “esotericism, hermeticism, the occult, magic, mysticism, superstition, the irrational,” leading scholar in Western esotericism Wouter J. Hanegraaff states that “this domain has always been considered the domain of *the Other*” and has been rejected from mainstream intellectual academic culture that had enforced its sense of identity by negating the “identity’s reverse image.”

Hanegraaff writes about the domain of Western esotericism as “*the Other*”:

It has been imagined as a strange country, whose inhabitants think differently from us and live by different laws: whether one felt that it should be conquered and civilized, avoided and ignored, or emulated as a source of inspiration, it has always presented a challenge to our very identity, for better or worse. We seldom realize it, but in trying to explain who ‘we’ are and what we stand for, we have been at pains to point out that we are not like *them*. In fact, we still do. [...] Our perceptions of ‘esotericism’ or ‘the occult’ are inextricably entwined with how we think about ourselves: although we are almost never conscious of the fact, our very identity as

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 29.

intellectuals or academics depends on an implicit rejection of that identity's reverse mirror image.<sup>121</sup>

In one of his "Seven Epistemological Theses on Esotericism,"<sup>122</sup> Andreas Kilcher<sup>123</sup> writes that esotericism explores knowledge up to its mythological (and literary) boundaries. The orientation of esotericism towards primordial forms of knowledge that have been continuously reconstituted in varying forms throughout history, may be linked here with performativity according to Lepecki: an "always singular yet always dispersed (or semi-absent) source," that insists on being actualized by and through dance. Something very ancient yet always new keeps on pressing itself towards expression through dance. But the ways we may speak about this source and understand it are evolving. To speak about the knowledge related to experiencing this source in dance in terms of a mythological kind of knowledge affiliates it with ancient human history.

According to LaMothe, who sees dance as the "generative ground of human culture, including and especially of religion", there is growing evidence that it was through the act of dancing that primate mammals evolved into proto humans with human traits such as "big brains, empathic hearts, a proclivity for religion, a penchant for cooperating, and ecological adaptability". La Mothe highlights the unique capacity of human beings to "notice, invent, recreate, practice, teach, and become complex patterns of bodily movement. *Human beings are rhythms of bodily becoming*". She pushes this line of thought even further by stating that "the case may be made that primates did not evolve into humans who chose to dance; but rather that the primates who danced were the ones who became *human*"<sup>124</sup>.

"Rhythms of bodily becoming" can be experienced through dance in their most primal manifestations as oscillations of energy that travel through the body and bring it into motion. Being receptive to these rhythms of becoming that always and forever can only be experienced in the present moment of unfolding time, might as well be a major foundation

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<sup>121</sup> Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 2012, 3.

<sup>122</sup> Kilcher, "Seven Epistemological Theses," 2009, 147.

<sup>123</sup> Andreas Kilcher is the head of the MA History and Philosophy of Knowledge at the ETH Zürich. His research areas are the history of German-Jewish Literature and Culture, Literary and Cultural Studies, Kabbalah and Esoteric Studies.

<sup>124</sup> LaMothe, "A History of Theory and Method in the Study of Religion and Dance," 2018, 5-6.

for the kind of knowing dance can convey to the dancer. But this force or source is very raw, there are no words, symbols or images that travel along with the waves of energy that pass through the human body through movement, at least not in my experience. So how can this primary, ancient yet always new and renewed source of life tell us about what the human body and the human being has the potential to become? How can we speak about it? What kind of knowing are we talking about? Where is natural evolution driving us, through our bodies? Might we be able to unlock some potentialities for knowing about the future of the human being through dancing?

### **Altered states of knowing - spiritual corporeality - embodied gnosis**

In the following I will explain how the three key concepts reflect a convergence between this research in and through dance and the academic study of esotericism.

Gnosis, a Greek word that stands for “intuitive knowledge of God and of one’s own self”<sup>125</sup>, plays a key role in Western esotericism. Wouter J. Hanegraaff investigated gnosis from the perspective of altered states of consciousness (ASC). Charles Tart, one of the founding fathers of transpersonal psychology<sup>126</sup>, introduced ASC into academic discourse. It first came into being in the context of LSD research in the 1960’s and has been mainly associated with the use of psychoactive substances, but other types of altered states of consciousness such as meditation, hypnosis and dream consciousness have been also included into its referential scope.<sup>127</sup> Hanegraaff integrated ASC as a conceptual framework for the interpretation of historical sources that belong to the domain of Western esotericism.

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<sup>125</sup> Hanegraaff, “Open Access to the Absolute: some remarks on the concept of religion,” 2015, 101.

<sup>126</sup> The theoretical foundations for transpersonal psychology are commonly understood to be laid by William James and Carl Gustav Jung. A leading figure in 21<sup>st</sup> century transpersonal psychology is Stanislav Grof. Transpersonal psychology emerged in the 1960s and focuses on experiences that reach beyond a common sense understanding of self towards processes of spiritual transformation induced by for example mystical experiences, experiences of self transcendence, cosmic self-humor, maximized sense awareness, psychedelic substances etc. Transpersonal psychology interprets these experiences as hinting towards other layers of reality that cannot be accommodated within an exclusively materialistically oriented scientific paradigm. Beauregard, Trent and Schwartz, “Toward a postmaterialist psychology: Theory, research and applications,” 2018, 23. For an overview on transpersonal psychology at the beginning of this century see Tart, “Current Status of Transpersonal Psychology,” 2006, 83-37.

<sup>127</sup> Hanegraaff, “Reason, Faith, and Gnosis,” 2008, 141. Footnote 2.

Taking “the authors seriously on their own terms,” Hanegraaff explains one of the reasons for using the ASC as an interpretative lens: “... the authors were faced with the delicate paradox of using discursive language for describing experiences that are typically said to resist verbalization ...”.<sup>128</sup>

Dancers and choreographers, who work on a visceral, affective, reflective but non-verbal level, share the paradoxical problem of resistance to verbalization while at the same time demonstrating a compelling thrust towards finding appropriate forms of discursivity for the unspeakable as experienced in dance.<sup>129</sup> Lepecki describes this paradox as a “desire to language”<sup>130</sup>, springing forth from experiences that usually evade verbalization. What causes this “desire to language” to spring forth from what appears to be unspeakable in dance is subject to speculation. From my experience, I would suggest that it is the depth, intensity and felt significance that dance can generate which triggers a “desire to language”. To find a language for deeply meaningful but difficult to grasp experiences can help a dancer to better understand what is happening. It allows these experiences to be shared with the world.

Deviating briefly to the ancient origins of dance in Greek culture, it may be interesting to note that Lucian of Samosata (c. 125 – after 180 AD) - in whose texts the word “esoteric” appears for the first time with reference to exoteric and esoteric groups of Pythagorean students - writes about dance:

... I forbear to say that not a single ancient mystery-cult can be found that is without dancing, since they were established, of course, by Orpheus and Musaeus, the best dancers of that time, who included it in their prescriptions as something exceptionally beautiful to be initiated with rhythm and dancing. To prove that this is so, although it behooves me to observe silence about the rites on account of the uninitiated, nevertheless there is one thing that everybody has heard; namely, that

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<sup>128</sup> Hanegraaff, “Teaching Experiential Dimensions of Western Esotericism,” 2011, 159.

<sup>129</sup> Lepecki, “Introduction/ /Dance as Practice of Contemporaneity,” 2012, 14.

<sup>130</sup> Quoting André Lepecki in his lecture “In the dark” at Studium Generale & Uncut Rietveld Academie. Are You Alive Or Not? Looking at ART through the lens of THEATRE, at theatre De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam, 20.04.2015.

those who let out the mysteries in conversation are commonly said to ‘dance them out’ ...<sup>131</sup>

In his article “Altered States of Knowledge: The Attainment of Gnōsis in the Hermetica,”<sup>132</sup> Hanegraaff shifts the interpretative perspective on the philosophical Hermetica from its Greek and philosophical dimensions to its Egyptian and religious dimensions. As these texts are based on “ineffable revelatory and salvational insights,” he assumes that they were received during extraordinary, ecstatic states of being. Rather than interpreting these texts as literary fiction, Hanegraaff interprets them from the perspective of a “hierarchy of ‘levels of knowledge’,” in which *gnosis* is seen as the highest attainable level. These altered states of consciousness are understood as “‘trans-rational’ stages of direct experiential knowledge.”<sup>133</sup> He further specifies gnosis as “‘knowledge’ of divine things ... attained not by means of reasoning, the senses, or revealed scriptures, but only by gaining direct, experiential access to the higher spiritual realities themselves.”<sup>134</sup>

Comparable to Hanegraaff’s shift from a Greek to an Egyptian context, I propose to shift the conceptual and intellectual mode of reading and writing the text of a *dancing body*, to probing into its trans-rational and sacred dimensions. The notion of “trans-rational stages of direct experiential knowledge” could become a useful conceptual tool to shift the verbal and corporeal discourse of dance towards that direction.

In my view, *altered states of knowing* as experienced through dance hint towards a quality of consciousness which might be able to inform us differently than through disembodied rational intellection about what the human being is or might become.

Based on very rare, but recurring numinous experiences in dance, I posit that the *dancing body* can convey a sense of proximity with its creative source. The notion of “creative source” carries here at least two connotations: the origin of one’s own being and the source of creativity in danced motion (or any kind of other creative activity). The body in danced motion can carry a dancer towards an intensive encounter with an awe-inspiring life force that

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<sup>131</sup> Lucian, “The Dance,” 1936/1955, 229.

<sup>132</sup> Hanegraaff, “Altered States of Knowledge,” 2008, 128-163.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>134</sup> Hanegraaff, “Teaching Experiential Dimensions of Western Esotericism,” 2011, 158.



appears to be both immanent to the body yet simultaneously transcends it. This experience of bodily proximity with an existential ground of being and meaning may engender a sense of something *real\**, of a non-rational but rather spiritual-corporeal modality of knowing of being. Drawing together a non-verbal (ontological) experience of *spiritual corporeality* and the epistemic transformation it ignites through *altered states of knowing*, culminates in a psychophysical state shift which is here tentatively described with the term *embodied gnosis*.

The main argument that I bring forward is that certain meta-empirical<sup>135</sup> dimensions of experiential reality appear to be intuitable through the body in danced motion. The specific quality of experience that has triggered this investigation in the first place is perceived as having a palpable unifying quality that appears to somehow be able to mediate between the mind/body, psyche/physics, I/other or ideas/matter divide.

From an intermediary state of being the experience of *embodied gnosis* draws these dichotomies together along a spectrum of varying degrees of dense and subtle materialities. This quality of experience is here targeted as a source for movement generation the origin of which remains to a large extent unknown. This experience can be intersubjectively shared depending on the ability of the dancer to communicate it and on the receptivity of the spectator or co-performer and their affinity with it.

*Embodied gnosis* stands for a state of inspired knowing-being that hinges towards the *numinous* where suprasensorial and non-verbal qualities of experience coincide with specific qualities of motion that permeate and transform the corporeality of the dancer. When a numinous experience occurs, it is characterized by a specific state of consciousness, an intermediary zone of awareness where the physical appears to intersect with the metaphysical. At the points of intersection between the physical and the metaphysical, mediated by the *psychophysical resonating space\** of the human body in danced motion, inspired being may occasionally gain a quality of knowing. The experience of *embodied gnosis* in dance then becomes suggestive of a meta-empirical source of being, meaning and intra- and extra-corporeal movement origination. The *dancing body* becomes a mediating interface,

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<sup>135</sup> Merriam- Webster Online Dictionary “metempirics”: “the study of concepts and relationships conceived as beyond and yet related to knowledge gained empirically”. Accessed 3.6.2023.  
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metempirics>.

a complex vehicle for perception that appears to me to be in touch with realms of being that extend far beyond its corporeal boundaries.

### **Where being and knowing embrace: dancing the imaginal**

The intermediary state or zone of awareness that appears to be conducive to *embodied gnosis* could also be described as suspended in an [\*imaginal\\*\*](#) realm between the sensorial movement logic of a dancing body and a suprasensorial faith in – and at times *gnosis* of – an unseen yet intuited immanent and transcendent divine or sacred realm of being.

The *imaginal* is a term coined by Islam scholar Henry Corbin. It is distinct from the *imaginary* understood as existing only in the imagination by giving an ontological status of reality to an *imaginal* place of being. In Oriental theosophy, the *imaginal* refers to a “precise level of Being and Knowledge”, an intermediary layer of being that is embedded in a worldview comprised of three layers: the pure intellectual world, the world of pure cherubic Intelligences (*‘âlam ‘aqlî, Jabarût*); the *imaginal* world (*‘âlam mithâlî, Malakût, Hürqalyā*), the world of the Soul and of souls, the *mundus imaginalis* and the sensible world (*‘âlam hissî*), the world of the material things.<sup>136</sup>

Being suspended in an *imaginal* realm during dance can have a quite literal and clearly readable and transformative impact on the morphing eloquence of the dancing body. Moving in an *imaginal* zone can give a dancer a concrete sense of being in direct touch with the deepest layers of one’s being underneath or beyond mental chatter and constructs, underneath or beyond psychological burdens or issues causing emotional turmoil.

It is a place of being that feels utterly *real*, hence my preference for working with the term *imaginal*, rather than *imaginary*.

The body in motion can be literally suspended in between [\*gravity\\*\*](#) and a polar opposite force of [\*levity\\*\*](#) – an upwards thrust to vertically extend the spine towards what lies (far) beyond it. Levity is an apparently natural, but in dance also aesthetically determining force that extends along a vertical axis, reaching upwards in polar opposition against gravity. Whereas gravity is primarily bound to the physical body in relation to the ground underneath the feet, a sense

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<sup>136</sup> Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 1989 and “Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal,” 1964, 3-26.

of levity can be conjured up from the depths of one's being by an intentional receptivity towards a vertically upwards thriving energetic connection. A blending of physical strength, will power and imaginative receptivity is needed to lengthen the body vertically and to maintain an energetic connection that creates a channel of communication between gravity and levity, between heaven and earth. I don't consider these poles of experience as strict dichotomies. To me, heaven and earth are rather orientations for corporeal consciousness that literally exist at the same time on two opposite ends of a spectrum of embodied awareness: underneath my feet and above my head. In between there is my body. Gravity and levity are then forces that connect me to what lies above my head and underneath my feet.<sup>137</sup>

I do not claim to have any experiential knowledge about the *imaginal* world of Islamic theosophy. Nevertheless, I see possibilities to explore resonances between this research towards *embodied gnosis* through a *dancing language* that combines non-verbal corporeal and verbal language and an esoteric worldview comprised of three worlds. In Islamic theosophy, the world of the soul is situated in between the world of the intellect and the world of the sensible material things. Transposed to the architecture of this dissertation project, these three worlds could correspond to the intellectual domain of the discursive contextualization of the danced experience, to the sensible corporeality of my physical body and – hovering somewhere between the intellect and the senses – the artistically “ensouled” inner and outer life of the danced experience, for example when my inner being meets the *imaginal* spaces created by the soundscape or when it meets the inner being of the spectator(s) through the dance.

By artistically adopting the term *imaginal*, I refer explicitly to an esoteric worldview that could accommodate the idea of *embodied gnosis* in dance. This adoption is a speculative move. This movement can be smooth, because of the resonances between dance and esotericism that I described so far. Besides the historical connections between dance and esotericism as discussed above, both dance and esotericism self-reflectively positioned themselves as “the Other” of modernity or mainstream academic culture in a more recent timeframe.

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<sup>137</sup> See also chapter three: dancing language between mind and matter for more on gravity/levity.

Like pulling the strings of a guitar, I activate these resonances with the dancing dialogue between the experiential logic of a *dancing body* and esoterically inclined forms of thought and worldviews that unfolds throughout this dissertation project.

To dance the *imaginal* implies for me to explore the idea of *embodied gnosis* at the edges between conscious and unconscious movement origination. In this intermediary zone I investigate how blending the human faculties of knowing, believing and imagining influence the creative communication of my *dancing body* and also the other way around: how the *dancing body* generates performative states that blend knowing, believing and imagining towards *embodied gnosis*.

### **Reason, Faith and Gnosis as foundations for constructing worldviews**

Gnosticism scholar Gilles Quispel (1916-2006) proposed a threefold subdivision of what he considered to be the main components of the European cultural tradition of constructing worldviews: “faith” – representing the theologies of the established churches, “reason” – rationalism as it evolved since ancient Greece and “gnosis” – presumed to have emerged in Alexandria during the first centuries. Quispel distinguished “gnosis” from the other two components by characterizing it as being based on “inner experience” and non-discursive expression.<sup>138</sup>

Hanegraaff later took up and nuanced this threefold distinction. Whereas Quispel proposed clear cut distinctions between faith linked to the Christian church, reason linked to science and gnosis linked to what is known today as Western esotericism, Hanegraaff looks at these terms from a different perspective: in his view, the three analytical categories of reason, faith and gnosis appear in all three contexts and also beyond them: they appear in the Christian church and her theologies, in philosophy, in science and as well in the arts, in literature and in Western esotericism. Differentiating between them would merely be a question of differences in degrees of emphasis. Hanegraaff’s critique of Quispel’s clear cut conceptual distinction is based on the argument, that speaking in terms of gnosis as being radically opposed to scientific rationality and doctrinal faith would re-enforce the already deeply ingrained stereotyped vision of gnostic forms of thought as irrational, heretical and

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<sup>138</sup> Hanegraaff, “On the Construction of ‘Esoteric Traditions’,” 1998, 19.

superstitious. Gnosis does play a crucial role in the writings belonging to esotericism, but other types of knowledge based on rationality, scientific thought, revelation and tradition are vividly present there as well.<sup>139</sup>

In dance, I investigate knowing, believing and imagining through my *dancing body* as psychophysical performative states. Knowing as a performative state in dance can loosely correspond with reason, yet it is based on a corporeal and non-verbal rather than mental and verbalized kind of logic. Believing as a performative state in dance can correspond to faith. I work with this quality as a firm belief in the body's intrinsic creative capacities. A firm conviction that the dancing body can act as a mediating interface between the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible without me necessarily controlling it consciously or understanding what wants to be communicated through the dance.

In my view, corporeally imagining can shift towards an experience of *embodied gnosis* when a felt experience of something *real* and sacred occurs.

How a psychophysical blending of knowing, believing and imagining contributes to **attuning\*** the *dancing body* to access an experience of *embodied gnosis* will be further discussed in chapter five (Attuning the Dancing Body towards Embodied Gnosis) and six (Dance, Music and Dance Language in SEI).

### **Towards a Dance Language**

The idea of *embodied gnosis* in dance is relatable to practices of trance<sup>140</sup> and religious dances that exist and have existed in countless cultures around the globe and throughout time. Yet my approach in this research is to strip my *dancing body* as much as possible from cultural or aesthetic references. Of course, it is impossible to claim that a dancing body can be a neutral territory or an objective research instrument. Each body that has been educated in a professional dance context carries in its kinesthetic memory inscriptions of all kinds of techniques and repertoire experiences. Professionally dancing bodies are aesthetically and physically shaped and therefore “biased” to a large degree. The language of a *dancing body*

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<sup>139</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Reason, Faith, and Gnosis,” 2008, 138-139.

<sup>140</sup> For a study on trancelike states and ecstatic experiences in contemporary dance and performance productions see for example Huschka, “Aesthetic Strategies of Trance-Gression: The Politics of Bodily Scenes of Ecstasy,” 2019, 4–17. I warmly thank Jeroen Fabius for this reference.

that is targeted in this research, aims to generate ways of speaking through dance which are not based on choreographed patterns, systems or cultures of thought and movement.

I search for a *dance language* that neither speaks in terms of a movement genre, tradition or narrative. Instead, I explore how the dancing body - understood as a mediating interface between the metaphysical and the physical - can generate, perceive and communicate new insights about this relation.

Not to speak through already known movement genres that are deeply imprinted into the *dancing body* through education and professional experience might seem an impossible task. Yet consciously directing an artistic orientation towards this goal can create openings, deviations and renewals in movement patterns that have been installed in my body through many years of engaging with various choreographic signatures.

I am performing an archeological excavation into my body in search for inscriptions or motivations to move that I hope to discover underneath or beyond what has already been codified. These may be genetic inscriptions or ancient corporeally stored memories of the body about its heritage and family lineage that are far removed from conscious awareness. Based on intuitively perceiving deeper layers of my body in dance, I assume that these inscriptions are there. To give continuity and visibility to this intuitive assumption I try to create the conditions for these inscriptions to appear from an intermediary psychophysical state between conscious and unconscious movement origination.<sup>141</sup>

I propose another kind of knowledge than procedural (implicit knowledge about how to perform specific tasks) or declarative knowledge (explicit knowledge about how a dance is written). These kinds of knowledge are often being referred to when classifying the knowledge that is at stake in performing and composing contemporary dance.<sup>142</sup>

I search for a naturally spiritual-corporeal knowing of being that can be intuitable through a *dancing body* and that I cannot yet fully grasp and understand with my conscious mind. This quality of corporeal knowing is targeted as a source for movement origination although, or because, it is still unknown.

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<sup>141</sup> See also chapter five: Attuning.

<sup>142</sup> McKechnie and Stevens, "Knowledge unspoken: Contemporary dance and the cycle of practice-led research, basic and applied research, and research-led practice", 2009, 86.

I am not looking for a practical know-how of dancing comparable to riding a bike.<sup>143</sup> I search for something less technical, not the automatized virtuosity of performing a dance phrase by kinetic memory without the need of cognitive processing. I search for a kind of knowing of being that does not solidify into a rationalizable or systematized choreographic pattern. My fascination is rather directed towards the mystery of moving and being moved, towards a transformative knowing of being that somehow seems to be related to the mystery of incarnation.

My approach to *linguaging*\* dance differs from somatic approaches to dance where the first-person subjective perception of corporeal sensations is foregrounded. I am rather curious about the suprasensory and trans-personal dimensions of danced experience. Through a *dance language* I am asking my dancing body what it is that manifests itself in dance that is not primarily sensible but intuitable from a yet unconscious but maybe potentially superconscious, not sensation-based level of experience.

My interest thus lies specifically in sources of movement origination that appear to stem from underneath or beyond corporeal sensations. I question to which kind of reality these movement impulses that appear to come from suprasensory realms of being may belong.

Suprasensory realms of being and the idea of cultivating the human body to perceive them through dance are also addressed in practices that embody esoteric forms of thought. Important examples from the 20<sup>th</sup> century are Rudolf Steiner and G.I. Gurdjieff.

Suprasensory realms of being are also related to the notion of the somatic unconscious in Carl Gustav Jung's (1875 – 1961) analytical psychology. Jung posited that intuition is not related to sense perception but to the unconscious.<sup>144</sup> Jung relates the somatic unconscious to subtle body concepts and practices as they are discussed in esoteric forms of thought.<sup>145</sup> We will visit these perspectives in chapter four.

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<sup>143</sup> Nelson, "Practice-as-research," 2006, 107.

<sup>144</sup> See for example "Sensing vs. Intuition," *YouTube*, accessed 3.6.23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9Fw-YpHoU8>.

<sup>145</sup> Jung and Jarrett, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra: Notes of the seminar given in 1934 -1939*, 1988, 441.

According to Hanegraaff, truth in gnosis is only experienceable on a personal level. Inner experience remains the sole authority for verifying the truth content of the experience.<sup>146</sup> The same may be said for suprasensorial and trans-personal experience in dance. An attempt at transmitting this inner knowledge would in Hanegraaff's understanding imply a reduction of the ineffable quality of gnosis to rational knowledge via processes of verbalization. On the possibility of communicating inner numinous experiences, I consider artistic practices that relate to unveiling or communicating inner knowledge or processes of knowing by experience as potential candidates for proposing *other* forms of communication of gnosis. A more explicit and elaborated connection between artistic disclosures of inner knowing and gnosis could be dynamically juxtaposed with Hanegraaff's definition of gnosis as being neither communicable nor verifiable or falsifiable.<sup>147</sup> Whether inter-subjective verification of successfully communicated *embodied gnosis* would eventually be possible or not, matters here less than the creative dynamics and meanings that could unfold within this juxtaposition, on artistic as well as on scholarly levels.

To recapitulate:

In this chapter I introduced the academic study of Western esotericism. I explained how the three key concepts *spiritual corporeality*, *altered states of knowing* and *embodied gnosis* came into being through a creative convergence between this research in and through dance and the academic study of esotericism. I introduced the *imaginal* as a place or state where knowing and being can coincide and speculatively positioned it in relation to the notion of *embodied gnosis* in dance. I elaborated on the triangle of reason, faith and gnosis as foundations for constructing worldviews and as linked to various cultural expressions with different degrees of emphasis. I explained how knowing and believing as performative states loosely correspond with reason and faith and how corporeally imagining can shift towards an experience of *embodied gnosis* if a felt experience of something *real* and sacred occurs. Finally, I situated my approach to *dance language* as an artistic-epistemic process geared towards a transformative knowing of being.

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<sup>146</sup> Hanegraaff, "A Dynamic Typological Approach," 1992, 10.

<sup>147</sup> Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 2013, 89.



With this chapter I hope to have been able to make the reader receptive to the *dancing language* that will unfold in the subsequent chapters. Movements of the body and of thought will be navigated between the unspeakable and verbal discourse, between the sensorial and the suprasensorial, between the physical and the metaphysical.

But how does the *dance language* relate to the *dancing language*?

This will be discussed in the next chapter.