Towards the end of the 20th century, the three genres circus, burlesque, and freak show were revived after a long decline that had started in the first half of the century. The revival brought new ideas, a new framing, and a realignment to contemporary values and beliefs. What still remains at the core of the entertainment, however, are the sensational bodies on stage.

This dissertation explores the attraction of these genres by focusing on the spectator's experience of the bodies on stage and the meaning they produce. With a theoretical base in embodied phenomenology, it engages in the exploration from a first-person perspective using a combined method of performance analysis and autoethnography. It engages in discussion on topics such as entertainment, the political, popular culture, and liveness, focusing on the embodied experience of desire, disgust, uncanny, and kinesthetic empathy. It directs attention to relational aspects by focusing on the intersubjective experience of the bodies on stage and the bodies in the audience, exploring the potential of subversion, community, and utopia.

The study shows the significance of the spectator's experiences and reveals the potential of using the experience as an analytical tool to broaden the understanding of theater and performances.
The Sensational Body
A Spectatorial Exploration of the Experience of Bodies on Stage in Circus, Burlesque and Freak Show

Jonas Eklund

Abstract
At the end of the 20th century, the three genres circus, burlesque, and freak show were revived after a long period of decline. Seemingly something in the genres still has a strong appeal to the spectators. The revival brought with it a new framing and a realignment to contemporary values and beliefs, but the core of the genres is still the sensational bodies on stage.

The aim of this dissertation is to explore the attraction of these genres by focusing on the spectatorial experience of the bodies on stage. The questions that guide the exploration are what experiential meanings do the bodies create, how does the meaning appear to the subjective consciousness, and how is the experience informed by the situation and the context.

Starting from an embodied understanding of phenomenology, as the body is the place from where we experience, the focus is on the meaning created through the experience, both as thoughts and emotions. Using a method of performance analysis and autoethnography shifts the focus from the performance to the experience of the performance. The experience is then discussed from three approaches: the cognitive approach, focusing on the meaning created intellectually; the embodied approach, focusing on how the meaning appears in and through the body; and the relational approach, focusing on the experience of intersubjective relations.

The first chapter focuses on experiences from contemporary circus. By approaching the cognitive experience, the first theme is about entertainment and how attention is kept by balancing novelty and familiarity in the acts. This is followed by an exploration of the political, and the potential of utopian moments. Approaching the embodied experience, the first part is about feeling motion through kinesthetic empathy. Elements of risk are then discussed through the sense of suspense and surprise. From a relational approach, the contact with the performer is considered using the concept of phenomenological empathy.

The second chapter explores the experience of contemporary burlesque. From a cognitive approach, the popular is reconsidered. The focus then turns to aspects of subversion as beauty ideals and norms are challenged by bodies on stage. From an embodied approach, laughter is discussed, followed by the experience of desire by challenging assumptions of a male gaze. The relational approach focuses on the experience of being in the audience and the sense of community.

The third chapter focuses on experiences from the freak show. From a cognitive approach, the first focus is on the staging of the acts and how they create curiosity. The following theme is liveness as an essential quality of the spectacular. From the embodied approach, the visceral feeling of disgust when the unwanted comes too close, and the uncanny with the uncertainty of the familiar and the strange, are discussed. Finally, the relational approach focuses on the experience of the ‘Other’ and the self.

By focusing on the embodied experience of meaning, both as thoughts and emotions, and relating them to the situation and a broader cultural context, the study shows how the spectatorial experience is intricately intertwined with previous experiences, societal norms, and cultural images that are circulated throughout our culture. The study shows the significance of the spectator’s experiences and reveals the potential of using the experience as an analytical tool to broaden the understanding of theater and performances.

Keywords: circus, new circus, contemporary circus, burlesque, neo-burlesque, boylesque, freak show, sideshow, bodies, phenomenology, spectatorship, popular culture, performance analysis, autoethnography, experience, body/mind.

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THE SENSATIONAL BODY
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A Spectatorial Exploration of the Experience of Bodies on Stage in Circus, Burlesque and Freak Show

Jonas Eklund
Till mamma och pappa
# Contents

List of illustrations ........................................................................................................... xi

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... xiii

Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1
  Background ..................................................................................................................... 1
  Aims and Research Questions ....................................................................................... 4
  The Field of Study .......................................................................................................... 5
    Spectatorship .............................................................................................................. 5
  Theoretical Approach and Concepts ............................................................................ 12
    Phenomenology ......................................................................................................... 12
    Embodiment ............................................................................................................. 20
    Affect and Emotions ................................................................................................. 25
  Methodological Approach and Concepts .................................................................... 32
    Performance Analysis as Experience Analysis ......................................................... 32
    Writing Autoethnography and My Position ............................................................... 35
    Approaching the Study ............................................................................................. 38
  Material ......................................................................................................................... 41
  Disposition .................................................................................................................... 43

Chapter 1. Circus ............................................................................................................. 45
  Background .................................................................................................................... 45
  The Field of Circus ....................................................................................................... 46
  Questions for the Chapter ............................................................................................. 58
  Material ......................................................................................................................... 59
  Circus from a Cognitive Approach ............................................................................. 60
    Entertained – Experiences of Fun .............................................................................. 60
    Politics at Play – Experiencing Utopia ..................................................................... 66
  Circus from an Embodied Approach ......................................................................... 77
    Moved – Experiencing Kinesthesia and Movement ................................................... 77
    Risk – Experiencing Suspension and Surprise ........................................................... 85
  Circus from a Relational Approach .......................................................................... 93
    When He and She Becomes You – Experiencing Connection ................................ 103
  Chapter Conclusion ..................................................................................................... 107
List of illustrations


1, Jesper Nikolajeff throwing knives at spinning wheel with Simon Rodriguez in *Borders*, Cirkus Cirkör and Malmö Stadsteater. Photo by Frans Hällqvist © 2015 Malmö Stadsteater................................. 71

2, Alexander Weibel walking a slack wire in *Borders*, Cirkus Cirkör and Malmö Stadsteater. Photo and © 2015 Jesper Nikolajeff. .............. 75

3, Saara Ahola on a shaky trapeze in *Limits*, Cirkus Cirkör. Photo by Mats Bäcker © 2016 Cirkus Cirkör......................................................... 84

4, Tatiana-Mosio Bongonga walking the high-wire in *Borders*, Cirkus Cirkör and Malmö Stadsteater. Photo by Frans Hällqvist © 2015 Malmö Stadsteater........................................ 89

5, Teeterboard act with Anton Graaf and Einar Kling-Odencrants in *Limits*, Cirkus Cirkör. Photo by Mats Bäcker © 2016 Cirkus Cirkör................................. 91

6, Costumes in *Borders*, Cirkus Cirkör and Malmö Stadsteater. Photo by Frans Hällqvist © 2015 Malmö Stadsteater........................................ 99

7, Costumes in *Limits*, Cirkus Cirkör. Photo by Mats Bäcker © 2016 Cirkus Cirkör................................................................. 99

8, Costumes in * Movements*, Cirkus Cirkör and Malmö Stadsteater. Photo by Emmalisa Pauly © 2017 Malmö Stadsteater................................. 99

9, David Eriksson having anxiety in * Movements*, Cirkus Cirkör and Malmö Stadsteater. Photo by Emmalisa Pauly © 2017 Malmö Stadsteater. 106


11, Kitty Litteur as the 50 foot woman at Stockholm Burlesque Festival 2015. Photo and © 2015 John-Paul Bichard.......................... 133
12, Ravishing Byrds is smashing the patriarchy at the Stockholm Burlesque Festival 2015. Photo and © 2015 John-Paul Bichard. .............................. 139

13, Lou Safire is turning into the white swan at Helsinki Burlesque Festival 2016. Photo and © 2016 John-Paul Bichard................................. 145

14, Märit playing with taboos at Fräulein Frauke Presents Bloody Valentine. Photo and © 2016 John-Paul Bichard............................................ 151

15, Sandy Sure in wrestling costume at Stockholm Burlesque Festival 2015. Photo and © 2015 John-Paul Bichard........................................... 153

16, Luminous Pariah sparkling at Helsinki Burlesque Festival 2016. Photo and © 2016 John-Paul Bichard....................................................... 158

17, Soa de Muse in black feather costume at Fräulein Frauke Presents CanCan. Photo and © 2015 John-Paul Bichard...................................... 170

18, Spectators watching the live show through their cellphones at Venice Beach Freak show, Photo and © 2016 Jonas Eklund....................... 208

19, Xander Lovecraft as the human blockhead. (Photo from same act performed at Cabaret of Hearts). Photo and © 2016 Cara Walton .... 213

20, Morgue in a blockhead act with a meat hook at Venice Beach Freakshow. Photo and © 2016 Jonas Eklund........................................ 215
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“sensational”

Definition of sensational

1 : of or relating to sensation or senses
2 : arousing or tending to arouse (as by lurid details) a quick, intense and usually superficial interest, curiosity, or emotional reaction
3 : exceedingly or unexpectedly excellent or great

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Introduction

The bulky, bearded man is chalking his hands. In the center of the stage are two large red kettlebells. He walks up to the kettlebells confidently and stops right behind them. As the music shifts from a soft melody to a distorted, aggressive guitar, a spotlight casts neon colors on him, while he stands staring straight out into the audience. Moving slowly, he bends forward and grips the handles. The two kettlebells are reluctant to leave the floor. With a swinging motion, the heavy chunks of steel are forced to comply, and when they reach chest-height, the strong hands let go of the handles, and at the same time give them a spin. For a split-second, the kettlebells are free falling, rotating slowly. As they start to fall towards the floor, they are caught again. The heavy weights are dragging the entire body down. The man's muscles are flexed so as to cushion the impact on the arms. At the bottom of the swing, the body stretches and pulls the kettlebells right back up, and a new rotation begins.

As I watch, I realize that my jaw is hanging slightly open, I feel my heart pounding faster, and my full attention is directed toward the body on stage. I am astonished and at the same time surprisingly moved by the force and tenderness of the act. How come I feel this way? What in the act is making me react this way? Why do I enjoy watching this? 2

Background

This short act at the beginning of the circus-show Undermän is where it all began. For the rest of the show, I was hooked, awed by the spectacular action of the bodies on stage, moved by the underlying story of loneliness and masculinity, thrown between laughter and tears, and viscerally moved by the breathtaking skills. The performance made me think about my experience as a spectator and the intricate relation between my body and the body on stage.

The body has a central function in most kinds of stage performances, as the body is the tool used to give meaning to an action, to show a course of events, or to tell a story. However, in some genres the body is even more important,

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2 Undermän, Cirkus Cirkör, Stockholm, December 2011.
as it seems to be the primary purpose of the act, being the tool and the story all at once. I would argue that this is the case in the three popular genres circus, burlesque, and freak show. Another body that is inevitably present is the body of the spectator – the often overlooked co-creator of the theatrical event.

In an article on the cinematic genres melodrama, pornography, and horror, film scholar Linda Williams labeled these genres *Body Genres*, as they have a specific purpose of evoking bodily reactions in the audience. I find corresponding purposes in circus, burlesque, and freak show, and as such, the body is in focus both as the center of attention on stage and at the core of the experience as a spectator. These genres will be the object of my study.

Between the bodies on stage and those in the audience is a relation where the communication is established, and the experience takes shape. In this work, I will focus on the experience of the spectator, as it is based on this bodily communication, considering it as created in relation to a broader cultural understanding, from the perspective of the lived body, since “the body is our general medium for having a world,” and as such all our experiences are as a body.

The title of this book plays on the multiple meanings of the word sensational. It is to be understood as sensational, as in exceedingly great or astonishing, as the spectacular body on stage that is central in all of the genres in my study. Sensational, as the arousing of a quick and intense experience, as in the lure of the superficial arousal of the body in popular culture, and finally as sensational, as relating to the sensation or the senses, as the sensory experience of the body in the audience as a spectator. It is in the intersection of these perspectives that this book emerges.

Circus, burlesque, and freak show – all of which dwell somewhat in the backyard of theater, and are most often associated with cheap thrills, triviality, and short-term amusement – have their roots in the popular entertainment industry with its heyday around the turn of the 20th century. Since then, these genres have been in decline due to the competition of mass entertainment and ethical discussions challenging different aspects of the genres. The future of the genres was uncertain, and although they never disappeared entirely, they were steadily losing ground to other forms of entertainment. Circus, with its family-oriented appeal, was the one genre that managed to succeed by some

3 Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1991.
means; the traditional circus still exists today, although the closing of some of the oldest circuses in recent years is worrying.\(^7\)

Another thing these genres have in common is that in the second half of the 20\(^{th}\) century, they all experienced a revival of sorts. In the 1970s, inspired by developments in the art field in general and in theater in particular, a new circus emerged with a new view on the aesthetics, the framing and the dramaturgy of the acts. This new circus continued to evolve, and today the genre is known as contemporary circus, which is the genre from which I draw my examples.\(^8\) The body on stage in the circus, which is the core of the experience, is however not merely an object of an impressed gaze: “[c]ircus performance presents artistic and physical displays of skillful action by highly rehearsed bodies that also perform cultural ideas: of identity, spectacle, danger, transgression – in sum, of circus.”\(^9\) As such, the experience is quite complex, as “[a] spectator’s viscerality and bodily thrill cannot be detached from his or her cognitive, emotional and unconscious responses to culturally shaped artistic representation that is intended to stimulate them.”\(^10\) It is from this notion that I engage in my analysis of the experience of circus.

The second genre in my study is contemporary burlesque, sometimes referred to as neo-burlesque. As a genre, it has its roots in early forms of subversive comedy and striptease, which, with a playful approach to undressing, focuses on the “tease” rather than the strip. This genre was revived in the 1990s when new ways of viewing female sexuality and empowerment emerged. However, the question of female empowerment vs. female objectification is still a lively discussion among scholars. The burlesque body on stage, as it becomes more and more revealed, is the obvious focal point, which can create conflicting emotions of excitement and shame. However, the acts are also culturally situated as “[t]he burlesque performer looks back, smiles and questions her audience, as well as her own performance, a performance that is comic, outlandish and saucy – a highly camp, mostly vintage spectacle.”\(^11\)

The final genre of my study is the freak show, which made a surprising comeback in the final decade of the 20\(^{th}\) century. The comeback was not so much an explosion of live freak shows around the world, but more a revival

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\(^7\) In 2017, one of the world’s most famous circuses – the Ringling Bros. & Barnum and Bailey Circus closed, ending a story that extended back 146 years.

\(^8\) The terminology is a bit confusing, and I will return to it.


\(^10\) Ibid., p. 144.

of the concept in the public’s mind through the appearance in several popular tv-series. I will, however, discuss the live experience of the freak show, as they do still exist. In recent scholarship, the freak is described as a social role constructed in the performance in relation to the norms of society, but “[a]lthough the components of freakishness change with time, the centrality of the body remains a constant and determining feature of the freak’s identity.”

Being a spectator of the freak is a complex experience of shame, curiosity, and visceral thrill.

I engage in this study starting from a background in theater studies with a broad approach, similar to the field usually labeled as performance studies, in which a range of cultural performances is discussed using a range of scopes and perspectives. Therefore, even though the study is conducted in the field of theater studies, it can also be read as a critical study of my own culture, and it also opens up for a critical discussion on popular culture and cultural studies, as it focuses on how the experience is shaped by body norms and engages in discussions on race, sexual orientation, shape, and functionality.

Aims and Research Questions

As my brief introduction has shown, circus, burlesque, and freak show are all genres that have been immensely popular, then in a decline and destined for extinction, but managed to revive and reframe themselves to attract new audiences. In these genres, sensational bodies are unavoidably in focus.

In this exploration, I aim to broaden the understanding of the attraction of these genres, and what in the experience creates value for a contemporary audience. This also relates to the aim of drawing some much-needed attention to theater as popular culture and entertainment, an aspect of the theater that has been neglected in the Swedish context.

In relation to the field of theater and performance studies, I aim to direct attention to the somewhat neglected importance of the spectator in performing arts. By using a phenomenological frame and a first-person perspective, the exploration of the spectatorial position will further develop approaches to performance analysis, as embodied and based in the experience as such. In my approach to the study, I focus on the meaning produced by both cognition and emotion, and also explore the importance of the spectator’s intersubjective relations in the experience. In doing so, I aim to show the complexity in the experience of what might seem to be “just entertainment.”

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The focus on bodies, not only on stage, but also in the audience, aims to broaden the scope on theater and performance as a place of embodied experiences.

By exploring the meaning produced in relation to a range of themes relating to theater and performance studies, as well as a broader field of culture studies and popular culture, the importance of the context becomes apparent. This wide-ranging discussion also aims to reach out and potentially connect to ongoing debates in other fields of research.

Research Questions
Based on the aims the following research questions has been posed to guide the exploration.

- What experiential meaning is produced within the subjective spectatorial experience of the bodies on stage in circus, burlesque, and freak show?
- How do the experiential meanings appear to consciousness in the subjective experience, from a cognitive, embodied and relational approach?
- How are the subjective experiences, and the meaning that emerges from the bodies, informed by the world outside the mind, as in the specific situation, and in a broader cultural context?

The Field of Study
The following section will lay the academic foundation for the rest of my study. Since the study engages in the experience of bodies on stage in circus, burlesque, and freak show, my main focus in the study is on the experience as a spectator. Therefore, I will start by framing the study in relation to research on spectatorship within the field of theater and performance studies. I approach the study from a theoretical understanding of an embodied phenomenological experience that focuses on different aspects relating to the cognitive, emotional, and relational experience. A discussion then follows on method and how I approach the study using performance analysis and autoethnography. At the end of this chapter, I discuss the empirical material in focus in my study and some ethical concerns of the study.

Spectatorship
Considering the importance of spectators and audiences in theater and other performances, little attention has traditionally been given to the spectator in
research which also has been noted by several scholars. Perhaps the position of the spectator has been taken for granted, as it is inevitably at the core of the theater; it is from our seat in the audience, as spectators, that we experience the action, create meaning, feel emotions, and sense the presence. Despite the somewhat neglected position in studies of theater, most scholars agree on the importance of spectators for it to become theater, most famously framed as theater being actor A, playing character B, in front of spectator C. And although questions can be raised regarding several points of this model, the necessity of the spectator is not usually what is being questioned. In the last ten years however, there seems to have been a growing interest in studies on audiences and spectatorship coming from a range of fields and contributing to a more diverse understanding of the role and experience of the spectator. In The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies (2008), Christopher Balme suggests two main approaches to these studies: one is that of the audience, which usually focuses on sociological, historical, or economic dimensions of the audience as a group. The other is that of the spectators, as individuals focusing on cognitive, emotional, and psychological experiences. The studies on the individual spectator can then be considered as either focusing on the actual experience or as an ideal or hypothetical experience focusing on aesthetics and semiotics.

In studies of audiences, the attempt is most often to understand who is in the audience and why they go to the theater. As such, they direct attention to sociological concerns and often make use of quantitative approaches using questionnaires or surveys to understand the audience in itself. Quantitative studies dealing with questions of the audience are also conducted by theaters from a marketing perspective in order to pinpoint the potential market. Even though it is an interesting field, it is outside of the scope of my study, which focuses on the individual experience; I will therefore not go deeper into the field of audience research.

**Studies of Spectators**

Research that approaches the spectators from their individual experiences has grown rapidly over the last 30 years and now makes use of a range of different

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15 Ginters, pp. 7-13.

16 Balme, p. 36.

theoretical tools, as the focus has shifted from the text to the theatrical event. These studies are usually done from a qualitative perspective.

In the late 1980s, critique emerged regarding approaching the audience as a passive entity experiencing a fixed and finished production. By treating the theater as a textual form, as drama, using theories from literature studies, the scope of understanding narrowed, and the complexity of the experience was underappreciated. Susan Bennett’s book *Theatre Audiences* (1990) addresses this issue and takes a new approach; Bennett switches the emphasis from literary theories focusing on the production, to reader and response theories, turning the attention to the spectators. The starting point for Bennett’s discussion is her recognition of a need for a new way to look at the audience, as theaters are approaching new non-traditional audiences, leaving the often assumed middle-class, homogenous audience behind. By approaching the audience as a cultural phenomenon, she discusses the theatrical event by connecting the theater as a cultural construction to the spectator’s individual experience and considering both the production and the audience definitions and expectations. Two significant theoretical changes that inform Bennett’s approach were the emergence of performance theory, which was broadening the scope of what could be considered theater, and the use of semiotics as an approach to discuss the understanding of the theater. Despite the potential of connecting the semiotic understanding to a focus on the audience, little attention had been paid to the reception side of the theatrical event, as the focus was turned to the signs, rather than the interpretation of the same.

Bennett’s book offered a shift of focus from the production, dealing with intentions, biography, the text, and the signs, to a focus on the reception, dealing with interpretation, understanding actions and reactions, and the construction of meaning. Since these first moves towards a critical approach to the audience and spectators, several more have followed, broadening the scope.

In the anthology *Senses in Performance* (2007), often forgotten aspects of the performance are discussed as the sensorial experience is analyzed in 17 chapters that deal with taste, smell, touch, kinesthesia, sound, and vision. These sensorial experiences are closely intertwined with other aspects of the performance such as the historical, social, and political.

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18 Ginters, p. 7.
19 Freshwater, pp. 11-12.
21 Ibid., pp. 9-20.
Another approach to spectatorship focuses on the cognitive side of the experience and is usually based in neuroscience, biology or psychology. One of the most comprehensive books on this approach is Bruce McConachie’s *Engaging Audiences* (2008), to which I will return later in the discussion on empathy and mirror neurons. Criticism of this approach, or rather, of the claims of this approach as superior to those in humanities and the social sciences, argue that studies of the cognitive functions are something completely different than the study of the consciousness, and the experience as it is appreciated by the spectator. This is a view with which I agree.

Since the 1980s, theater scholar and critic Jill Dolan has been addressing issues related to spectatorship and gender in the theater from a feminist point of view. Her book *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988) predates Bennett’s book, but does not address the theater audience at large; it is however acknowledged as a source of inspiration for Bennett. In 2005, Dolan started the blog *The Feminist Spectator* on issues related to spectatorship and feminism. The award-winning blog later resulted in the book *The Feminist Spectator in Action* (2013), which focuses on how to adopt a critical stance towards the stage and screen as a spectator. In Dolan’s book *Utopia in Performance* (2005), the scope is a bit different as she discusses the potential of utopian experiences from a personal point of view, engaging in both thoughts and emotions towards the action on stage. Dolan’s approach in this book has been an important inspiration for me on how to approach the experience from both feelings and thought. In her introduction, Dolan poses some crucial questions about the difficulty of addressing spectatorship at the theater, questions that continually linger in the background in my study. “[H]ow do we write about our own spectatorship in nuanced ways that capture the complicated emotions that the best theatre experiences solicit? How do we place our own corporeal bodies in the service of those ineffable moments of insight, understanding, and love that utopian performatives usher into our hearts and minds? How do we theorize such moments, subjecting them to the rigor of our sharp-

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26 Bennett, p. 18.
est analysis while perceiving the pleasure, the affective gifts that these moments share?" I will return to the specific issue of utopian moments, and community, in my discussions on circus and burlesque.

In *Theatre & Audience* (2009), Helen Freshwater address the issue of the missing spectators in the discussion of spectators. Although interested in the spectators’ interpretation of the experience, the focus tends to be on the writer’s personal experience, hypothetical models of spectatorship, or the historical audience. When engaging in other’s opinions, scholars usually turn to reviews instead of engaging in reception studies that include ordinary spectators. Although I agree with Freshwater, there are several problems with addressing the experience of spectators, as she also admits in the book. One aspect is the temporality of the experience, as it is difficult to access a spectator’s instant reaction. Asking a spectator about the understanding or experience of a specific moment in a performance after the event is asking for a revisit of the experience by the use of memory. Henri Schoenmakers, who has written extensively on reception studies, makes a distinction between the reception process in the body and mind while it is experienced, and the reception result after it has been experienced. The first approach usually involves some measuring device that provides data on the direct experience, while the other relies on questionnaires or interviews. Between the live experience itself and the recollection of the experience when giving the answers, some kind of reflection is likely to occur which might affect the answers in the study. Depending on the quality of the questions asked and the interpretation and analysis of the answers given, the result of the study gives a more or less accurate understanding of the spectators’ experience.

For this study, I turn to Willmar Sauter’s approach to spectatorship, developed during more than 30 years of engagement with reception studies in different forms. Sauter’s first encounter with empirical audience research was through an audience survey at the Drottningholm Court Theatre in the early 1980s. The results gave information about the demographics and habits of theatregoers, but said little about the spectators’ actual experience. In order to get to the experience, Sauter developed a method that he calls *Theatre Talks*, where a small group of spectators discusses the experience right after the show. Rather than posing questions to the spectators, the aim was to stimulate informal discussions to get at the experience without influencing the answers.

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31 Freshwater, pp. 27-38.
The results from the *Theatre Talks* led to new questions on the experience of the spectator, and one factor that kept returning was the role of the actor in the experience. At the time of this development in reception studies, semiotics was the leading theoretical approach in discussions on the understanding of theater. However, the semiotic approaches were not very suitable for reception studies, as the spectators do not experience signs that are being decoded, but instead perceive the meaning in itself. Two reoccurring aspects that Sauter determined were missing from the semiotic discussions were the experience of the skill and personality of the performer, and the pleasure of the spectators’ experience.\(^{34}\) The focus in theater studies had long since been on the production of theater and models elaborated on the complex relation of actor and character, but the spectator remained a passive onlooker. Since actor and spectator are simultaneously present in a shared place and time, there is at least a potential of influence from the present spectators.\(^{35}\)

Approaching these issues and acknowledging that the spectator really is a “co-creative participant” in the theatrical event, both in principle and in practice, led Sauter to focus on the theatrical communication between the performer and spectator.\(^{36}\) This was an approach to potentially bridge the gap between production and the spectators’ experience. With inspiration from Bert O. States’ phenomenological approach in the book *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (1985), where he discusses the intricate relation between I, the actor as a self-expressive mode; You, the audience as a collaborative mode; and He, the character as a representational mode, Sauter created a model in which he separated the theatrical communication into three levels in order to be able to focus on different aspects of the experience.\(^{37}\) Sauter’s model of theatrical communication is not only a discussion of the theatrical event in itself, but it also bears resemblance to an analytical tool for performance analysis. Sauter makes the connection between reception theory and performance analysis and argues that these need to be more closely tied together,\(^{38}\) as the scholar is also a spectator, which makes it difficult to separate scholarly analysis from the experience as a spectator.\(^{39}\) Since my study is directed at the spectatorial experience, this connection becomes even more apparent. I will return to Sauter’s model of communication in my discussion on performance analysis and

\(^{34}\) Sauter, 2000, p. 3.  
\(^{35}\) Sauter, 2006, pp. 51-53.  
\(^{36}\) Sauter, 2010, pp. 251.  
\(^{38}\) Sauter, 2000, pp. 249-250.  
my approach to the study, as it works as an inspiration, and I use the same line of thought in my approach to the analysis.

Another scholar engaged in research on spectators is Erika Fischer-Lichte. In her book *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), she directs her attention at an array of aspects of performances, all originating in the fundamental principle of the actor and spectator as co-creator of the event. Starting in a discussion of the disturbing experience of the performance *Lips of Thomas* by Marina Abramović in 1975, in which the artist harms herself in front of a live audience, Fischer-Lichte recognizes the complexity of the performance, as it challenges a number of false binaries connected to the live event. Some of these binaries are the separation of art and everyday life, the artist and the audience, the subject and object, the body and mind. These binaries and the potentiality of a liminal space are explored and tied to discussions in theater and performance studies, such as presence and liveness, the meaning of the experience, and the interplay between actors and spectators.

A central concept tied to Fischer-Lichte’s approach to the co-presence of actors and spectators is what she calls the autopoietic feedback loop, in which the response and reaction of actors and spectators continuously triggers another response and reaction in the other. This circulation of energy includes other members of the audience as well. Therefore, the experience and meaning created are dependent on the relation between the single spectator and others present.

Fischer-Lichte, who herself has a background in semiotics, criticizes the use of semiotics, instead favoring a focus on the phenomenal experience of materiality, to which she ties aspects such as corporeality, atmosphere, tonality, and voice. Starting in the experience of associations rather than interpretations, the scope broadens as experiences that do not have a symbolic relation tied to the phenomena are acknowledged. The experience produces a meaning that appears through the perception, rather than what is perceived being interpreted and assigned a meaning. Since several of Fischer-Lichte’s topics and discussions relate to my own discussions, I will return to them when they are useful.

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41 Ibid., p. 38.
42 Ibid., pp. 140-147.
My Approach to the Spectators

As my short presentation shows, the approaches to audiences and spectators are quite diverse and focus on different aspects of the theatrical event. Depending on the questions being asked and the theoretical stance that is taken, the process and the results differ significantly.

Bennett’s discussion of the audience started in a recognition of a need of another approach as the theater changed and new audiences were created that could not be studied with theories that approached them as a homogenous, middle-class audience with the same knowledge and understanding. Dolan saw a lack of focus on how gender affects the spectators, while Sauter found ways to come closer to the experience as such.

In the study, I approach genres that – compared to spoken drama, and other forms of theater – focus less on the representation, and more on the spectacle. As such, the purpose and attraction for the spectator are different, and potentially experienced differently.

Theoretical Approach and Concepts

In the following section, I will outline the general theoretical approach at work in this study. I begin with the overarching concept of phenomenology. As a general framework, it both directs attention to what I study, and to how it is being studied. My approach to phenomenology then narrows as I introduce the embodied aspects of the experience. Some key concepts will be introduced in this section. Finally, I discuss affect and emotions, as they are an essential part of the experience of the bodies in these genres.

Several other theoretical concepts will be used when I engage in the analysis and discussions on specific topics in each chapter, and these will be presented as they are brought into play.

Phenomenology

Briefly, phenomenology could be said to be a field within philosophy dedicated to the study of the structures of human consciousness, and how phenomena appear to us. By using first-person experiences as the source of information, phenomenology studies the structures of consciousness concerning perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, bodily awareness,

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43 Bennett, pp. 1-2.
embodied action, and social activity. I would argue that the scholarly appeal of phenomenology, especially as applied outside the philosophical field, is that it creates a theoretical ground for using lived experience as the source of information, and that the experience in itself is not reduced to a theoretical curiosity. The phenomenological venture starts in the experience, by carefully describing what it is like, how it shapes consciousness, and how that consciousness shapes the experience, and ultimately how meaning is created in the experience of the world.

Phenomenology is often accused of being introspective and subjective, and it is argued that it cannot be seen as an ‘objective’ theoretical approach for academic research. Phenomenology has a specific relation to objectivity, and rather than dismissing it all together, argues that any account of objectivity always is experienced through a subject, hence a subjective experience of the objective. One way to think of phenomenology, in order to stand clear of the accusation of introspection, is that it is a scientific approach for conducting research on subjectivity, and not a subjective approach for conducting scientific research. As Zahavi and Gallagher put it, “Some people mistake phenomenology for a subjective account of experience: but a subjective account of experience should be distinguished from an account of subjective experience.”

At times, I have been asked whether one should consider phenomenology as theoretically tied to the philosophical question of ontology or epistemology. One could argue that it is related to either, both, or something else. In philosophy, four main subfields are ontology, which studies the fundamental being as “what is;” epistemology, that focuses on “how we know;” logic, which is the study on “how to reason;” and finally ethics, which discusses “how we should act.” Phenomenology could be considered a fifth subfield with focus on “how we experience.” At the core of phenomenology is the experience, which is arguably the way in which all other understanding and knowledge come to mind. As such, phenomenology is not only the theoretical approach to my study; it is also the subject of the study, as the experience of the spectator is my focus.

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46 Ibid., pp. 15-23.
49 Smith.
The Evolution of Phenomenology

I will not go into the history of phenomenology in any depth, as a number of other sources have, but I will briefly frame the development and some of the most prominent scholars in the field.

Phenomenology as it is understood today has its roots in the late 19th- and early 20th century, with Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) usually being considered the founder. Husserl was a German mathematician who, during his studies in philosophy with the Austrian psychologist Franz Brentano (1838-1917), became interested in consciousness and how we know things. Husserl’s initial studies resulted in the work *Logical Investigations* (1900-1901), which sets out a new path on how to understand logic and knowledge in its two volumes. For the remainder of Husserl’s career, his view on phenomenology and the possible applications broadened as a theory focusing on experience and consciousness as such developed. Besides formulating the general understanding of phenomenology, Husserl also established methods for how to engage in phenomenological studies, and reconfigured the concept of intentionality.

Although Husserl is considered the founder, his phenomenology was inspired by a range of earlier scholars, such as the earlier mentioned Brentano, as well as David Hume (1711-1776), and their approaches to empirical knowledge. Questions on consciousness that are central to phenomenology also predate Husserl; thinkers such as René Descartes (1596-1650), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), and philosophers in Hindu and Buddhist traditions all studied the conscious mind. Thus, although they were not discussed as phenomenology, questions of consciousness have a long tradition in both philosophy and religion.

Husserl’s approach to phenomenology spread, and several prominent scholars were influenced and joined, or followed, the philosophical movement, although mainly in the continental philosophical tradition in Germany and France. Some of the most known are Max Scheler (1874-1928), who engaged in questions on ethics and the self. Edith Stein (1891-1942) worked closely with Husserl, and is mostly known for her work on empathy, to which

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50 Moran, p. 11.
52 Moran, pp. 10-11.
53 Smith.
I return in my discussion on empathy. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) engaged in questions of ontology and the being in the world. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) is most known for taking phenomenology in the direction of hermeneutics. In France, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), best known as an existentialist, took on phenomenology and discussed issues of transcendence and freedom. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) brought the body into phenomenology. I will return to him in the section on embodiment.

I mentioned that phenomenology has mainly been a field in European continental philosophy. In America, similar discussions on the consciousness, under the name philosophy of mind, have primarily been discussed within analytical philosophy. Although the questions being asked on consciousness and minds are quite similar, the traditions have approached the studies differently. In recent years, the field of analytic philosophy and the philosophy of minds have moved towards cognitive sciences and biology, as well as towards phenomenology. One of the most well-known figures in this field is the Chilean biologist and philosopher Francisco Varela (1946-2001), whose thought-provoking approach to the embodied and enactive mind created ties between phenomenology and neuroscience.

Another use of phenomenology is found in Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), in which she connects the phenomenal lived embodied experience with ideas on discourses that impose norms and ideas on us regarding race, gender, and sexuality. By focusing on the orientation of the body, Ahmed opens a discussion that bridges the gap between phenomenology as focused on the individual experience, and a postmodern queer focus on the discourses as a power structure. Ahmed’s approach of orientation and phenomenology will return in some discussions of specific examples.

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60 Smith.
Phenomenology in Use and Some Key Concepts

One fundamental aspect of Husserl’s phenomenology is the concept of intentionality. He argues that every experience in consciousness is directed towards something. Whether we feel, remember, imagine, hear, taste, or think, consciousness is always directed toward the thing of which we are conscious. Hence, the conscious experience has two different but inseparable aspects: the intentional quality, the mode in which the experience is experienced; and the intentional matter, the intentional objects being as such. One example could be that I am longing for a cup of coffee as I sit here writing this text. This experience is at the same time directed toward the cup of coffee – this is the intentional matter – and to the longing, which is the intentional quality of the experience. In contrast, if I were to remember my last cup of coffee, the coffee is still the intentional matter, in many ways similar to the first example, while the remembering is the intentional quality, which is different from the longing. As such, the phenomenology is focused on the interaction between the things we perceive and the structures through which we perceive them. Phenomenology is therefore interested in how the conscious mind experiences the world.

Another aspect of the consciousness that is of importance in my analysis is the realization that the experience emerges in an already-existing world before we consciously reflect upon our experience. There is thus a pre-reflexive state of self-consciousness in which most of our lived experiences appear. One concrete example of this is the tension I feel in my upper back and neck as I sit at my kitchen table writing this. I have had this sense of tension for a while without giving it any real attention, as I am focused on my writing, and it has thus been a pre-reflexive experience. Now that I have focused on this sensation, I have a thematic and reflected understanding of it as an experience of my upper back and neck tension. However, in my pre-reflexive experience, I never doubted that the sense was mine, or that it was a sense of tension in me. I just didn’t bring it to my acute awareness. We are constantly doing and experiencing things without reflecting upon them. These experiences are informed by our habits, our previous knowledge, and our understanding of the world. Accessing these pre-reflexive experiences is one of the purposes of phenomenology.

Gallagher & Zahavi, p. 132.

Husserl introduced a phenomenological method as a way to get closer to experience itself while creating a structure that met his demands for scientific rigor. Central to his method is the epoché, which has the purpose of suspending the natural attitude that constantly affects how we perceive the world. The natural attitude is the naïve understanding that makes us take the world for granted. By suspending, or bracketing, this natural attitude, we can direct our focus on how reality appears to us in our experience, rather than how we think we experience it. The epoché is not to be considered a step that one concludes and then moves on from; it is rather an attitude that should be maintained throughout the analysis. Closely connected to the epoché is the phenomenological reduction, which is a reflective analysis of how the experience appears and which subjective structures interact with the appearance of the thing. This relates to the intentionality of the experience, connecting the intentional matter with the intentional quality.65

Even this brief glance at some aspects of the classic phenomenological method creates quite a few concerns about how it should actually be used. Is it even possible to suspend or bracket the natural attitude, and how do I as a researcher construct these brackets? Some phenomenologists question Husserl’s approach to the phenomenological attitude and even the possibility for the reduction.66 Merleau-Ponty writes that “[t]he most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction.”67 Based on this view on phenomenology and its methods, the focus is not on finding the essence of the phenomena, but rather exploring and disclosing the meaning of the experience.68

A problem with engaging with phenomenologists is that they rarely present their methods and what they are doing explicitly. In the preface to Phenomenology of Perception (1945), Merleau-Ponty points to the necessity of a phenomenological method, as it is the only way to access the phenomenology, and then suggests systematically bringing together “celebrated phenomenological themes” and figuring it out from there.69 However, he fails to explain how it works as a method. The different concepts and aspects of phenomenology, and the many variations of use by different scholars make it difficult both

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67 Merleau-Ponty, p. xv.
69 Merleau-Ponty, p. viii.
to grasp and to use. In the very first sentence in the preface to the book Merleau-Ponty asks “What is Phenomenology?” and goes on to note that the question – then half a century after Husserl’s first works – still remained to be answered. Now, another 70 years later and with an even more diverse use of phenomenology, the question is still valid. For this reason, scholars make use of phenomenological concepts more or less true to Husserl’s approach and depending on the field of study, the understanding of what phenomenology is differs, as does the use of the theory.

**Phenomenology in Theater and Performance Studies**

In the last twenty years, phenomenological perspectives and concepts have increased dramatically within the field of theater and performance studies. One of the first phenomenologists to engage in studies on theater was Roman Ingarden, who in the book *The Literary Work of Art* (1931) mainly focuses on the use of language at the theater. Another early example of phenomenology use aimed at dance is Maxine-Sheets Johnstone’s *The Phenomenology of Dance* (1966). Throughout a long career, she has written extensively on dance and phenomenology, mostly in relation to embodiment. The *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (1985) by Bert O. States mentioned earlier is another early example of using phenomenology in theater and more specifically on acting. His use of personal pronouns has inspired my approach, although my use is different. In Stanton Garner’s *Bodied Spaces* (1994), he discusses embodiment and spatial aspects of some theater-plays. Since the late 1990s, studies using phenomenology have increased steadily. Nordic Theatre Studies dedicated the issue ‘Approaching Phenomenology’ (2012), to phenomenology. Besides containing a number of interesting studies making use of phenomenology, the introduction gives a good overview of the field. The an-

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70 Ibid., p. vii.
71 Grant, p. 14.
74 States.
76 Grant, pp. 14-15.
thology Performance and Phenomenology (2015) included still further approaches and examples of phenomenology. While writing this chapter, I received my colleague Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen’s dissertation Over the Threshold, Into the World (2018), which uses phenomenology to approach questions on spirituality and transcendence in relation to staged events.

Approaching theater and performances from phenomenology is a way to get at the experience crucial to how we perceive, understand, feel, and create meaning in theater. The fundamental perspectives on experience, consciousness, perception, and embodiment in phenomenology provide useful frameworks in discussions of the theatrical event.

**Approaching Phenomenology in My Study**

Since my main focus in this study is on the spectatorial experience of bodies on stage, phenomenology will act as a general frame, as it is the study of experiences as such. Within, or closely related to, phenomenology are also several theoretical aspects that are of importance in relation to the study. The phenomenal experience as situated and embodied and aspects of affect and emotions will follow in this section, since they are general and continuous in the study. Others will be presented as they appear and as they become useful in the analysis.

I use phenomenology both with a focus on the content of the experience and on the structures in which the experience becomes conscious. I also follow the insight of Merleau-Ponty on phenomenology and use it “as a manner of style of thinking,” adopting a mode that is open to the experience as it appears in consciousness. This is more similar to the practice of meditation, in which experiences are noticed when the consciousness is open, than an analytic approach that uses a specific scope to address a particular issue. Therefore, I start in the experience, identifying scopes, and the analytical aspects in the study are then used to discuss the complexities of the experience further, and as a way to communicate with the scholarly community. Phenomenology as a style of thinking works to go beyond the superficial assumed experience, to aspects of the experience that are hidden, forgotten, or taken for granted. Approaching it with attention to the details that create the full experience in


81 Merleau-Ponty, p. viii.
consciousness and paying attention to how norms and structures of society influences the experience. Or, as the phenomenologist Susan Kozel writes; "A phenomenological approach manifests itself as a way of living in the world that integrates intellect with sensory experience and does not flinch from that which seems to be paradoxical or ambiguous; it can be used to construct meaning, to celebrate the mundane as well as the extraordinary, or to critique thought, attitudes, or social structures."  

**Embodiment**

Within the philosophy of phenomenology, the body has an important role that needs to be considered in relation to the consciousness, the experience, and the mind. The discussion of bodies in phenomenology is quite complex, and I will just briefly touch upon some aspects that are of importance in my study.

*The Embodied Mind*

One question that has intrigued philosophers throughout history is known as the mind-body problem, which concerns the mind’s relation to the body of which it is also a part. One of the most well-known approaches to the mind-body problem is found in what is called Cartesian dualism, which suggests that the body and mind are to be seen as separate and distinct. This view on the consciousness has influenced both science and the common understanding of body and mind, and it is a view that still today has an effect on the way we think and speak about experiences and consciousness. For phenomenologists, this separation is flawed and fails to acknowledge that the mind in itself is embodied. The only way we can experience things in consciousness is through our bodies as we are in the world, seeing, touching, sensing, hearing, and so on. 83 It is with my body that I perceive the world, interact with the world, and understand the world. My understanding of history, culture and my own identity is always formed in relation to myself as an embodied being. There is no perception without a body since all our experience is based in the body. I do not only have an awareness of the body, but I have the awareness as a body.

The body is also in constant negotiation with the environment, as the body shapes the environment just as the environment shapes and regulates the body. 84 Consider for instance how a chair is making you bend your knees and position yourself in accordance with its measurements. Or how a cold wind

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84 Ibid., p. 156.
makes you shiver. Our sense of the body is not only about our physical relation to the surrounding environment, but it also affects the way we perceive and experience the world.\textsuperscript{85} If my legs are tired, the hill that awaits me seems higher, or if I am holding my breath, time seems to pass more slowly.

\textit{Embodiment in Use and Some Key Concepts}

A fundamental concept in the phenomenal embodiment is the distinction between the body as an object and the lived body, often referred to using the German words \textit{Körper}, as for the body as a physical object, and \textit{Leib}, as the lived body in which we experience the world. This distinction is useful from a phenomenological point of view for thinking about and discussing bodies, and unfortunately missing from the English language, as well as from Swedish, which imposes a narrow understanding of the body. This does not mean that the body is two separate entities, but rather indicates that there are two perspectives for understanding and considering the body.\textsuperscript{86} An easy example of this is that I can look down at my keyboard and see my fingers pressing the keys. In this, I view the body as an object, as fingers running over the keyboard. However, I can easily switch focus and feel my fingers pressing the keys, and right now slipping and making a mistake. This is an experience of my lived body writing and slipping. Both perspectives can be valuable in research, as the body as object is studied in medicine, biology, neuroscience, and so on, while it is from the lived body that the phenomenological experience is being explored and discussed, as it appears in our embodied consciousness.\textsuperscript{87} The potential of the lived embodied experience becomes useful in scholarly research, as it provides knowledge that is different from what can be obtained by discussion from a presumed objective approach. One example is how diseases are understood entirely differently depending on whether a physician or the patient is doing the explaining. The scope of understanding, both from their separate experiences, would probably range from a medical understanding of pathology, as the body as object is considered, to a social and cultural understanding of being sick, as the lived experience is being considered.

An important point that Merleau-Ponty makes is that the experience of the world and the objects in the world are experienced as a whole, even though our perception only offers a perspective or a specific horizon. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of how looking at a house is more than experiencing what is in one’s field of vision. The visual perception is of the side of the house that is facing him, but he nonetheless has no doubt regarding the continuation of

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., pp. 155-156.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., pp. 154-155.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
the house, both in space and in time. As one moves, different aspects of the house enter the immediate experience; the full experience however is created as a synthesis of information from previous experiences. Concerning theater, a similar understanding is found with Fischer-Lichte, who argues that “something is not first perceived as something to which meaning is subsequently attributed. Rather, meaning is generated in and through the act of perception.” Our previous experiences and our knowledge are always present and influence our experience. As such, there are no experiences outside of their horizon of meaning. This is central in the understanding of how ideologies, norms, and context influence our experiences.

Our potential of an un-reflected use of previous knowledge is also tied to our ability to incorporate physical habits and skills through training and repeated experiences. Once habitual, the skill does not require any conscious mental effort. The body is thus considered to have an embedded consciousness, not depending on conscious mental activities. Such habits become our way of being in the world, and are another example of a pre-reflexive consciousness in which we experience something without consciously directing our attention or awareness to it.

Considering the mind as embodied also has an effect on our understanding of other people. If we consider the body as our connection to the world and where our conscious experience is situated, the same is true of our understanding of other beings with a conscious mind. This experience, however, is completely different from experiencing an inanimate object. Important for the experience is the distinction between the body as an object and the lived body, as we can experience others as both. When we look at other humans, we not only see their bodies’ movements and actions, we also experience aspects of their mental states, their intentionality, and their emotions. The fact that I can consider the other body as either an object or as a lived body entails that they can do the same with me; this realization has an effect on the relational aspects of the experience. I will come back to this in the discussion on how I relate to other bodies in the experience.

88 Merleau-Ponty, pp. 77-83.
89 Fischer-Lichte, p. 141.
90 Merleau-Ponty, p. 18.
93 Gallagher & Zahavi, p. 167.
Embodied Mind 2.0

Following in the track of Merleau-Ponty, who complemented his philosophical explorations with empirical data and insights from natural and social sciences, a new generation of scholars studying the mind is working to further bridge the gap between philosophy and science. In this approach, different aspects of consciousness and the mind are considered by taking the embodied understanding even further. The movement is primarily based in cognitive sciences as they approach the philosophical field of phenomenology. One of the seminal books in this field is *The Embodied Mind* (1991), where an enactive approach to the mind is introduced that suggests that cognition appears in its interaction with its environment. Since then, this view on cognition has grown and spread in different directions. The concept is related to what has become known as 4E cognition, meaning: Embodied, Embedded, Enacted and Extended. This development ties to a need to reconfigure the understanding of cognition and mind as technological developments challenge our previous thoughts. Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts on embodiment have been of importance for this field. As an example, the theory of an extended mind, in which cell-phones are starting to be considered parts of the human mind as it works as an extension of our memory, was already suggested by Merleau-Ponty when he discussed a blind man’s use of a stick as an extension of his body schema. These approaches for gaining new understandings of the human mind, which connect science and phenomenology, are at an early stage, and imagining what the future may hold is utterly thrilling.

Bodies and Embodiment in Performance Studies

If one accepts the premise that the body is closely intertwined with our conscious mind, and that the access to the world is through our body, it is no surprise that bodily perspectives are of great importance in studies of theater and performances. In the experience, there are at least two bodies present – the performer on stage and the spectator in the audience – and both are important for the theatrical event and possible objects to study. Depending on the type of performance and the use of representation and construction of fictive characters, there are yet other bodies to which to relate. The spectator does not only relate to the body of the performer, but also to the character’s body,

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95 Varela, Thompson & Rosch.
96 Merleau-Ponty, pp. 165-166.
the own body, and possibly the other bodies in the audience. The actor experiences the own body, but also has to relate to the character’s body and the bodies in the audience.

Within performance studies, the strong tradition of discussing bodies, both concerning culture and aesthetics and in relation to embodiment and phenomenology, has primarily been within the field of dance. In the book *Choreographing Empathy* (2011), Susan Foster focuses on the embodied experience of dance, using phenomenological aspects of empathy.\(^97\) I will return to this book later in my discussion on kinesthesia. Maxine Sheets-Johnston’s *The Primacy of Movement* (2011) does not relate specifically to dance, but is a philosophical discussion of the mind from the knowledge of a dance scholar, in which she argues for a turn towards an embodied understanding.\(^98\) The phenomenological experience of kinesthesia, and the importance of movement, have so far almost exclusively been focused in dance studies, but with *Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theatre – Phenomenology, Cognition, Movement* (2018), Stanton Garner takes a broader perspective on different aspects of movement, connecting the discussion to the field of philosophy, theory of minds, and neuroscience.\(^99\)

**Approaching Embodiment in My Study**

As the focus in this study is on the experience of bodies, the embodied perspective works as a foundation for my understanding of consciousness and how we experience the world, be it as making sense of a theme, remembering actions on stage, feeling desire, or as relating to other bodies and their subjectivity. Embodied phenomenology treats the own body as the subject from which the world is experienced. As such, the experience is always embodied, and the lived body is at the core of the experiences.

As I explore and analyze my experiences of the different genres, the notion of the pre-reflective experience and my embodied habits become useful as they direct attention to aspects of the experience that would otherwise be hard to discuss. My previous knowledge and embodied experiences are relevant, as they shape my understanding in relation to norms and the context of the bodies being experienced.

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The distinction between the body as an object and the lived body is not only crucial in the understanding of the self in the experience, but also in relation to the other body, and how they as lived bodies relate to me as a spectator.

As a final point, I consider the body and mind as inseparable and intimately intertwined in the experience. However, in the analysis and discussions, I will at times treat them as separate as a theoretical approach in order to access different aspects of the experience.

Affect and Emotions

Research on affect and emotions is a field that attracts scholars and scientists from a variety of disciplines, and depending on the purpose of the research, the approaches can differ quite a lot. Some differences are in the understanding of how emotions are constructed and whether they are universal or not, others are in the distinctions made between different types of feelings.

A classic understanding of emotions – and one that has been highly influential both within science and in everyday life – is that we have an innate and universal set of basic emotions. Already in 1872, Charles Darwin argued that the same emotions could be found in cultures all over the world. This view on emotions had a significant influence on the field of psychology and the general understanding of emotions. One scholar who continued work along this path was the psychologist Paul Ekman, who connected basic emotions to specific facial expressions that could be universally recognized around the world. These expressions could convey basic emotions such as joy, wrath, fear, shock, disgust, and loneliness. New basic emotions have been added since the first experiments. Ekman’s finds also resulted in technology for reading others’ facial expression to detect deception, a system made famous by its appearance in the tv-series Lie to Me (2009-2011), and in the analysis of the recording of Bill Clinton’s micro-expressions as he declared that he “did not have sexual relations with that woman.”

In the book How Emotions Are Made, psychologist and neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett challenges both the concept of basic emotions and the universality of emotions, and argues that this widely recognized concept exists due to flawed methods in the studies. She argues that because of the way the tests are constructed, the methods reproduce the result as the most likely outcome, which unintentionally leads the participants to the expected answers. Since most of the studies that confirm the basic emotion/universality theory are constructed in a similar way, the same error is repeated, and the confirmation of the theory wrongly supported. Feldman Barrett suggests an alternative understanding that still explains the results in the research; she suggests that
emotion and response are culturally constructed and not essential.\textsuperscript{100} Feldman Barrett’s approach opens up for an understanding of emotions in line with a social constructionist perspective, and challenges the common essentialist view on emotions.

\textit{Defining Feelings}

Among researchers who deal with different types of feelings, there are different approaches to the definition of the same; they can range from specific detailed descriptions of the difference between mood, affect, feeling, sensation or emotion to an absence of any distinction. What is even more confusing is that some who do make distinctions still come up with different words to explain the same thing.\textsuperscript{101} For my study, I rely on psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs’ distinction of five different feelings from the phenomenological tradition. The first of these is the often taken for granted \textit{feeling of being alive}, which is usually pre-given and un-reflected, but which can become present in certain situations. The second category is \textit{existential feelings}, which is related to feeling of being alive, but is more concerned with the self in relation to being in the world, and in our relation to others. These feelings differ from emotions in that they are general and do not have the same intentionality as emotions. The third feeling is \textit{atmospheres}, which is experienced through the resonance in the body and felt more distinctly compared to existential feelings and moods. The next category is \textit{mood and attunement}, which works as background feelings that frame and change other affective experiences. Moods are non-intentional and have some persistence over time, arriving and leaving gradually. The final and most complex feeling is \textit{emotions}, which are short-lived and dynamic, as they are experienced through bodily changes. Emotions are intentional, and interrupt, or redirect our attention, and as such direct and move us in different ways.\textsuperscript{102} Fuchs thus suggests that emotions are not internal or belonging to the psyche, but rather embodied and extended, as they are experienced in the connection to the environment, and depend on the interaction of our affection, perception, and movement, not only moving us affectively, but also physically. As our emotions are expressed on our outsides, we are also inter affectively connected to other people, and are both affected by and affect others.\textsuperscript{103} I will go back to these different feelings and aspects of emotions as they appear in the analysis.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., pp. 8-11.
Starting from this understanding of the phenomenological feelings, I will consider the way emotions are considered in the field of affect theory, and how they relate to aspects of the social situation and the cultural context.

The Affective Turn
In the last twenty years, a new interest in emotions has emerged in what has become known as the affective turn, in which scholars from diverse fields are focusing on affective dimensions of culture, history, and politics without the limitations of poststructuralism and deconstruction, allowing the lived experience to take place in the discussion.\(^{104}\) Since the field of affect theory is applied to a range of scholarly traditions and fields of study, the understanding of affect, as well as its use, differs greatly.

Within the field of cultural studies, the term has some common themes and understandings, although they are labeled and used somewhat differently. However, affect is usually understood as our relation to the world as it is constantly changing, and how these relations affect us. As such, the affect is neither in our bodies, nor outside of them, but in the space emerging between us as we experience the world, constantly assigning new meanings to the experience as it appears. Affect is the pre-personal non-conscious force that moves us and directs us in our navigation of understanding experiences. Affect, as a force that appears between bodies, that is both created by us and creates us, opens up for discussions on how politics and ideologies connect to human bodily experience, of affect, and not only as rational or thought-based considerations.

However, the use of the notion of emotions, feelings, and affect within affect theory is a constant source of confusion, as there are different approaches and opinions about how to use them. Brian Massumi, who is one of the most prominent theorists of the field, makes a clear distinction and suggests that emotions are tied to personal experience and appear in context, while affect is the continuation that is situational and precedes the emotion, just as it lingers on after the emotion.\(^ {105}\) As such, the affect is separated not only from the emotion, but also the sensation, and focus is directed away from emotions, while affect as a separate category is favored in the discussion.

Sara Ahmed challenges this understanding of emotions and affect and ties the discussion to the way emotions have been considered less valuable than


reasoning and thought,\textsuperscript{106} and also how the turn to affect in the field excludes the feminist theories of emotion that preceded the affective turn.\textsuperscript{107} Sticking to the notion of emotions, Ahmed argues that emotions are not created only internally as a response to an object, but that “[e]motions shape the very surface of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others. Indeed, attending to emotions might show us how all actions are reactions, in the sense that what we do is shaped by the contact we have with others.”\textsuperscript{108} Ahmed, whose base is in a phenomenological tradition, calls attention to the fact that emotions are intentional, and always are orientated towards an object.\textsuperscript{109} The division between emotions and affect is thus not necessary, as emotions themselves are relational and informed by the situation.

Another important notion in Ahmed’s approach is that emotions and bodily sensations are intertwined and cannot be distinctively separated, except on a theoretical level.\textsuperscript{110} By the use of the word impression, which is a word with a multitude of meanings, Ahmed wants to focus not only on how bodies press, impress, or are under the impression, but also how the emotion leaves an impression as ideas and values are tied to the emotions.\textsuperscript{111} The emotion is therefore not an inherent internal response, but is shaped through the impression shaped by previous social and cultural contact.

Ahmed uses the term “sticky” as to discuss how these impressions through repetition change the surface and accumulate affective values that shape our understanding of the world.\textsuperscript{112} Similarly, concerning the experience of meaning at the theater Fischer-Lichte wrote that “even the “first” perception in a performance is already the result of previously generated meanings, whether they are purely subjective or based on cultural codes.”\textsuperscript{113}

Ahmed also argues that the judgments accompanying emotions are enacted, as they “do not lead to actions; they are actions” as they orient us and moves us towards and from other people.\textsuperscript{114} As a spectator, the orientation is of importance in relation to the experience’s intentional quality, and how it directs our attention and influences our experience of relations to others.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., pp. 204-208.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., p. 4.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., pp. 6-7.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., pp. 5-6, 40.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., pp. 6-7, 208.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., pp. 11-12, 89-92.
\textsuperscript{113} Fischer-Lichte, p. 152.
\textsuperscript{114} Ahmed, 2014, p. 209.
As I am interested in the individual emotional aspects of the experience, as well as how this experience is shaped in the intentional orientation towards the object, I follow Ahmed’s use of how emotions are culturally and socially informed and use her notion of emotions rather than the broader notion of affect theory.

**Phenomenal Embodied Emotions**

As my earlier discussion perhaps suggested, I approach emotions as embodied phenomenal experiences. For this discussion, I use Giovanna Colombetti’s approach to the experience of emotions, which combines recent finds in neuroscience with psychology and phenomenology.115

Any feeling or emotion is unavoidably experienced from the body, as we never can step out of our own bodies. However, even if the feeling is based in the body, that does not mean that it has to be about the body, as feelings are connected to bodily aspects in different ways. Going back to the earlier discussed phenomenological concept of intentionality, the body can be the intentional object of the feeling, like when we focus on the contraction of the abdominals when doing crunches at the gym, the acute pain of hitting one’s pinky toe on a door jamb, or as a focused body scan in mindfulness meditation. Whether one is suddenly vaulted into awareness or a contemplated search of the bodily senses, the focus is on the body, as lived. As a spectator, this emotion can occur if the sadness of a play brings tears and your focus shifts to the bodily experience of crying, or, as I will get back to later, if the action makes you queasy. Returning to yet another concept in phenomenology – the reflective and pre-reflective self-awareness – the body as an intentional object is a reflective self-awareness in which my attention is directed to and observed as the object of the awareness.116

To clarify the experience in relation to the earlier discussed concepts of the lived body and the body as an object, experiencing the body as an intentional object does not mean that the body is objectified, but rather that it is in focus. The experience discussed is still that of the lived body and not the body as an object, which would deal more with an outside perspective of it, as of looking at it in a mirror or measuring it.117

The more common way in which the body is experienced in feelings and emotions is as the vehicle of the emotion, as feeling through the body. At the theater, this is the common way we feel. The feeling through the body relates

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116 Ibid., pp. 116-117.
117 Ibid., pp. 115-116.
to a pre-reflective self-awareness, as an “unmediated, nonthematic” awareness of the body in which the focus is elsewhere, although the body is still present. The feeling through the body can be experienced in a range of different ways depending on the situation. A conspicuous bodily feeling could be the tingling nervousness before giving a speech at a wedding. Although the focus and emotional attention are directed at the speech situation, the feeling is very much in the body. The feeling is experienced through the body. This can be either a localized sensation, as the nervousness might manifest itself in the stomach, or more of a diffuse sense, as the energized, full body excitement right before one jumps onto a waterslide. The experience can also have different bodily modes, such as either visceral, as with the turning, nervous gut, or kinesthetic, like the clenching of a fist in anger. These are examples when the feeling through is in the foreground of the experience, though not as an intentional object.

Colombetti argues that there are still other ways in which emotions are sensed through the body. The “obscurely” felt body is a sense of the body as a background. These are experiences when the focus is on something else, and the body is not in awareness, but cannot be considered completely transparent or absent. Colombetti gives the example of sitting on a delayed train on the way to the airport. The experience of the emotions is focused on aspects of the travel, the time, the speed of the train, and on whether she will make it or not. The body is not made aware, but still, it is stressing, making the experience feel confined and tense. When the situation is resolved, in one way or the other, the built-up tension might be felt in the body as a headache, or stiff shoulders. In this scenario, the body is, in fact, taking part in shaping the experience, even though it is not made present in awareness. Colombetti argues that the background bodily feelings are like watching a situation through colored glass, a glass that changes the experience of that which is in focus, and “contributes to the affective quality of the situation.”

The final aspect of bodily affective experience proposed by Colombetti is the feeling of being absorbed. Although not usually considered an emotion or an affect, it is a state that comes with a range of emotional experiences, such as interest, engagement, and frustration. As an example, playing the piano is an activity where bodily feelings are used in the absorption of the activity. The

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118 Ibid., pp. 116-117.
119 Ibid., pp. 118-119.
120 Ibid., pp. 119-121.
121 Ibid., pp. 122-126.
experience of flow, when people become fully involved in an activity, also relates to a sense of bodily feelings, as it is used to maintain the focus.\textsuperscript{122}

In my study, I will use this understanding of affective embodied engagement as a theoretical framework for the discussion on how the lived experience is shaped, and how it relates to the experience of the bodies in the genres.

\textit{Affect and Emotion in Theater and Performance Studies}

Feelings, emotions, and sensation are most often at the core of the theater, as the theater is in many ways an arena of emotion. The excitement, thrill, surprise, laughter, and sadness are not only experiences that we encounter, but often it is the attraction in itself, the reason for going in the first place. Emotional aspects have always been of interest for people writing about theater and performance. Early examples are found in Aristotle’s notion of catharsis in the ancient Greek theater, and the discussion of technique in the Indian \textit{Natya Sastra}.\textsuperscript{123} Emotions and feelings have not only been of interest for scholars and theater critics, but also for practitioners in discussions on acting technique and how to convey expressions to the audience. Erin Hurley’s \textit{Theatre & Feelings} (2010) gives a brief overview of the field of emotional experiences at the theater, discussing feeling in relation to topics such as acting, social work, and the place of emotions within theater.\textsuperscript{124} In research on acting, emotions and how to express them are a theme that is found in several books. In \textit{Performing Emotions} (2003), Peta Tait discusses how the representation of emotions is tied to gender on the example of Stanislavski acting in certain Chekhov plays.\textsuperscript{125} Tait uses phenomenology in her discussion, but the focus is on acting and drama. I will return to Tait in relation to her later scholarship on circus. An example of research that focuses specifically on the emotions of the spectator is Jill Dolan’s above-mentioned \textit{Utopia in Performance} (2005), in which she uses accounts of emotions in her discussion on the spectatorial experience in relation to utopia.\textsuperscript{126} Although she does not specifically discuss phenomenology, her use of the first-person perspective is similar.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., pp. 128-132.
\textsuperscript{123} Hurley, 2010, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., pp. 10-24.
\textsuperscript{126} Dolan, 2005.
Approaching Affect and Emotion in My Study

My approach is based on the phenomenological framework of feelings based on Fuchs’ five distinctions as feeling of being alive, existential feelings, atmospheres, moods and attunement, and emotions. I will address these feelings as they appear, and again in the conclusion of the study.

I find that Fuchs’ approach to emotions as interaffective, embodied, and extended corresponds well with Ahmed’s work, where emotions are dependent on cultural and social contexts and created in relation to others. By using her approach to affect and emotions and her notion of how impressions shape our understanding of the experience, taking both bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts into consideration, the scope broadens and allows for a constructive discussion with social discourses.

I argue that the experience of emotions is always embodied, and the notion appears in consciousness in different ways. Therefore, my analysis will not focus only on what is experienced – the content – but also on how it is experienced, and how it relates to the structures of consciousness. By using the framework of the embodied emotions established by Colombetti, I link the emotional aspects to phenomenological structures of consciousness.

Using an emotional approach to the experience rather than only focusing on sense information reduces the risk of becoming self-centered and introspective, as it opens up to a broader understanding of how the embodied phenomenal experience is socially and culturally informed.

Methodological Approach and Concepts

As the outline of my study deals with the phenomenal experience of other bodies, and as my discussion of the theoretical implications suggests, I need to construct a method that can accommodate the need to focus on the experience as it appears. The primary method will be a version of performance analysis in which my main focus is on the experience as such rather than the performance. I will also consider my position in the audience as an ethnographer, being a part of the field that I study. Finally, I will present the structure of my study, where different aspects of the spectator’s experience are considered.

Performance Analysis as Experience Analysis

As mentioned in my earlier discussion on spectators, there is a close relation between performance analysis and the spectator’s experience. The scholar analyzing the performance is a spectator, but a specific spectator with special
skills and a specific view on the experience. I would thus argue that all performance analyses are studies of spectatorship, although they are rarely described as such. However, as the scope of studies is a different one, the focus on the experience versus the focus of the production differs. I would argue that even approaches claiming to be focused on spectators tend to focus on the performance rather than the experience. With my method, I will attempt to challenge this focus and start the discussion from the spectator’s experience.

**Performance Analysis**

Performance analysis emerged as a sub-discipline of theater studies in the 1970s as the interest for contemporary theater grew and methodological tools for analyzing performances were established, primarily based in the field of semiotics. In the following decades, analytical tools developed, and competing theoretical perspectives claimed their space. Today performance analysis is perhaps the main method used within theater studies, as new performances are constantly being scrutinized from different perspectives.

A general description of performance analysis is the engaging in a methodological analysis using some kind of theory on some aspect of the performance. The theoretical approach used depends on the question being asked, as well as the theoretical knowledge of the scholar. New theoretical approaches are constantly being developed and borrowed from other disciplines. Typical approaches are based in semiotics, hermeneutics, phenomenology, anthropology, cultural studies, and communication.

As for the aspects of the performance being analyzed, these can range from a specific character in a play to the bodies moving on stage, the aesthetics of costumes, the scenography, the soundscape, the dramaturgy, temporal aspects, or the general theme. The focus is limited only by the imagination and the skills of the analyst. It is common to use meta-theories such as gender and queer perspectives, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial perspectives to further deepen the analysis.

Martin and Sauter argue that a central part of the analysis is comprehension of the meaning of the performance. This is a rather strong claim, and I would argue that the understanding can be of interest, but is not always, and not in

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127 Martin & Sauter, pp. 15-16.
130 Sauter, 2006, pp. 46-47.
131 Ibid., p. 47.
relation to all performances. In the genres that I am studying here, the spectacular and the sensational are central, and thus the experience itself is in focus, rather than an interpretation of the content. Although I steer away from an approach that is invested in understanding, this does not mean that I discard the meaning of the experience. On the contrary, I would argue that the meaning is what is in focus – the meaning of the phenomenal experience. Fischer-Lichte argues for this broader understanding of meaning in which she also includes the experience of senses and emotions as they appear in consciousness.\(^{133}\) Searching to understand tends to imply that there is an answer hidden somewhere in the performance, and I would argue that in the focus on understanding lies a risk of clouding the experience and directing one’s attention away from what might be the main attraction.

**My Approach to Performance Analysis as Experience Analysis**

As my earlier discussion has shown, there has been a lack of focus on the experiential aspect of theater in the performance analysis. In Sauter’s approach from the theatrical communication, he makes some choices that bring the discussion closer to the spectator. In *The Theatrical Event* (2000), Sauter changes the word in the subtitle from the *reception* common in theater studies to the more phenomenological and arguably more active word *perception*, as it focuses on the process of spectating rather than the result of the same.\(^{134}\) I find this small change important, as it re-configures the approach to the spectators’ experience and in a sense transfers power from the production side to the spectator. However, in his subsequent discussions, both of his model as well as in his analysis, the focus starts in the action on stage. The communication, therefore, tends to be discussed on the premises of the performer.

In the short introduction of performance analysis in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies* (2008), Balme finds the need to differentiate between ‘production’ and ‘performance’ aspects of the analysis so as to clarify the focus on performance analysis.\(^{135}\) I see why this differentiation can be useful, but I would like to add a third aspect in order to further direct the focus toward to the reception/perception aspects of the performance, namely the experiential aspects. My study focuses on the spectatorial experience of the bodies on stage, which I consider a domain of the spectator in the performance; I thus suggest the concept of *experience analysis* to clearly base the focus on the communication from the spectator. In this, I also challenge the need to

\(^{133}\) Fischer-Lichte, p. 151.
\(^{134}\) Sauter, 2000, pp. 5-6.
\(^{135}\) Balme, pp. 132-133.
focus on the understanding of the meaning of the performance and instead put forth settling for an understanding of the experience of the performance.

Writing Autoethnography and My Position

If I take the phenomenological understanding of my own consciousness as the only access to the world at face value, the best place to start the discussion is undoubtedly from my own experience. Media scholar Henry Jenkins argues that “[t]o understand how popular culture works on our emotions, we have to pull it close, get intimate with it, let it work its magic on us, and then write about our own engagement.”\(^{136}\) Therefore, my starting point is of the experiencing “I,” through which I discuss the bodies, the genres, and the experience as such. This approach keeps me from entering discussions based on interpretations of interpretations. I want to emphasize that I do not make any general claims that my experience stands for that of all spectators; instead, I use my experience as a point of departure in the discussion, and on how we experience.

I consider my full experience of the bodies and their action on stage the field of study. I thus approach the field as an ethnographer trying to make sense of the culture and how it is experienced. Ethnography is usually directed at another culture, which is studied from a varying degree of interaction and participation.\(^{137}\) Through thick descriptions, with an extensive amount of details and a careful interpretation and analysis, the result is a description as well as a discussion of the culture. Since my study is directed at the spectatorial experience, the ethnographic fieldwork can be framed even more intimately, as I am a part of the field I study. Therefore, I have the opportunity to use my own embodied experience as the source of my description and discussion.

Autoethnography is a specific approach in ethnography in which the personal, phenomenal, experience is used to analyze the culture or some aspects of it. It differs from autobiography, as its purpose is not the content of the life story, but rather a theoretically informed critical approach to the individual self and the self’s relation to the culture.\(^{138}\) Autoethnography concerns writing about the social experience of culture that is a part of everyone, including ourselves.\(^{139}\) The argument is that ethnography should not only be considered to

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\(^{139}\) Ellis, p. xvii, 31-41.
be about the other(s) and their culture, but also about ourselves and our culture, as well as our relation to the other.\textsuperscript{140}

In my case, this approach is well suited, as the object of study is accessible through my own experience as a social construction. As my aim is not to find a truth about the object, but rather to discuss what the phenomenal experience is and how it is appreciated and understood, there is no need for an objective distance. However, I need to be cautious about my role in the description and analysis. My challenge is to give an account of the experience that is coherent, sincere and useful, and not overly self-indulgent, as it would then run the risk of becoming autobiography. The value is in the self-conscious reflection of the experience as subjective, and by that working against the naivety in the natural attitude of the experience.

Autoethnography has sometimes been criticized as self-indulgent, narcissistic and navel-gazing, and although preoccupied with the self as the source of the data, “the culture flows through all of us,” and information from the self is thus just as important as information collected from another self.\textsuperscript{141} This issue is similar to the misconception of phenomenology as introspective discussed earlier. I argue that a phenomenological account is that of the experience of the subjective, not a subjective account of the experience. The experience is what is central, and how it takes shape and gives meaning in consciousness. Autoethnography uses the direct, phenomenal, lived experience as a source of data, without the inevitable distance and layers created in an analysis based on someone else’s experience.

Questions have also been raised about the validity of autoethnography. There are those who see no problems and embrace the approach heartily, while others struggle with the format and the unorthodox approach. One way of dealing with validity is to repeatedly reflect on the result and ask a set of questions to the text to ensure that it is coherent. By questioning whether the descriptions and analysis from the experience make sense for me as a researcher, a self-reflection is introduced; by posing the same questions to others – academics as well as non-academics – the results can be corroborated.\textsuperscript{142} The purpose of autoethnography is to critically engage in a discussion of the own culture, and it therefore needs to be approached as studies of another culture would, by engaging in discussions of the field.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., p. xix.
\textsuperscript{141} Winkler, p. 243.
\textsuperscript{142} Anjali J. Forber-Pratt, “‘You are going to do what?’ Challenges of Autoethnography in the Academy’, \textit{Qualitative Inquiry}, vol. 21, no. 9, 2015, p. 831.
Some studies using autoethnography also present the results in experimental ways, such as narrative stories, poetry, or performances. The purpose of this type of evocative autoethnography is to engage the reader with the experience of the author. My experience of this approach is that it tends to complicate the reading and at times undermine the potential result of the study. I thus use autoethnography only as a way to approach the field, and to gather data. This approach is more in line with an analytical autoethnography, closer to the classic ethnography, which encourages an engagement in general scholarly discussions. The presentation of my results and my discussion will be more conventional, although the use of thick descriptions will still be a part of the approach to the examples.

My Approach to Autoethnography
In my study, autoethnography has informed the way in which I conduct the research as I engage in the experience as an ethnographer, taking notice of all aspects of my experience, paying close attention to my thoughts, my affects and emotions, my bodily sensations, and my experience of the relation to other bodies at the event. These dense descriptions of the experience are then sorted, analyzed, elaborated, reflected upon, organized, and discussed. I consider my approach a critical study of my own culture, using my embodied phenomenal experience to inform my understanding of the meanings produced within the culture.

Positioning the I
Considering my theoretical approach and my previous discussion, it might come as no surprise that I am not looking for objective answers in my study. Even if there are some ‘truths’ about the world, I would still experience these through my subjective consciousness, which would unavoidably alter it to be a truth for me. This also entails that the knowledge I produce is situated, as it is coming from a specific place, with specific historical understanding, in a context, and shaped by previous experiences. In the seminal article Situated Knowledge (1988), Donna Haraway challenges the way science is presented as objective truth, as it denies the discourse through which it is being made. Haraway argues that a sensible approach to science and scholarly studies is to make use of partial perspectives that are situated, to acknowledge the specificity of the knowledge being produced. This way of approaching research

143 Ellis, pp. 184-218.
144 Winkler, pp. 239-240.
145 Ibid., pp. 239-240.
fits together well with the phenomenological understanding of the consciousness as the source of all our knowledge. I therefore make no claims about finding answers about the experience of others, or answers that are even relevant for others, but rather make a case for the importance of the experience. I thus consider this study more of a critical discussion than a search for truth or objective answers.

However, since I am using myself as a point of departure, there is a need to make myself and my position visible throughout the study. The point of departure in the study, or my particular vantage point, is that of a white straight cis male who lives in Stockholm, comes from a working-class background and grew up in the 1980s and early 1990s in a village in southern Sweden. By life’s unexpected turns, I found myself in theater and performance studies at the university, and ever since then, my academic interests have been mostly focused on popular culture, critical theory, bodies and experiences from a phenomenological point of view, leaning on Ahmed’s insight in the way the knowledge is situated through impressions.147 My embodied history of lived experience, the books I have read and the classes I have attended have created the impressions that continuously affect the way I perceive, analyze, and write. It is from these impressions that the experiences appear.

Something should also be said about my experience in relation to an “ordinary” spectator. I am well aware that my experience is not that of just anyone going to the circus, burlesque, or freak show. I come with other expectations, another knowledge, another focus, and another framing of the experience. This has to be considered both an asset in the informed discussion of the experience, as well as a problem, as it further distances me from an average spectator. The question of the attraction of the genres is therefore unavoidably discussed from my specific position in the audience, and as much as I would like to approach the question with the open mind of a child, this is not possible.

Approaching the Study

In my discussion on spectatorship, I hinted that my method was inspired by Sauter’s model of theatrical communication, which is based on three levels. First, the sensory level, where the initial and basic contact between the performer and spectator is constituted. On this level, the focus is on the basic interaction as the performers walk onto the stage and exhibit themselves, to which the spectator reacts and responds. Sauter argues that this level of communication is difficult to research and that it has often been neglected. On the artistic level, the spectator reacts and responds to the encoded actions of the

performer. Actions that are related to the style and conventions of the specific genre influence the spectator on this level, which implies that the knowledge and previous experience of the spectator are influencing the experience. Finally, the symbolic level (which was called the fictional level in earlier versions of the model), which is the level where the spectator engages with the communication of the fictional character being embodied by the performer.\(^{148}\) Although I find the model useful, as it certainly unpacks the theatrical communication and helps to frame the analysis, I struggle with some of the concepts. Connecting the encoded action to the artistic level is one concern; I become confused as to why it is not related to the symbolic level. Another concern is the use of embodied action of the symbolic level, as I find all actions and reactions being embodied, at least from a phenomenal point of view. However, Sauter addresses the issue to some extent as he emphasizes that the levels are not static, but intertwined and fluid, and that there is a dynamic interplay between them.\(^{149}\) The separation into these levels should be seen as a theoretical tool used to focus the attention in the analysis and discussions, rather than a way to describe the experience of theater. Although I see the value of Sauter’s levels of communication, I would argue that they again tend to favor the performance rather than the reception. Therefore, I approach my analysis with a slightly different focus. In Sauter’s approach, he also distinguishes between “two modes of perception: an intuitive, emotional mode and a cognitive, intellectual mode” that could be useful in the analysis.\(^{150}\) Even though Sauter points out that it can be challenging to keep the modes apart, I find them useful as an approach to the experience in the moment of my analysis.

Drawing inspiration from Sauter’s distinction between these two modes, I have chosen to analyze the experience from three different approaches. First, from a cognitive, intellectual approach, in which I focus on aspects of the experience that occupy my mind. Secondly, from an embodied, sensational, approach, where my bodily experience comes into focus. My final approach is inspired by Sauter’s engagement in the “interaction between performer and spectator”\(^{151}\) and in him recognizing that “[he] responded to the activities on stage as well as to the audience around [him].”\(^{152}\) Ironically however, in trying to cover “all aspects of the relationship between the performer and the spectator,”\(^{153}\) a thing I find missing is precisely “the relationship between the per-

\(^{148}\) Sauter, 2006, pp. 56-61.
\(^{149}\) Ibid., p. 56, 61-62.
\(^{150}\) Ibid., p. 57.
\(^{151}\) Sauter, 2000, p. 255.
\(^{152}\) Ibid., p. 251.
\(^{153}\) Ibid., p. 4.
former and the spectator,” or at least the importance of the intersubjective relations for the experience. As Kozel argues, “The extension of lived experience happens not only by extending our human senses but also by exploring the depths of our relationships with others.”

Therefore, my third approach is a relational, intersubjective approach in which the spectator’s experience of the relation to other bodies is analyzed and discussed. In my approach, I am also inspired by Bert O. States use of I, You, and He, but I switch focus from the perspective of the actor and performance to that of the spectator and the experience.

Each of these three approaches will then be applied to my experiences of each of the genres in order to explore the complexity of the spectator’s experience. In my analysis and discussion, I will use a range of meta-theories and conceptual perspectives to inform the understanding of the specific experience. These are chosen from my own previous knowledge, my interest in research and topics, and from my decision regarding what is most suitable for the individual case, so as to obtain the most interesting and useful result.

Another scholar would probably make different choices and arrive at different conclusions and results. What I am trying to achieve is an analysis and a discussion of the experience that is coherent, accessible, intriguing, and could act as a starting point for further discussions on the topic, or as scopes on other case studies.

*Cognitive Approach*

In the cognitive approach, I focus on the intellectual experience of the mind and discuss themes and topics that influence the experience in line with thoughts, memories, ideology, etc. I would argue that this is the conventional way of analyzing and thinking about theater, as in what the meaning is of the act, or how to understand it. These analyses are often approached using semiotics or hermeneutics to discuss the understanding of the experience, but a phenomenological approach is equally possible. From this approach, I will discuss aspects of entertainment, politics, the popular, subversion, staging, and liveness. This is arguably also the way an ordinary spectator thinks that s/he is experiencing the performance. However, I would suggest that the experience is far more complex, which is why the other approaches also are needed to get a richer view of the spectator’s experience.

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154 Kozel, p. 16.
155 Sauter, 2000, p. 251.
**Embodied Approach**

With the embodied approach, I focus on the bodily quality of the experience, on how the act makes us feel, or what sense it provokes. This level is essential in the genres in my study, since the body, both on the stage and in the audience, is central. In genres like circus, burlesque, freak show, mime, dance, and opera, it is quite evident that the experience cannot be reduced to a cognitive experience. Moreover, I would argue that the case is the same for all theatrical events, although it is easy to forget. From this approach, I will discuss the sense of risk, kinesthesia, laughter, desire, disgust, and the uncanny, all of which shape the embodied experience. The bodies and their actions on stage are doing something to us that is more than in our cognitive minds.

**Relational Approach**

Finally, I take a relational approach as I elaborate on my experience of the intersubjective relation to other bodies present at the theatrical event. The relational level is my attempt to add a new aspect to studies on the experience of spectators. I would argue that an often-overlooked part of the experience is the spectator’s intersubjective relation to the body on stage, to the fellow spectators in the audience, and in relation to others as Others. By using the personal nouns, I, He/She, You, We and They as a theoretical guide, I engage in current phenomenological discussions on how we experience our interaction with others. From this approach, I discuss empathy, we-ness, community, shame, and othering.

Finally, I want to stress that the separation into these theoretical approaches is an intellectual exercise to make it possible to discuss the complexity of the spectator’s experience. In the real experience of theater, entertainment, and ultimately life, the perceptions, emotions, memories, thoughts, ideologies, and everything that shapes the conscious mind are intertwined, simultaneous, parallel, and ultimately complex.

**Material**

The choice of genres in my study is due in part to my interest in the specific genres, and how the bodies are the main focus on stage. As I mention in the brief background, another factor that influenced my choice was an article on *Body Genres* written by film scholar Linda Williams, in which she argues that
the cinematic genres melodrama, pornography, and horror have a specific purpose to provoke bodily reactions in the audience. The genres therefore highlight the complex relation between the bodies on stage and the bodies of the spectators.

Concerning the specific acts and performances, my choices have been rather pragmatic, as convenience in terms of time and accessibility due to location has been the main factor. Since my focus is the experience of the spectator rather than the specific shows, I see no problem with this approach. However, at the same time, I am well aware that other choices would have resulted in other experiences and another result.

**Approaching the Material**

The material being analyzed can be seen from two perspectives: the empirical material as the performance on stage, which is a common way to approach the object of the study, or as the experience of the performance onstage. Approaching it from experience is also typical, but this often leaves out the experience as the base of the argument. What I try to do with my phenomenological approach is to acknowledge the experience in order to explore perspectives that might otherwise be missed.

One problem when it comes to doing fieldwork, or performance analyses for that matter, is the vast quantity of information that is being experienced at once. In ethnographic fieldwork, the solution usually means spending an extended time with the object of the study, and when it comes to performance analysis, one usually watches the performance on several occasions or reviews recorded material.

The objects of my study mainly consist of shorter intense acts only shown once within the show. Whenever I have had the opportunity to experience an act more than once I have done so, but with the burlesque acts I have usually only had one chance to experience them, since the performers only do each act one time during a show, and then travel off to another place. The field of burlesque is quite international, and repeat acts at the same venue are rare.

I have used recorded material as a correcting tool when I have had the opportunity, but the live experiences are the ones that I discuss. If I experience something when watching the videos that I had not registered in my notes written after the show, I do not allow the new input to shape my argument. However, smaller corrections and greater precision when it comes to the order of things such as spoken words, costume details, body movements, and so on have been added to give a fuller description of my experience. By doing this,

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156 Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1991.
I could focus more attentively on my experience without constantly tracking details of costumes, actions, and words.

One could claim that reviewing recorded material gives a more accurate understanding of the experience, but I would rather argue that the review obscures the initial experience, and risks changing the account of the experience, which also have been argued by other scholars.\textsuperscript{157} Fischer-Lichte addresses a general problem of unreliability in accounts of theater, as the memory is not comparable to a warehouse in which we can access items in the same condition as they were when we left them; our memories are creative and make changes over time. Revisiting the source, in this case a performance, will not only produce new memories of the experience; it will also change the old. Once the memories are chosen, they also need to be turned into words and sentences, which again creates new understandings and meanings.\textsuperscript{158} This is something we have to accept, and in the best case embrace, as it is an opportunity to expand our understanding.

Dealing with the elusiveness of the theatrical experience is tricky, but it is also what makes the experience of live acts unique and intriguing, which I will get back to later in my discussion. I have tried to find a compromise between my use of memory, notes, and video as it suits the purpose of my study.

Disposition

This study primarily consists of three chapters focusing on each of the genres. Each chapter begins with a short introduction to the specific genre, gives a short background of the genre’s roots and a discussion of research in the field, and presents the aims and questions that guide the chapter. Each chapter then engages in the discussion from the three approaches presented in the introduction. At the end of each chapter is a short conclusion.

Chapter 1 is about the experience of circus. I will focus on a few different experiences, and aspects of, the bodies on stage in some acts of the contemporary Swedish circus company Cirkus Cirkör. From a cognitive approach, I will analyze the experience as entertainment, and in relation to political aspects and the potential of utopia. The discussion from an embodied approach is how other bodies’ movement is experienced in the spectator’s body, and how the sense of risk informs the experience. In the final, relational, approach, I will discuss how the spectator experience He or She vs. experiencing You, in

\textsuperscript{157} Martin & Sauter, p. 110.  
\textsuperscript{158} Fischer-Lichte, p. 159.
relation to the other body on stage, by using the phenomenological concept of empathy.

Chapter 2 deals with the experience of burlesque, and in this chapter, I analyze acts of contemporary shows from the last couple of years. From a cognitive approach, I focus on the popular, and how the repetition of images and stereotypes affects the experience. I also discuss how the body in burlesque could be subversive and challenge norms in society. The discussion from the embodied approach will be on the experience of laughter and desire, and how the experienced relates to the construction of identity and norms. In the discussion on the relational approach, I discuss the phenomenal experience of We, and how the shared experience as an audience is potentially creating a community.

Chapter 3 is about freak show, and the experiences I discuss are live contemporary acts from performances in two shows in the USA. From a cognitive approach, I will focus on the liveness of the acts, and how the staging of reality and fiction influences the experience. As for the embodied approach, I focus on the experience of disgust, and how the familiar becomes estranged in the uncanny. Finally, the relational approach will discuss the experience of they as the other, different aspects of Othering and the sense of shame.

Finally, there is a brief conclusion that will tie the pieces together and relate to the aims and questions of the study.

Let the show begin.
Chapter 1. Circus

I step under the arched stone entrance into the old circus building, which is hidden in a backstreet in the center of town. I leave my jacket in the cloakroom and grab a program for the show. My anticipations are high. I know that the show is a celebration of 25 years as a circus company. I step into the foyer and consider buying a cup of coffee. Almost immediately, a man in a grey military uniform comes up to me and asks to see my documents. A bit confused and surprised, I show him my ticket. He looks me sternly in the eyes and says, “Beards are not allowed in here.” I hear myself giggle nervously through my beard, and the wheels start spinning in my mind. Without a smile, comment, or reaction to give me some relief, he hands back my ticket and moves on to “check” someone else’s documents. I am not used to being questioned anywhere; as a Swedish citizen my passport grants me unquestioned access to the world, and for me, the right to look, or be however I want, is as natural as breathing. The situation startled me, and I realized that this was not going to be just any circus show.

The show is about to begin, and I sense a worry in my chest... 159

Background

Of the genres on which I focus in this book, the circus is by far the most well known, and the one most people have experienced themselves. The reach of the traveling circuses makes it, in many ways, even more so than dramatic theater. If I continue the analogy of the genres being in the backyard of the theater, the circus is the colorful tent covering the field, with glowing lights, music, laughter, and sound of amazement, pulling your attention with a promise of fun.

My first memory of any kind of stage performance was of the circus driving through the small village where I used to live and pitching their tent on a field next to the gas station. I remember how word spread, and soon all the kids were jumping on their bikes and on their way to see what was going on. If I

159 Borders, Cirkus Cirkör/Malmö Stadsteater, July 5, 2015.
was lucky, my mom took my brother and me to the show and we got to watch all of the marvelous acts, smell the animals, and laugh at some clowns. The experience was about the spectacular, the intensity, and the thrill.

But the circus has become more than the live experiences discussed in this book, more than what happens in the tent or on the stage. As one of the most important genres in the early days of popular culture, circus has made a mark on entertainment and culture of all kinds; its influence can be found in movies, in tv-series, at the theater, in opera, in music, literature, games, in kids playing, and in everyday life. Consider the use of circus words in everyday language: the president is a clown and it has turned into a circus, and we need a manager to make sure that the business runs smooth.

As a genre, the circus has quite a long tradition of amusing and amazing people, and last year – 2018 – marked 250 years since the founding of what is considered the first circus. The genre has changed quite a bit since then, as some acts have disappeared due to rules and regulations, like the use of wild animals, while other acts have developed as inventions are turned into new stunts. During the latter part of the 20th century, circuses struggled, and many were forced out of business. However, in the 1970s experimentation with circus and theater led to a revival and a redefinition of the genre. The new circus got rid of the animals, moved into theaters, and tried to attract new audiences using a new type of aesthetics, changing from a genre considered low-brow entertainment to becoming associated with art. Since then, the contemporary circus, which will be the focus of my study, has coexisted with the traditional circus, which continues to struggle.

In this chapter, I focus on the experience of the bodies in the circus, how they give meaning to the spectator in relation to entertainment, and in relation to our world. Focusing on my own bodily experience, I will discuss how the body on stage affects my body in the audience, and how my body’s interaction with the body on stage changes the experience.

The Field of Circus

In this section, I will define the use of the term circus, both in general and in relation to my study. I will then give a brief account of the history of the circus, highlighting the evolution of the genre up until the situation of today. This will serve as a short introduction to the genre and present the foundation from which my experiences and analysis take shape.

For the sake of those interested in the circus in a Swedish context, I will briefly present the history and the current situation of circus in Sweden.
Defining the Genre

In recent decades, it has become increasingly difficult to define what constitutes circus. In the introduction to The Routledge Circus Studies Reader (2016), circus scholars Peta Tait and Katie Lavers suggest the working definition of circus as “an art form which explores the aesthetic potential of extreme physical action by bodies (animal, human and post-human) in defiance of cultural identity categories including species, and usually performing live with apparatus in big or small enterprises, often with costuming, music or sound score, lightning, and technological effects including filmed footage.”

As a general description, it covers most of the circus. However, I find further definitions useful for giving an overview of the genre.

The traditional circus is usually performed by a traveling company and presented in a circular arena, most often a tent. It is a form of entertainment based on human skills and trained animals. Typical acts include acrobats, clowns, tightrope walkers, jugglers, and animals. This is circus as most people usually imagine it.

In the 1970s, the Nouveau Cirque or New Circus emerged with a new approach to the organization, aesthetics, and dramaturgy. The new circus was introduced as a circus without animals, and it is often performed on a theater stage, with narration or a theme to hold the acts together.

When the new circus had become established as a genre, the use of Cirque Contemporain or Contemporary Circus started to appear. Contemporary circus was suggested as a better label for a genre that was continually evolving. Some claimed that the new circuses had tried to fly before they could walk and that the shows had lost their connection to the roots of circus. With a new label came a new understanding of the evolution coming from within circus, from the acts, and not only as an additional narrative layer.

Today, both the terms new circus and contemporary circus are used, at times interchangeably and sometimes to specify styles. To make it even more confusing, some traditional circuses choose to call themselves contemporary circus to show that they are also evolving and up to date. Nowadays, there is also a tendency towards the simple label circus, without making a distinction from the traditional circus or assigning it to a specific movement.

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Circus in My Study

In this study, I will refer to the acts simply as circus. One reason is that I agree with the latest move towards including different expressions of the genre under the same label; another is that it does not really matter in relation to the purpose of my study, as the experience, not the genre, shapes the analysis. The final reason is ease of reading. The acts that I do discuss are however tied to the contemporary/new circus, rather than the traditional.

The Roots of Circus

Depending on what part of circus culture you are considering, the roots can be traced to different sources. The Roman circular arena in which chariot races with horses were held is very often suggested as the earliest roots, and the name of the arena lives on in the tradition, as Circus.\textsuperscript{162} If one were to instead focus on the performances, one could argue that acrobats, jugglers, and street performers of various kinds are the original roots, and they can be found in written sources from medieval Europe. Visual sources give even earlier accounts, in tombs over 4000 years old, and on old rock carvings.\textsuperscript{163}

If I turn to the history of the circus as it usually is presented, it all begins in England. The French circus scholar Pascal Jacob suggests six important eras of the circus, according to the dominant regions and traditions.\textsuperscript{164} The first era is the invention and the early years in England, when the riding master Philip Astley (1742-1814) started a riding school in the southernmost part of London in 1768. His cavalry background had given him exceptional riding skills that, combined with gymnastic stunts performed on horseback, proved a great attraction. Around that time, there were several others performing trick riding, but what forever linked Astley’s name with the “invention” of circus was that he gave the show a form, placing the performers and audience in a specific place and the acts in an order. He also knew how to market the show, which always has been an essential factor in circus success.\textsuperscript{165} In the early years, the horses were in focus, not only as in trick riding, but also in equestrian drama, which reached its peak in the 1830s and 1840s with large military equestrian dramas.\textsuperscript{166}

\textsuperscript{162} Tait & Lavers, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{163} Tomi Purovaara, \textit{Contemporary Circus: Introduction to the Art Form}, Stockholm: STUTS, 2012, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., pp. 16-17.
In the second era, between 1830 and 1880, France took the reins. The circus was established in France when Astley visited between 1772 and 1778. He created the French branch Amphithéâtre Astley, and in 1787 he built the Cirque du Palais Royale in Paris. In France, the equestrian shows took on a more artistic impression, and the clown character was developed and refined. This is also the era in which the circus families became important as the acts were passed on from one generation to the next, which continued well into the 20th century, and in some cases still does.

The years between 1880 and 1930 were the era when German circuses became famous for exotic animals, and when the American circus with its focus on the spectacular reinvented the genre. With the strong equestrian tradition in circus, the interest in showing wild animals quickly emerged. At first, the wild animals were just paraded around and shown off, but soon the interest in doing acts and handling the wild animals became a part of the shows. In the later parts of the 19th century, these acts became closely associated with German circuses. Since this era, exotic animals have been closely associated with the traditional circus.

The spectacular American circus was established quite early, as one of Astley’s apprentices, John Bill Ricketts, arrived in America in 1792 and started a riding school that also engaged other performers and put on circus shows. The American circus introduced a number of features that later came to be closely associated with circus in general. In the 1820s, circus shows started to be performed in large canvas tents, which meant that the shows now could reach further into rural areas by traveling on wagons. The circuses joined forces with traveling animal menageries, which displayed zebras, camels, and monkeys for the curious, and the number of circuses steadily increased.

One of the most important individuals of this era was the entertainment entrepreneur Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810-1891), who is often considered America’s greatest showman. Barnum’s first experience in the circus business came from selling tickets at the age of 25. With his earnings, he started his own traveling variety show, which he ran for a couple of years. In 1841 he managed to purchase the American Museum in Manhattan – a dime museum where curiosities were exhibited cheaply for a wide audience. In Barnum’s

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167 Leroux, pp. 7-8.
168 Stoddart, p. 15.
169 Leroux, pp. 7-8.
hands, the museum turned into a place of various amusements such as lecture Rooms, waxworks, a fish tank, and human exhibitions. In the second half of the 19th century, Barnum was involved in traveling shows of various kinds, mostly with a focus on human exhibitions. By 1880, Barnum had established a successful circus, as had a man called Jimmy Bailey (1847-1906). The two joined forces, and a new era in the history of circus begun. Their show, the Greatest Show on Earth, became a huge success, and their biggest tents could fit an audience of a staggering 14,000 people.

The years between 1930 and 1980 were the era when the Soviet Union presented highly skilled performers and focused on artistic expression. The circus had come to Russia early, when Astley’s former employee Charles Hughes arrived in St Petersburg with a small troupe of performers in 1790. The circus became widely popular and developed as in the rest of Europe until the revolution came. Vladimir Lenin, himself a fan of circus, recognized the people’s love for the circus, which led him to appropriate private circuses in 1920; in just a few years, all circuses were under state-control. Already in 1929, the state established the Moscow Circus School, which was the first professional circus school in the world to be run by a state. The training provided was of high quality, and the demands on students were equally high. The result was technically brilliant performers with a great sense of artistry. This highly skilled training of the individual performer in a school instead of being trained by the family became a central part of the next development in the circus.

The Revival as Nouveau Cirque and later Contemporary Circus
The last two eras suggested by Jacob are the contemporary circus as it is known today; first, the development of new circus in France from the 1970s up to 2000, and second, the emerging circus region in Quebec with Cirque du Soleil as the frontrunner and also the biggest circus company in the world.

In the wake of modernism in the 1960s, the theater field started to explore new aesthetics and locations. Ariane Mnouchkine’s Théâtre du Soleil took

172 Ibid., pp. 16-30.
173 Ibid., pp. 89-94.
174 Ibid., pp. 99-100.
175 Ibid., p. 87.
176 Leroux, pp. 7-8.
179 Purovaara, p. 66.
180 Leroux, pp. 7-8.
performances to new locations like factories and circus arenas, using techniques from *Commedia dell’arte* and focusing on physical skills and expressions. In America, a similar development was underway with companies like *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, the *Pickle Family Circus*, *The Bread and Puppet Theatre* and the *Big Apple Circus* looking for new ways to challenge the conventions.

The new circus that emerged challenged a number of the conventions of circus that had been established during the earlier eras. One of the most significant changes that took place in the 1970s was the founding of circus schools, which opened up the circus for people born outside of circus families. The traditional system, in which skills and tools were passed down from generation to generation, did not only stop people from being a part but also cemented the acts and aesthetic with the tradition that was keeping the families together. At the schools, collaborations between students led to new companies with new ideas of what circus could be. As the students finished school, new circuses began popping up, and around the same time, the field of circus had changed. It is impossible to tell which circus was the first, as the reinvention took place in many places at the same time; it was as if the time had simply come for a new circus. In 1979, circus became recognized as an art form in France when questions regarding circus were moved from the Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of Culture, and in 1985 the state-funded professional circus school *Centre National des Arts du Cirque* was founded. The nouveau cirque was becoming established as a genre.

With the new circus came a number of changes to what used to be considered the core of the circus. The first thing to go were the animals. Some claim it was due to ethical reasons, others that it was a matter of practicality. I would argue that it was not so much the removal of animals away, but rather that they were not brought in. The new circus was created mainly by people outside of the traditional circus, who engaged in a reinvention of an art form, usually from their interest in a specific discipline, and I cannot see why they would bring animals into the circus.

Another change was the move from the tent onto theater stages and into streets, parks, cabarets, sports venues, the Nobel banquet, or into the water. It could be anywhere, but most often the audience is placed in ways similar to the theater, facing the front of the action.

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181 Purovaara, pp. 89-97.
182 Ibid., pp. 97-100.
183 Ibid., pp. 105-111.
185 Purovaara, pp. 111-113.
The most striking difference was in the approach to the acts and the aesthetics. The traditional circus presented the performers one after another, and they each performed their specific act, left the ring, and another performer stepped in and a new act began. In the new circus, this stacking of acts was challenged by giving the show a narrative in which the performers developed characters and told a story, or by giving the show a thematic or aesthetic frame. The spectator went from watching a series of technical skills to experiencing a complete work of art.

As with any art form starting in the challenge of something traditional, there will soon be a challenge of the new form as well, and therefore there are contemporary circuses with animals, and those who perform in tents, and using a traditional ring. The evolution is of diversion and multitude, not about sticking to a new determined form.

In the 1980s, the new circus established itself as the companies found their specific expression. By the 1990s, discussions about the new circus and its relation to the general art field, as well as about the specific circus disciplines, led to the use of yet another term – contemporary circus – which was more in line with the development and approach to the traditional circus. What is new will soon get old, and by using the word contemporary, the constant changes of circus are inherent in the label. However, both the terms new circus and contemporary circus are still used to label the circuses and genre, sometimes with the same meaning and sometimes with distinctions.

Today, the genre has evolved in different countries and regions, where some companies are more in line with theater, whilst others put on spectacular shows with technique and extravaganza; some are closer to avant-garde art, others take a nostalgic approach toward the traditional circus, while still others jump off a teeterboard from a hot air balloon 3000 meters up in the air and make a parachute landing.

Quebec and Cirque

As the new circus spread across the globe, new regions and countries have come into focus. The most recognized is Quebec, Canada, where the leading company Cirque du Soleil has become a global entertainment industry. Founded in 1984 by Guy Laliberté and Daniel Gaultier, the company soon became a great success by combining the French style of new circus and an

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187 Purovaara, p. 114.
188 Ibid., pp. 125-126.
American approach to entertainment and business, hiring highly skilled performers from all around the world.\textsuperscript{189} By running several shows simultaneously, and with clever use of marketing, they soon became well known in North America and started to tour around the world. In the domination of \textit{Cirque du Soleil}, it is easy to forget that the Quebec region also is the origin of other successful circus companies such as \textit{Les 7 doigts de la main}, \textit{Cirque Éloize}, and \textit{Cirque Alfonse}.\textsuperscript{190}

The reason for the region’s strong influence is not only the remarkable success of the companies, but it is also closely tied to the circus school \textit{École nationale de cirque}, which provides professional training and the steady influx of highly skilled performers.\textsuperscript{191}

\textbf{Circus in Sweden}

\textit{The Traditional Circus in Sweden}

The first of the English circuses focusing on equestrian acts visited Sweden in 1787 under the direction of riding master Peter Price, who went on an eight-month tour across the country. In the years that followed, he and his brother James Price returned to Sweden for occasional shows. At that time Gustav III (1771-1792) was king of Sweden, well-known for his interest in culture and theater. He was the founder of the Swedish \textit{Royal Theatre}, which was the home of opera and ballet, and later the Swedish \textit{Royal Dramatic Theatre}, which focused on spoken drama. Under his mercy, the traveling circuses were touring. A law from 1789 regulated that a variety of performers, which specifically mentioned air jumpers (acrobats), ropewalkers, and animal dancers were allowed to perform as long as they paid taxes.\textsuperscript{192} One could argue that the king, most known for establishing the great theaters in Sweden, in this sense also brought the circus to Sweden. Some years after the king’s death came new regulations that were less supportive of the traveling entertainers, and the performers were now to be banned. However, an exception was made for the Frenchman Jean Baptiste Gautier and his family, who traveled with an animal menage and came to Sweden in 1804. The reason for the exception was that an elephant had never been shown in Sweden before. The show toured, and soon an acrobat joined. In 1807 the tour left Sweden and continued south via Copenhagen to Germany.\textsuperscript{193} If Price was the one who brought the

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\textsuperscript{189} Leroux, pp. 3-8
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., p. 9.
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., p. 3.
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., pp. 25-32.
\end{flushright}
circus to Sweden, Gautier was the one who made it famous. During the early years of the 19th century, several equestrian shows were presented around Sweden.

From the latter part of the 19th century, several circuses toured in Sweden, most of which were run as family businesses. One of the most famous in the early 19th century was the Schumann family, whose history began in 1872 and ended in 1982, when it finally was closed.194 The Bronett family started their Circus Scott in 1937, and it was one of the biggest circuses in the latter parts of the 20th century.195 In 2003 it closed for financial reasons, but it was revived in 2011 and toured for several years until eventually only doing shows in Stockholm, and then switching focus from circus to Christmas shows, entertainment for kids, and magic shows. The Rhodin family have a circus history going back to 1899, when Carl Rhodin took the alias Brazil Jack and got into the circus business, working on wild west shows, and later with Cirkus London. His son Trolle Rhodin had huge success with Zoo Cirkus, with which he toured until he got a leading position at Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, where he stayed until 1982. He then moved back to Sweden, and started Cirkus Brazil Jack with his children.196 This is the last of the old circus families in Sweden still touring today. Several other smaller circuses have come and gone over the years, but most of them have closed in recent years.

The Swedish Contemporary Circus and Circus Cirkör

As the history shows, it is difficult to point to a specific year when it began, and equally difficult to pinpoint specific locations, as the history of circus is an international one, with people constantly moving and sharing ideas.197 Early Swedish examples of performances that sprung out of the idea of nouveau cirque was Jordcirkus, a Swedish theater company with its roots in the late 1970s that created performances with political visions. However, although called a circus, they instead went on to explorations of the theater.198 Another early example was Varieté Vauduvill, which was a traveling variety with acts rooted in the sideshow rather than the circus, showing sword swallowers, snake charmers, and illusionists. They started in 1979 and toured around Sweden with their show in the 1980s and early 1990s.199 Since the concept of ‘new

194 Ibid., pp. 179-199.
195 Ibid., pp. 245-268.
196 Ibid., pp. 269-296.
198 Ibid., p. 221.
circus’ did not exist in Sweden at the time, they were never a part of that discussion, but considering the performance field at large, they could be seen as belonging to the same history.

In the 1990s, the Stockholm Water Festival became an important player in the establishment of new circus in Sweden as they invited several international circus companies, and the concept of ‘nycirkus’ was soon established in Sweden, as a growing audience wanted more. The new framing of the circus also brought in audiences that had previously frowned upon the low-brow entertainment, and circus was suddenly back on the map of entertainment, and moving towards art. Among the visiting companies were the French circus Archaos and the Australian Circus Oz. The Stockholm Water Festival was also the location for the premiere of Cirkus Cirkör’s first show, which would drastically change the field of new circus in Sweden.

Today, the Swedish contemporary circus is mostly associated with the company Cirkus Cirkör, which was founded by Tilde Björfors in 1995. There was no infrastructure for new circus in Sweden at that time, so the first years were not only about creating circus shows, but more about creating a whole organization of the art form. The name of the company is a mix of the French words for circus, cirque, and heart, coeur, which would be transcribed in Swedish as kör, hence Cirkör, usually written with the letter ö upside down. The fundamental idea of the circus was nothing less than to change the world, and as the circus grew, a set of core values emerged, meant to get everyone involved to strive in the same direction: Cocky Commitment, in order to dare to break barriers and find one’s own way. Qualitative Madness, to give the best to students and audiences. Collective Individualism, as in working together from the diverse standpoints of everyone involved. It is from this view on circus, humanity, and life that the company operates. Therefore, the company is also engaged in circus training for kids, disabled people, the elderly, amateurs, and professionals. They also produce events and activities for companies and parties under the label Cirkör Event. Cirkör is thus not just a circus company, but more of a general hub of Swedish contemporary circus, with education, research, social outreach, and art.

Already in 1997, Cirkör started a one-year post-secondary circus training program called Cirkuspiloterna, as they saw the need to continue to grow and maintain high quality. In 2000, the training program became an internationally
acclaimed three-year post-secondary education. *Cirkuspiloterna* was closed in 2005 when a three-year higher education in “new circus” was established at *The University College of Dance*, which became *The University of Dance and Circus* in 2010. In 2009, the “new” of the new circus was removed, and the education now leads to a Bachelor of Circus Arts.

**Research on Circus**

The field of research on circus is vast and has attracted scholars from a number of academic fields ranging from theater and performance studies, cultural history and ethnography, to pedagogy, business, and marketing. Within the field of theater and performance studies, most of the studies focus on different aspects of the history of circus.

As for my discussion on the roots of circus in older European history, I rely mainly on Helen Stoddart’s *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation* (2000), which gives a condensed, yet informative overview of the origins of the circus.\(^ {205}\) The first part of the book also focuses on a number of characteristics of the circus, such as the structures, the economics, the legitimacy and status, and the aesthetics, before discussing the representation of circus in other genres such as literature and film in the second part of the book. Although the scope of the book is focused on the traditional circus and the earlier periods of popular culture, the cultural studies approach and the informed discussion have been useful in relation to my contemporary examples.

In my short section on the American circus, John Springhall’s *The Genesis of Mass Culture: Show Business Live in America, 1840 to 1940* (2008) on the evolution of American popular entertainment has been of value.\(^ {206}\) I will return to this book in my chapter on freak show.

The section on circus in the Soviet Union is based on Miriam Neirick’s *When Pigs Could Fly and Bears Could Dance* (2012), which gives a fascinating account of how the circus with its multitude of potential meanings became immensely popular in the Soviet Union, and how the circus and its bodies worked in an ideological battle with the West, and specifically the USA.\(^ {207}\) The book highlights the very real ideological potential in the art of circus.

So far, there has been surprisingly little general historical research on the new circus. For this section I have mainly used Tomi Purovaa’s *Contemporary Circus: Introduction to the Art Form* (2012), and although it was not

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written by a scholar, it gives an overview of the emergence of the new circus. The book also collects texts from a number of other writers to give an account of the contemporary circus in the Nordic countries.208 From this book, I use the chapter ‘Fragments of the History of Contemporary Circus in Sweden 1990-2010,’ written by Camilla Damkjær & Kiki Muukkonen, for my section on the Swedish contemporary circus.

Comprehensive scholarly research on the history of the traditional circus in Sweden is non-existent to date. For that section, I have used Per Arne Wåhlberg’s *Cirkus i Sverige: bidrag till vårt lands kulturhistoria* (1992), which, although not a scholarly work, provides a unique and informed insight into traditional circuses in Sweden.209

_Inuti ett cirkushjärta = Inside a Circus Heart* (2009) is another non-scholarly source. It was however written by the founder of the company *Cirkus Cirkör* Tilde Björfors and its president Kajsa Lind, and it gives an inside view of the work with Cirkus Cirkör and their agenda.210

The range of studies with a critical approach to specific aspects of the circus is continually growing, and an array of approaches, theoretical explorations or topics have challenged common ideas of the circus and show the genre’s complexity both as entertainment and as art.

*The Routledge Circus Studies Reader* (2016) offers a broad range of perspectives, with chapters discussing history, gender, race, aesthetics, animals, spectators, and politics and contributions from more than 30 scholars.211 The book gives a good overview of the contemporary field of circus studies and shows the variety in scopes and focuses. I use several chapters from this anthology, as well as the introduction, in relation to the specific topics discussed.

Another anthology is *Cirque Global: Quebec's Expanding Circus Boundaries* (2016), which focuses on Quebec as a thriving place for circus culture, giving a historical context, as well as focusing on aesthetics, ethical concerns, and the business side of the circus.212 This book also shows the variety in contemporary circus research, albeit with another focus, as it deals with one specific region, and further highlights the importance of the region both when it comes to circus shows and research.

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Research on circus specifically focused on the spectator and the experience of circus is so far rare. It has primarily been done by Peta Tait, who has engaged in discussions on spectatorship in the circus in shorter chapters. *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (2005) is one of the seminal works in discussions of bodies and gender in circus, but it also includes a chapter that initiates a discussion on the phenomenal experience of the spectator.\(^{213}\) In this chapter, she uses aspects of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s bodily phenomenology to discuss how circus bodies, and especially aerialists, create emotions in the spectator. In her later book *Wild and Dangerous Performances: Animals, Emotions, Circus* (2012), Tait discusses how animals in the circus were trained and how they relate to the growing interest in animals in science.\(^{214}\) Furthermore, the book concludes with a chapter on the effect that the acts, and in this case, the animals, have on the spectator. Tait also touches upon the spectator’s experience of circus in the chapter ‘Risk, Danger and Other Paradoxes in Circus Oz Parody’, in the *Routledge Circus Studies Reader* (2016), of which she is also an editor.\(^{215}\)

Another scholar who touches briefly on the spectator as subject is Erin Hurley, who writes about the value for the audience experiencing a Cirque du Soleil show in the chapter ‘Performance Service: The Promises of Cirque du Soleil’ in the anthology *Cirque Global* (2016).\(^{216}\) However, even though Hurley claims to be interested in the feelings and appeal of the performance, the text goes on to talk about what the circus is selling, and little attention is given to the actual spectator.

### Questions for the Chapter

This chapter aims to explore how the body on stage in circus is being experienced by me as a spectator. As it is a genre of the sensational and spectacular, I want to gain an understanding of what causes this sense and how it relates to the attraction of the genre.

- **What experiential meaning appears in my subjective experience of the body on stage in circus?**
- **How do these experiential meanings appear to my consciousness, from a cognitive, embodied and relational approach?**

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• How are the subjective experiences, and the meaning that emerges from the bodies on stage in circus, informed by the world outside the mind, as in the specific situation, and in a broader cultural context?

Material

I have chosen to use three Cirkus Cirkör shows as my empirical material. The shows are connected as a trilogy on the global migration situation. 2015 was the year marking the 20th anniversary of Cirkus Cirkör as a company. In that same year, the influx of migrants from North Africa and the Middle East had become headline news all over Europe. In collaboration with the Malmö City Theatre and using the old circus stage Hipp (the Hippodrome), they created a show that was part celebration of the company, and of circus as a genre, and partly focused on the current migrant situation in Europe and around the Mediterranean Sea. This became the show Borders, which premiered in May 2015. During the two-month running period, there were 17 shows, and 6 797 people came to see it.217

In March of 2016, the second show in the trilogy Limits premiered at Västmanlands Theatre. While Borders had been produced for a specific venue, Limits was produced for touring. Some of the performers and acts from Borders were brought back. The celebration was cut short as the new reality of Swedish migration policies called for a show with a clearer focus and a more direct voice. The show was still running in the summer of 2018, and it has been on tour in Europe, Japan, and the USA. During its first year, 97 shows were performed for an audience of in total 56 440 people.218 In 2017, another 118 shows were performed in front of a total of 70 426 people.

In 2017, Cirkus Cirkör collaborated with Malmö City Theatre once again, for the third and final part of the trilogy. The show Movements premiered in May 2017, playing 21 shows for an audience of 6 621 people.219

I experienced all of these shows live as an ordinary audience member: Borders on June 5th, 2015; Limits on two occasions, on January 27th and February 1st, 2017, both at Dansens Hus in Stockholm; and Movement on June 2nd, 2017. I have also watched video recordings of the shows: Borders in a version produced for television with close-ups, some special effects, and editing, and

Limits and Movement as production documentations with a static camera. The video recordings have been used to confirm and correct details of descriptions, while the phenomenal experience itself is from memory and notes from the live viewings.

Circus from a Cognitive Approach

In this chapter my first exploration, on the intellectual level, will focus on the experience in relation to entertainment, which also is at the core of the experience throughout the rest of the book. I will then move on to discuss how the sense of utopia and certain political aspects shape the experience.

Entertained – Experiences of Fun

The first aspect of the genres I am studying is the experience of entertainment. I find this fitting, as one might consider the rest of the examples intertwined with aspects of entertainment presented in this chapter, and the genres I am studying are usually labeled as entertainment.

The word entertainment arguably has its roots both in the Latin word *inter tenere*, which means “to hold mutually or between,” and in the French word *entretenir*, which translates to maintain or keep up. As such, entertainment could be understood as the connection made, and maintained, between performer and spectator in the experience. The core of entertainment is the interactive engagement; both parts are crucial for something to become entertainment. Entertainment is about connecting the audience and the performer and keeping that connection.

In the book *Fun! What Entertainment Tells Us About Living a Good Life*, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016, Alan McKee makes a convincing case for the importance of studying entertainment. Starting in aspects that have been and are essential for successful entertainment, namely vulgarity, story, seriality, happy endings, interactivity, fast and loud, spectacular, emotion, adaptation is not a bad thing; he comes to the conclusion that at the core of entertainment is fun. As a theoretical concept, fun has enjoyed little attention in scholarly

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223 Emaljanow, pp. 1-5.
discussions, and McKee comes up with the working definition, “Fun is pleasure without purpose.” Several of the characteristics that McKee suggests tie in to the experience of circus in quite obvious ways – Interactivity, Fast and Loud, Emotion, and of course, Spectacular. The other characteristics also influence the circus, but in less obvious ways.

Based on McKee’s notions, I approach this from a slightly different angle and focus on what I consider two central aspects of entertainment: easy access, and novelty. Looking to McKee’s characteristics, I would argue that vulgarity (which in its original meaning refers to “common people”), story, seriality, happy endings, adaptations are not bad things; all have the purpose of creating a familiar storyline and characters that are easy to follow. Fast and loud and spectacular have the purpose of novelty and create sustained attention. Interactivity is the open orientation towards the audience and an intention to engage and entertain, and emotions emerge if the pieces fit together.

With the aim of a broad audience and easy accessibility, entertainment has often been set in opposition to art with the claim that art is about the aesthetic experience – refined, difficult and edifying – and entertainment is about commerciality, vulgar, easy and hedonistic. I question this notion, as it is both derogatory to entertainment and based on a misconception of the particularity of entertainment as an escapist mindlessness rather than captivation and an experience based on the connection between audience and performer. Dyer points to the question of whether entertainment is a category at all, since it is in many ways reminiscent of an attitude towards things, in that it is a description of the experience rather than of the object as such. It is also easy to forget that art as a concept, at least in the understanding of fine arts, is quite young, having emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Different forms of circus were around at that time, but had not yet been labeled circus.

The pinning of art against entertainment is based on a false dichotomy. Art is often utterly entertaining, while performances labeled as entertainment could be and often are considered art. However, for the sake of funding, organization, and research, the difference can sometimes be highlighted to fit the scope of art. Artistic quality is often used to decide where subsidies go and which ‘art’ is approved by state or cultural institutions. In this sense, the labeling is also used as an ideological tool to keep cultural expressions in line.

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226 Ibid., p. 33.
227 Ibid., pp. 17-18.
229 Ibid., p. 12.
231 Dyer, 1992, p. 3.
with contemporary values and policies.\textsuperscript{232} I would argue that the problem with this rather is related to the political side of the arts than the performances themselves. For the circus, the process of trying to gain recognition as an art form rather than entertainment has been a long one. Because of animal use, issues with circuses have in some countries been related to the department of agriculture rather than the department of culture.\textsuperscript{233} It was not until after the emergence of the new circus that circus became considered an art form in some places, such as Quebec, Australia, USA, and Scandinavia.\textsuperscript{234}

The corporeal aspect of circus, where physical skill is at the center of the action, is creating another differentiation as art, and the artist is compared the artisan, skilled worker or craftsman. The artistic labor is in a sense more abstract; the end result is not a direct outcome of the labor in itself because of the representational aspect, in which the meaning, and value are in the appreciation of it, rather than in the direct labor in itself. In the traditional circus at least, the circus “artist” has a more direct connection between labor and result, as the act is demonstrative rather than representational.\textsuperscript{235} Using this argument, one could suggest that the contemporary circus is more closely related to art, while the traditional circus is more related to craft.

The contemporary circus is an example of a genre that does not lend itself to labeling, as the combination of entertaining circus feats, avant-garde aesthetics, and theatrical narration creates an art form that engages in a broad cultural understanding, but always with the spectator experience in focus.

I agree with Richard Dyer’s argument that it is a problem that entertainment often is studied with a focus on excuses by relating the discussion to the entertainment’s positive effects when it comes to economic success, as social outreach, or from its political potential.\textsuperscript{236} Dyer argues that “most attempts to take entertainment seriously do so in ways that avoid treating it as entertainment.”\textsuperscript{237} McKee argues that the study of entertainment works in two different ways; it provides fun, and it shows the importance of entertainment in people’s lives,\textsuperscript{238} and he ultimately claims that “entertainment is the most important

\textsuperscript{232} Davis, pp. 13-14.
\textsuperscript{235} Stoddart, pp. 81-82.
\textsuperscript{236} Dyer, 1992, pp. 1-3.
\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., p. 2.
\textsuperscript{238} McKee, p. 41.
category of culture in twenty-first-century Western cultures.” In order to make sense of the world, we need to explore and engage in discussions on what gives meaning to people.

I aim to engage both in the experience of entertainment as such, and to explore the experience from a range of perspectives, not only in this chapter but in the remainder of this book.

_The Sound of Juggling_

In circus, there are two types of acts that I would say are presented at the core of entertainment. Clown acts and juggling both have a strong visual tradition and familiar characters, and they are easy for a spectator to access. The clown usually works with interactivity and the connection with the audience, and the unexpectedness undoubtedly offers some novelty. Sometimes clowns behave unpredictably though, and the crossing of boundaries rather creates an experience of discomfort. The juggler, on the other hand, is usually quite safe, as her attention needs to be focused on the manipulation of objects. The attraction of the juggler is rather in the spectacular skill and creativity of the act. For this analysis, I have focused on a juggling act from the show _Limits_ that also includes some aspects of the clown.

The multitalented artist Peter Åberg is left standing on the stage after the previous act in which he was playing percussion with a flip-flop on a large plastic drainage pipe. He is dressed in a pair of loose orange pants and a turquoise shirt. Suddenly, a small, white plastic tube rolls on to the stage. He picks it up and looks at it, and then looks at someone in the audience and points accusingly, as if the spectator had thrown the tube there. From behind Peter, another tube comes bouncing onto stage, making a fascinating sound. He looks at it, picks it up, and hits his leg with it, and again a thumping sound is heard. As he holds the tubes, smiles and looks out to the audience, a third tube is thrown on stage. He picks it up and turns around on the stage, looking, trying to figure out from where the tubes came. He takes a deep breath and starts to juggle. The different length of the tubes makes each catch create a different sound or a note, and the classic three-object cascade juggling makes the distinct sound of tom-tam-tum, tom-tam-tum, tom-tam-tum. As he catches the last tube and stops, the audience applauds, and he turns to the audience and says, “Thank you very much!” People around me are laughing. He has funny bones, this intangible quality that makes laughter easy. He starts juggling again, this time in a different pattern where he shifts hands at times, which makes the beat different. Again, people are laughing and applauding. The act

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239 Ibid., p. 2.
240 _Limits_, February 1, 2017.
is funny, quirky and impressive. Peter is controlling the audience with small nods, smiles, and looks; he creates laughter. I think it is about timing, the musicality central to this act is visible in his understanding of phrasing, pauses, and tempo, and on paying attention to the audience’s feedback, to connect with the audience’s state of mind. He continues juggling in a new pattern, hitting his leg at times, changing the pace, and then into a new pattern. Suddenly the visual, usually so essential to juggling, is forgotten and my focus is on the sound, on the juggling beat. He starts again, now with even more focus. He combines the juggling with foot stomps and makes a clicking sound with his tongue. It starts to resemble a one-man-band.

As I mentioned earlier, entertainment is about maintaining attention, keeping the act interesting, and communicating between the body on stage and the body in the audience. The use of rhythm and music to create a visual rhythm has a long tradition in circus, to build up intensity, highlight danger or mark the climax of an act. In this act, the connection is even more apparent as the visual and the rhythm are coming from the same source. In dance, movements that directly mirror the sound score are sometimes condescendingly called Mickey-Mousing, referring to early animated short films with perfect synchronization of sound and image. This practice is often connected to entertainment, as it is aimed at pleasing the audience rather than producing a representation or involving the audience’s imagination. In this musical juggling, the aim is the audience’s appreciation, showing off a skill, entertaining for the sake of entertainment. As such, it is arguably more concerned with the experience in the present, as the focus and attraction, than with an intellectual interpretation of the potential representation.

In a text about musicals, Dyer discusses how the qualities of non-representational signs are important for the experience of entertainment and recognizes that non-representational signs also get their meaning only in relation to the situation as they are produced, and that they are culturally and historically informed, rather than the experience being based on some universal human feeling. The decoding of non-representational signs is an ability that has to be cultivated. Erika Fischer-Lichte frames a similar understanding in a slightly different way, as she argues that meaning emerges in the perception of the experience, and not only in relation to signs that are open to interpretation. Fischer-Lichte talks about associations rather than interpretations, and the as-

associations that are involved in the production of meaning are brought to consciousness “both as memories and new meanings.”

When watching the act of juggling, I had several associations reaching in a number of directions, connecting the action onstage to juggling acts I had seen previously, combined with memories from earlier acts in the same show. An image appears of Peter’s performance in my introductory example from the show *Undermän*. The associations appear, connecting at times, then disappear, but not once during the act is there a point where I experience that I am interpreting and assigning meaning to the action as such. The focus is entirely on the experience. Previous experiences and my cultural background however influence my associations and the meaning I get from the act.

This argument also relates to Ahmed’s notion of impressions as a pre-experiential conception that is continually influencing the emotional experience itself. These impressions are shaped not only by memories, but also in the context of societal and cultural norms. Returning to my earlier claim of the need for familiarity and easy access as key aspects of entertainment, it makes sense that we all have different preferences when it comes to entertainment, as different tastes have been acquired, and norms of what types of entertainment are accepted police our emotions. These impressions, which have been formed in previous experiences, act to create a context for the emotional experience and give it both depth and pleasure.

In the act that I am experiencing, Peter is maintaining a keen balance between the comfort of familiarity, which is framed by the juggling and the simple beat, and the novelty, as he uses his skill to keep the attention through timing and changes in the juggling patterns. As the juggling and beat grow more and more complex, the audience begins chiming in, clapping to the beat. I suddenly realize that I had been nodding my head to the beat, engaging in the rhythm and connecting to the body on stage. I started to clap as well, like the rest of the audience, and it happened almost unnoticeably – I suddenly found myself clapping. My attention was still directed to the body and action on stage, but suddenly I became aware that the action was felt through my body in a more noticeable way.

In the final juggle, the musicians are playing along, accompanying the juggling beat, whistling, clicking, and hitting drums all at once. As the music comes to an end, the audience is cheering and applauding in amazement. It seems like Peter managed to maintain the connection created in the act, and to keep the attention of the audience, and ultimately to entertain the audience.

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243 Fischer-Lichte, p. 143.
244 Ahmed, 2014, pp. 6-8.
McKee defines fun as a “pleasure without purpose” and argues that fun is at the core of entertainment, but I want to challenge this notion and suggest that the purpose of fun, and entertainment, is precisely the pleasure of it. The pleasure was given in and through the experience. Essential to the circus is the way the circus approaches and orientates towards the audience and the spectators. By using skill, ability and the spectacular, they create a sense of novelty and grab attention. In the reuse of recognizable images and character, they strive for familiarity and easy access; and in the openess to connect and include they aim to please. In a text on the success of Cirque du Soleil and the “promise” they make to their audience, Erin Hurley uses the term “performance service” to describe how they sell “pleasure” and heightened affective experiences.\textsuperscript{245} It might be easy to jump to the quite common, – and in my opinion worn out – reflection on how the entertainment business is all about money and that this instantly reflects poorly on it. I would argue that the crowd-pleasing qualities of entertainment are less about money and more about the experience of the spectators, the connection, and on providing fun.

McKee urges a continued exploration of fun and entertainment to get a better understanding of the meaning it has for us and how it enriches culture.\textsuperscript{246} Entertainment as we know it today has sprung from early theatrical entertainment, and I see great potential in exploring the entertainment in theater and performance, as well as using aspects of performance to explore entertainment in a broader sense.

Politics at Play – Experiencing Utopia

In the presentation of the material being analyzed in this chapter, I mentioned that the three shows deal with the global migration situation. As such, they already approach a political issue with their themes. However, in this section, I will discuss how aspects of the political are experienced as a spectator, and how they can have political potential, and on the contrary potentially be a political problem.

Although the circus is not a genre that is recognized as political, and one that has traditionally put on politically-themed performances, that does not mean that the circus has not had political implications.\textsuperscript{247} As many entertainment genres, the circus has needed to make money to survive. Thus, political statements or an open stance on sensitive issues would risk scaring away spectators, and the shows therefore avoid the explicitly political. However, one can

\textsuperscript{245} Hurley, 2016, pp. 71-78.
\textsuperscript{246} McKee, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{247} Stoddart, p. 97.
argue that the staging of wild animals; the way in which other cultures were put on display; the performance of nationalism and superiority; and the business aspects of the shows are indeed political, in line with a capitalistic world view growing parallel to the circus. As the new circus emerged in the wake of 1968 and in correspondence with the social movements at the time, the situation changed, and today contemporary circuses often take an open stance on political issues such as representation, gender, sexuality, and migration.

Cirkus Cirkör is a company that more explicitly focuses on the potential of using the circus as a political and social platform. As I mentioned in the discussion on the Swedish contemporary circus, Cirkus Cirkör wants to challenge the way the world is understood and to use circus as a language to make change in the world.248 It is therefore unsurprising that the emerging humanitarian crises of refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea from war and conflict to safety in Europe, became a topic on which Cirkus Cirkör could make a statement.

Circus, as well as other performances, can have political potential in a range of different ways. It could deal with specific topics and show political issues as a part of the narrative, connecting political issues in the world to the actions and bodies on stage; it can be subversive in the way bodies are displayed or represented. I will get back to this potential subversion in later chapters. The acts and bodies on stage can also work as utopian in that they give a sense of an alternative future. In this section, I will focus mostly on the potential of politics in the narration in the shows, and from the potential of a sense of utopia.

Richard Dyer engages in the relation between entertainment and utopia inspired by the usual claim of entertainment being a sense of wish-fulfillment and escape. Dyer suggests that utopia is experienced from the embodied feeling of it, rather than what it is, as in Thomas Moore’s utopia.249 Dolan follows Dyer and takes a similar standpoint, as she does not want to “propose a ‘real’ utopia” or construct a real utopia, but instead to focus on “how utopia can be imagined or experienced affectively, through feelings, in small, incremental moments that performance can provide.”250 Dolan uses Dyer’s notion of utopia and turns it into a utopian performative in which the sense of utopia can appear in moments specifically connected to live performances. She argues that “[s]pectators come to theatre not only to witness, not only to passively consume, but also to participate by actively imagining other worlds. Perfor-

248 Björfs & Lind, p. 39.
mance remains an incomplete form, whose address is only fulfilled in the moment of reception.”²⁵¹ For performance scholar Jose Muñoz, utopia is not just an imagination of what could be, but has a clear political objective as it serves as a critique of the present situation “as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a then and a there that could be and indeed should be.”²⁵² In this approach, the utopia is not just an imaginable world, but a direct notion of what is missing now.

In the genres I am studying, the importance of the narrative aspects is weaker than in spoken drama and theater in general, as an important part is the spectacular experience as such rather than in a story being told. However, this does not mean that there is no potential for the feeling of utopia. The experience can be created both from the experience of the narrative, representational engagement, as well as from the non-representational actions common in circus. There is, however, yet another possibility: that utopia appears in the liminal space between the narrative and the real, and in the uncertainty where art meets everyday.

*Migrating People and the Audience – Being Moved by the Action*

The show *Borders*, which both celebrates Cirkus Cirkör’s 20th anniversary and simultaneously deals with the migration situation in Europe, has the form of an assemblage where scenes focusing on migration alternate with scenes of celebration. The celebratory acts are not only about Cirkus Cirkör, but rather about circus as an art form, with references to pioneers in new circus like Archaos and Circus Oz. With the display of fire, nudity, and machines like chainsaws, chaos is created as different acts take place at the same time. The celebration is funny, spectacular, and engaging, but during the show, there is an omnipresent sense of underlying worry, as if the atmosphere created by the stage, the performers and the setting that I described in the introduction to this chapter was dense and fateful. In one celebratory act, a group of performers are dancing, drinking, and playing, accompanied by cheerful Klezmer music, while Cirkus Cirkör's core values of *Qualitative Madness, Collective Individualism*, and *Cocky Commitment* are being shouted out as positive propaganda.²⁵³ Suddenly, people in uniform storm in and claim the space, with the sound of police sirens coming from a megaphone and shouts demanding that the festivities come to an end. One of the uniformed men tacks a sign saying

²⁵¹ Ibid., p. 97.
²⁵³ Björfors & Lind, pp. 36-55.
“Eviction” on the chest of a free-spirited artist, while another begins shouting, “This is no place for a damn Haikon Taikon party, this is a respectable place!” The phrase Haikon Taikon is a derogatory and offensive phrase used to describe a chaotic situation, referring to a famous Swedish Romani family by the name of Taikon. In my mind the experience leads my thoughts to the Weimar Republic, as a place of joyful decadence, but where there is a constant underlying worry about oppression, and of the terror that is to come.

The act continues with the authorities turning to a specific section of the audience. “We have gotten complaints that this section is disturbing the peace.” Some people in the audience laugh nervously while others look annoyed and confused. Different arguments on why the people cannot sit there are being yelled. The arguments mirror how refugees seeking asylum are being treated. “You are too crowded, and I think all of us here agree.” The serious faces and the constantly repeated claim that the section needs to move finally have an effect. Some people are leaving their seats and are being directed down onto the stage floor. Most people seem to understand that the moving is a part of the act; that the section is being cleared because of the next act, but many still seem puzzled and disturbed. Taking the step onto the stage floor is crossing a threshold between the comfort of the real life of the audience into the traditionally representational realm of the action on stage. This is a crossing where the rules of the play become uncertain, and the power relation between spectator and performer is highlighted as the spectator is forced from the unspoken role as an uninvolved observer.

As the section clears and people find their places on pillows on the stage, the questions continue. “I can’t find your name in the documents” “Are you a European Citizen?” When everyone is seated and the order is restored, a revolving platform is placed on the stage, and a spinning wheel of wood is put in the direction of where the audience was sitting. Two performers step onto the platform – Alexander Weibel Weibel with a violin, and Jesper Nikolajeff with a bunch of throwing knives. Alexander starts playing a sad tune, while Jesper throws knives at the wooden target as they spin around. The questions continue, and I feel a sensory overload as the different sounds and visions compete for attention. One of the men in uniform takes away Alexander’s violin, and he starts to throw knives as well. Papers are being tossed in front of

254 The Swedish sign tacked to the artist’s chest read ”Avhysning.”
255 ”Här ska inte vara någon jäkla Haikon Taikon fest, det här är ett respektabelt ställe”. My translation.
256 “Sen har vi har fått in klagomål på att den här sektionen stör den allmänna ordningen”, ”Ni sitter alldeles för trångt, det tror jag att alla andra här också tycker, eller hur?” My translation.
257 Fischer-Lichte, p. 48, 50.
258 ”Dokument, jag kan inte se att ni finns med här.”, ”Är ni EU medborgare?” My translation.
the target, and Jesper and Alexander throw knives to pin the papers to the target. The phrases, “Documents please!” “Where are you from?” “Hold up your documents”\textsuperscript{259} are repeated over and over while they glare at the people sitting on the floor.

When I saw the show, I was sitting in the section that had to move, and I have to say that the experience was quite upsetting. As soon as the performers directed their attention to our section and started to interact, I immediately felt uneasy. In the old hippodrome, the audience sits around the stage as in a traditional tent circus, and therefore the attention of the rest of the audience was turned towards us. My role as a spectator suddenly became unclear, and the situation created questions about how to act. Should I comply? Should I refuse? Should I show that I am not someone who accepts the ill-treatment of others? I experienced an internal conflict of the convention on theater as a staged event, with rules that separate me as a spectator from the action onstage. Complying and taking the step on to the stage was also a step into a place that is neither reality, nor the fiction of the play, but rather a liminal, in-between space, a space of uncertainty.\textsuperscript{260} This caused a sense of crisis, and as I took the last step down the stairs and onto the stage, I felt as everyone was looking at me, questioning me. The physical experience of being moved also creates a particular situation, as I was being manipulated, not just by the threatening sound from screaming authorities, but by a very real experience of being forced to move. At the same time, the actual moving enforced the fictive action, as well as including me in it, and broke the experience of the very same, as it forced me to deal with the very ‘real’ situation of being a spectator at a show, being asked, or forced, to move. The discomfort of being made to sit on the floor, hearing the constant, repeated questions for documents, passports, and seeing the knives being thrown, combined with the feeling of being questioned, if only for a few minutes, struck a nerve in me. The act did not only present the reality faced by many migrants, as they are continually being questioned and suspected, but it also gave me a hands-on experience of having my privileges revoked or challenged, if only for a few minutes and in a setting from which I could step out at any time I wanted.

The migration of the audience was in this way a presentation of the reality, showing the world we live in, in times that are all too similar to past situations that we thought we never would experience again. Fischer-Lichte describes a

\textsuperscript{259} “Documents please” and “Hold up your documents” are spoken in English. “Where are you from?” is my translation of: ”Var kommer du ifrån?”

\textsuperscript{260} Fischer-Lichte, p. 48, 50.
similar situation and how “[t]he aesthetics fuses with the notion of non-aesthetic, blurring the boundaries between the two.”

This blurring of the boundaries can then become a tool for reflecting on the art, and on reality.

As the act continues, the actor Simon Rodriguez comes out of the audience and calmly states; “The risk of dying at sea is 30%, the risk of dying if one stays is 60%.” He repeats the phrase as he is being strapped to the spinning wheel where the knives were thrown. In the background there is a constant ringing sound adding to the sense of tension. The target is set into motion and as he spins the phrase is repeated; “The risk of dying at sea is 30 %, the risk of dying if one stays is 60%.”

As the speed of the wheel picks up, and the knives begin hitting the wooden target with dull thumps, the sentence grows shorter, “30%, 60%” repeated after each throw, almost as a mantra. In my mind, the risk of the actor getting hit by the knife is blurred with the risk of migrants trying to reach safety.

This act affected me deeply, and I remember the intense silence in the audience as the reality of the refugee’s ordeals was presented in this new way. It felt like the phenomenal experience of the risk onstage was somehow opening

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261 Ibid., p. 172.
262 “Risken att dö på havet är 30% Risken att dö om man stannar är 60%”. My translation.
up a new way to understand the risk taken by people fleeing over the sea. As for the sense of utopia, when the act came to an end the room was completely quiet; there was a solemn air. I saw people crying silently. It was as if the world had slowed down, as the seriousness of the global situation had finally caught up and we were joined in the sense of reality. In this moment, I thought, the circus we are in is no longer a stage on whose floor I am still sitting; the performers are no longer acting, and the audience is no longer spectating. We are humans facing the dire reality of the world and realizing that we are all a part of it, “confronting the historical present,” and in all this there is a sense of unity; the utopian moment is felt as a crack that lets the light break through the darkness, and that the light that comes through brings hope of another world. As Dolan writes: “The utopian moment appears in this moment, when the work “clicks” with the audience because something true, something recognizable, something felt and mutually believed, even though only imagined, passes among those present.” In the short moment of peace we are all on one side, the side of hope, recognizing what is missing in the world, and although the feeling of utopia does not offer any political change in the moment, the sense of empathy experienced and the forming of community has the potential of political power. In this empathic experience of merging the migrants’ risk with that of the performers, a new way of understanding others emerges, an emotional experience that leaves an impression.

As I got off the stage, leaving for the intermission, I took one of the papers that had been tossed in front of the target. It was a printout from the Swedish Migration Agency – an application form to obtain refugee protection status – which again directed my mind to the very real situation of the world’s refugees.

**Puzzling Politics – Utopian Potential in a Cube**

In one of the acts in *Limits*, the artist Peter Åberg is going to solve a Rubik’s cube while blindfolded. So the audience can follow the trick, a video camera is placed on his chest, and the image is then projected onto an old school-map showing Europe’s borders during World War II. Peter begins the trick by explaining how he is going to do it. To begin, each square of the cube should be assigned a letter of the alphabet to pinpoint the place it should end up on the finished cube. At first, I try to understand the technique, but his explanation

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264 Ibid., p. 157.
265 Ibid., pp. 169-171.
266 Borders, June 5, 2015.
keeps getting more and more complex. You need to memorize all of the positions it has when scrambled, and you need to connect the letters to objects, and then make up a story to remember them and connect them again. In the audience, people are laughing at the absurdity of it. Peter is explaining his rather complicated system as if it was straightforward, and we actually had a chance of learning it. He continues, saying that the brain is better at remembering the absurd or the violent than the everyday stuff. His first letters that need to be connected are creating the sentence; shoot the Santa. Some people in the audience are laughing. Peter jokes that the people in the audience might not find the idea of shooting the Santa sick, but he does. The act is funny and finally, we’ll get some well-needed comic relief in the show, which has been quite emotional up till now.

Now the real solving of the cube begins. Peter announces that he memorized the cube before the show, to save time. He declares that his story will be in English; he makes jokes in Swedish directed at English-speaking spectators and vice versa. Peter then takes a last look at the cube and puts the blindfold on, and begins, “So, the first picture I have is that I put a bomb here in the middle of the audience, and that is BM for bomb, and when you have a bomb in the audience you get panic, P and A, for panic.” He continues the story with a road, of cars that are jamming the road, creating a story about fleeing with his sister when the planes came dropping bombs, escaping in small boats to Turkey and so on, highlighting the letters that make sense in relation to the story, as well as to the solving of his cube. However, all that I hear is the story. The audience is completely silent, the people I see around me have serious looks on their faces, and there is a dense atmosphere in the room. The story continues, of checking the phone, scared of getting bad news from home, the home he had to leave. The last letters being connected is C and K, “C and K, is for sick, because I think it is sick, how you and I, have so different lives”. As he says these last words, the cube is completed. For a couple of seconds everything is quiet, then the audience breaks out in applause and cheers. I feel an emptiness in my chest. In this act, the darkness, hopelessness, and a “sick” world created a strong utopian sense that “reminds us that there is something missing, that the present and presence… is not enough.”

Playing with Fire – Appropriate Representations of Culture?
After one of the scenes of chaotic celebration in Borders with fire, chaos, and laughter, the action slows down, and the music becomes mellow. One of the performers, a retired tightrope walker who now acts as ringmaster, has found

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268 Muñoz, 2009, p. 100.
an old book and reads out loud in Swedish, “In 1741, you see, a new regulation stated that beggars should be arrested, and Jews, tightrope walkers, Tatars, and Gypsies should be deported from the country. Amazing, when you think of it, how far we have come.”

She closes the book and looks out into the audience. When she opens the book again, the pages catch fire. She slams the book shut.

Foreboding music is playing and a man in uniform comes onstage balancing a plastic jerrycan on his head, while another performer is slowly dragging a wagon overloaded with luggage and refugees around the stage. On the loudspeaker is the voice of a refugee, talking about the hardships of fleeing. Apart from setting the mood, this scene is used to set up the next act, as a large roll of paper tissue is being rolled out over the sides of the stage. The many layers of tissue are then twisted to create a rope, which is then tied to a rig that looks like something constructed at a junkyard, creating a slackline. The artist of the act, Alexander Weibel, is walking along the rope to check that it is to his liking. He is dressed in a pair of dusty khaki pants with the legs tied tightly around his shins with a pale red ribbon, and he is barefoot. On his upper body, he is wearing a pale red vest over a beige tank top with red stripes. His lower right arm is covered by a beige armguard similar to those used by archers. On his head is a greyish turban. He has a thin and stripy black beard, and his face has a brown tone, and I cannot decide if it resembles oil and dirt or a much more problematic brown face make-up. Using an old oil barrel, he steps up onto the rope. The sound of fingers sliding along guitar strings and a mechanical ringing sound are creating an eerie noise that heightens the intensity and focus. When the rope is carrying his weight, his feet are shaking as he steps backward, letting his toes feel where the rope is. The rope makes creaking sounds. As he reaches the middle, he turns around and walks forward a few steps and takes his violin from another man on the stage. Using the violin and the bow as counterweights as he balances to the middle of the rope, he collects himself and starts to play a fateful melody. I see the intense focus in his face. As he continues to play, a fire is placed under the rope behind him while hot water is poured onto the rope in front of him. The flames from the fire are licking the paper-rope, charring it. At the other end, the steam is rising as the rope gets wetter and wetter. The focus and intensity are heightened by the suspense of the risk, of the fact that everyone knows what is inevitably going to happen. At the same time though, the risk is quite low, since the fall from

269 “1741, förstår ni, så kom en förordning om att tiggare skulle gripas, medans judar, lindansare, tartarer och zigenare skulle utvisas från landet, fantastiskt, när man tänker på hur långt vi har kommit.” My translation.
the rope is only a few decimeters. Suddenly the rope breaks, and there is a sound of gasping in the audience.270

I see this act as an attempt to link the situation of circus workers of the past, making a reference to the old Swedish law, to the refugees and the risks they take, and how the conditions are rigged to ensure failure; it is the staging of a risk that is manipulated so there is no possible way to escape from what is bound to happen. The act has an effect on the audience, as the atmosphere is intense and everyone is focused on what we all know will happen.

I have no doubts that the intentions behind Borders are admirable, and that the show does give people food for thought on the situation in the world, as is shown in the earlier discussion of my experience of a utopian moment. However, the image of the ‘Other’ that the show presents can be problematic, as it risks reinforcing stereotypes that work to segregate rather than unify people. In the act described above, the representation of the ‘other’ draws on an image of the Orient as full of mystique, exotica and the primitive.

Edward Said writes about this image in the book Orientalism (1978), in which he argues that the Orient is a discourse constructed and maintained by the West, mostly by Europeans, in universities, at museums, in the description

270 Borders, June 5, 2015.
of history, in representations in literature, film, music, and popular culture.\textsuperscript{271} The image works to maintain a hegemony in which the West remains superior to the Other, in this case, the implied Orient,\textsuperscript{272} which is usually understood as the Arab World, Near East or the Middle East – geographic terms that in themselves demonstrate the construction from a Eurocentric perspective. Said argues that the Orient does not exist in reality, outside of the discourse created by the definition, and his purpose is not to give an accurate account of the Orient, but rather to challenge the very idea in itself.\textsuperscript{273} The construction and reproduction of the Oriental are about power, and of defining the self against the Other. Ahmed unfolds how this relates to the West as the norm. In the orientation towards the Orient, the place from which the experience takes place is the Occident, and as such makes the West into the norm around which we are arranged.\textsuperscript{274} Reproducing images that refer to the Orient as exotic, undeveloped or not modern, such as in the wagon being filled with luggage and people, reinforces the norm of the West.

This use of cultural stereotypes and the Orient as a theme has a long tradition in circus, partly due to performers coming from around the world, but also for the purpose of framing the acts as exotic in order to sell.\textsuperscript{275} There is, however, a need to be careful and considerate with the representations being presented, as they enforce impressions on the surface that, through continuous repetitions, can become sticky.

Some of the friction I experience concerning the choice of aesthetics and representations continue in my experience of the show \textit{Limits}, but now the stage, and costumes refer more to an imaginary place than a real representation of the Other. In the final show of the trilogy, \textit{Movement}, the costume and aesthetics are something completely different, to which I will return at the end of this chapter when I discuss the experience of the relation to the body on stage.

Through the experience of the acts that I have discussed, it becomes evident that the circus does have political implications in different ways. Through intense utopian moments, the feeling of another possible world gives a sense of hope, and the sense of community, of being together with the audience and connected to the performer, is empowering. However, as my final discussion shows, great care needs to be taken to make sure that one is not reproducing norms that one intends to challenge. Although the body was present and played an important role in the experience in the previous examples, as it is

\textsuperscript{273} Said, p. 322.
\textsuperscript{274} Ahmed, 2006, pp. 112-120.
\textsuperscript{275} Stoddart, pp. 102-106.
always intertwined with the mind, the discussion mostly focused on broader concepts. In the following section, I will dive deeper into the explicit bodily experience.

Circus from an Embodied Approach

The circus as a spectacle has long been recognized as giving the spectator a bath of embodied sensorial experiences. Fischer-Lichte writes that the circus “carried an inherent refusal to transmit meaning and instead triggered wonder, amazement, horror, and shock in the spectators, thus immediately affecting their bodies.”

Although the revival of the new circus came with an increase of representation, the bodily sensations are still at the core of the experience. In the following section, I will engage in discussions on kinesthesia and how the body on stage “moves” the body in the audience. Then I will consider the bodily experience of risk that is closely connected to circus.

Moved – Experiencing Kinesthesia and Movement

Being a spectator of circus, watching sensational bodies doing the most amazing stunts, is not just an emotional rollercoaster; at times it can almost feel like a real one, when the movement of the body on stage is creating senses of motion in the own body. The thrilling experience is somewhat hard to describe, and although scientific finds have suggested neurobiological reasons for the experience, there is still a lot to be discussed.

Within the field of performance studies, the spectator’s bodily experience has predominantly been discussed by dance scholars, and often based on phenomenological theory and from embodied perspectives. In the early 20th century, the dance critic John Martin, who wrote about the emerging modern dance, recognized that spectators felt a bodily engagement with the dancing body onstage. A concept that he used extensively – and one that has been central to the understanding of the body in dance – is the notion of kinesthesia, which can be described as the awareness of the own body’s movement. The sense of kinesthesia has been paired with a range of different theoretical concepts to address different aspects of dance and bodily knowledge, such as the specifics of different bodily practices, the interpretation of movements, the body’s connection to cultural understanding, and so on.
The notion of kinesthesia acknowledged the complexity of bodily movement and offered a vocabulary to start discussing movement in a more specific way. For the discussion of spectators’ bodily experiences, the phenomenological concept of empathy paired well, connecting the embodied experience with a theory on how we connect to others through intersubjectivity. Although versions of empathy had existed earlier in philosophy under different names, it was with the writing of phenomenologists such as Lipps, Scheler, Husserl, and Stein at the beginning of the 20th century that empathy became a useful tool in theoretical discussions. Since I am using the concept of empathy later in this chapter to discuss the experience of a You on stage, I will continue to focus on the bodily experience for now and return to a general discussion of empathy later. As for the understanding in this section, empathy is the way in which we relate to others and ‘tap’ into their experience and feelings.

The concept of kinesthetic empathy opened up for a discussion on the bodily experience of the spectator and how the spectator relates to other bodies both in performance art and in everyday life. In the early 1990s, a team of neuroscientists performing experiments on the brain activity of macaques found that some of the monkey’s cerebral neurons were activated when watching one of the scientists eating a peanut. The neuron fired in the same manner that it would have if the monkey had been eating the peanut itself. The test was replicated and it was confirmed that specific neurons mirrored the activity of someone else’s action.279 This led to the idea of a specific type of neurons, called mirror neurons, that have the function of connecting one mind to another. This finding, which has had a significant impact on the understanding of the mind, does come with some reservations. So far, the mirror neurons have been found in other animals, but the complexity of the human brain makes it difficult to study it in a similar way.280 For the time being, the evidence of human mirror neurons is indirect, and some finds suggest a mirror system rather than a specific type of brain cell. These finds fit well into the concept of kinesthetic empathy, that is, as a neurobiological explanation of why it happens. However, the cognitive turn of spectatorship and performance studies that was predicted, as scientific results offered ‘proof’ of the experience of spectators, is so far remarkably invisible from the field of studies. One reason lies in the argument of a phenomenological approach to research from lived experience. Even if mirror neurons provides a neurological explanation, which is debatable, it says little about what the human experience of it really


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is. To give an analogy, even an exhaustive list of the atoms and molecules of a cold beer says little about the taste and sensation of it in the mouth.

In an article on the experience of the thrill in a play, theater scholar Joseph Roach wrote that "[k]inesthetic empathy does offer us one way of understanding why performance works as well as it does when it acts physically to shake audiences up."281 Or in the words of Peta Tait, "The bodily reactions of a spectator are significant for the reception of performance."282 For the researcher of spectatorship, especially in genres of the spectacular, this experience is useful for understanding the appeal of the experience. However, what this experience entails, how it works, and to which degree the "mimicking" resembles the others is a complex ongoing discussion involving the fields of philosophy, psychology, neuroscience.

Kinesthetic Empathy in Circus Research

The circus, or at least circus feats, have commonly been used in philosophy in the discussion on the transmission of emotions and already appeared in Diderot’s Encyclopedia from the mid-18th century. In an entry on tightrope-dancers, M. Le Chevalier de Jaucourt acknowledges how the spectator’s emotions are affected by the body in motion on the rope.283

In recent years, circus scholar Peta Tait has used kinesthesia to discuss the spectators’ experience of aerialist performances. She uses Merleau-Ponty’s idea of body-to-body encounters to frame her discussion on the transmission of the experience, making use of the concept of “catching” the other’s experience, through their body and movement.284 In the dissertation Aerial Stars (2016), Catherine Holmes suggested another view on the spectator’s experience, framing the experience as a kinesthetic fantasy by highlighting the imaginary aspects involved in the production of the sensation. Fundamental for this argument is that Holmes’ experience is not of the other body’s motion, but rather of the other body’s motion experienced as her own body.285

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284 Tait, 2005, pp. 141-152.
Swing and the World Swings with You

A projection suddenly lights up the gray backdrop, painting an image of a gray city on a dark night. The dark clouds move quickly over the sky. In front of the projection stands a woman on a black trapeze bar. I instantly recognize her. The performer Saara Ahola is standing straight, with her back to the audience, her arms locked around the ropes to keep balanced. Her brown pants and beige top look surprisingly colorful in front of the dark city. A few sad chords from a keyboard amplify the sense of despair. Suddenly she lets go and falls, just catching herself in the ditch of a knee. She hangs, balanced, gazing out into the audience with a serious look on her face. With careful control, she slowly reaches up, grabs the bar and starts to swing long, slow arcs, and then pulls up with her legs, laying on her back in balance. A sad, tender voice starts to vocalize as Saara moves around on the trapeze. She rises to her feet then, balancing with the side nearest the audience. From the speakers, the voice of a refugee tells the story of living in a city at war, when all of a sudden everyone is gone. On the trapeze, Saara now hangs, face down, from her hips. She spins and returns to balance, as to illustrate the ordeals of war.\(^{286}\) When she lets go and resumes her swinging in long slow arcs, I start to feel the motion in my body; it is as if my body is sensing her hips pulling and stretching to gain momentum. My focus is still on the act, but the experience of my body, through which I’m experiencing the other body, is coming to the foreground and makes itself felt. The feeling through my body becomes central, and it strengthens the experience of a connection with the body on stage.

A central understanding of an embodied, phenomenological approach to the experience of a spectator is that the living body is the point of orientation from which we perceive and experience the world. From my bodily position in the audience, I experience and create meaning of the other body. This position is informed by a range of specifics relating to my body – some aspects that are mostly related to the body as an object, such as shape and size, and others that are related to the body as lived. Although the shape and size are of importance, as they create the boundaries and fundamental basis for our being, I want instead to focus on the lived body and how it influences the experience of kinesthetic empathy, or if that happens at all. The first aspect is the function and abilities connected to the lived body, and the second relates to the sense of self and possibilities connected to the lived body.

The ability to move, and the way in which action is an activity that is most often pre-reflexive and just happens without us taking notice of it, has long been a topic in phenomenology. The notion of body schema is often used to

\(^{286}\) Limits, February 1, 2017.
describe this essential function of our bodies.\textsuperscript{287} The body schema describes the sensorimotor capacities in the body that allow the body to move without constantly directing our attention to what the body is doing. The system works with the sensory feedback given through proprioception, which informs the body of its position, and kinesthesia, which gives feedback on the movement of the body. An example from everyday life is how we walk in a constantly changing terrain, where there are obstacles such as curbs, steps, and slopes, and although we do not direct our attention to the body adjusting to all of these difficulties, we usually succeed. The body schema can be understood as the bodily range of movement decided by our ability to grasp our own bodies’ positions.

A closely related concept is \textit{habit}, which Merleau-Ponty uses to describe how we incorporate new skills and sometimes complex movement into our repertoire of possible movement, which then becomes accessible outside of our direct awareness in the same way as described concerning the body schema.\textsuperscript{288} Consider the truly complex activity of drinking a cup of coffee. As I reach for my cup, I do not actively calculate my distance from the cup, anticipate its weight, or put that in relation to the force of movement required for my hand and arm to be able to reach it, lift it, and balance it with minute corrections as the liquid moves in the cup; nor do I synchronize the movements with the opening of my mouth and the pouring. I just grab my cup of coffee. The bodily action in this sense is pre-reflexive, as I do not consciously reflect on the actions needed for the action to happen. I believe that most of us have had the experience of lifting something when this automatic ‘calculation’ was slightly off, such as when preparing to move a box that is so overloaded that it’s about to burst, and engaging the system for heavy work just to discover that it was the box of decorative pillows and almost keeling over from the mismatch of power invested and the weight of the object manipulated. This is an example of the system failing.

The skill in question can also be an extremely complex movement. Consider the awkward bodily experience when first trying to figure out a dance move, like in the last craze for “the floss,” in which the arms are flung around the body, and the hips are wondering what the heck is going on. However, as we practice, the body incorporates the movement through repetition and all of a sudden we cannot even imagine the problems we had earlier. We have incorporated “the floss” and made it a habit, and not a good one, some would say.

\textsuperscript{287} Depending on which philosopher and what tradition is being followed, a similar understanding is at times called corporeal schema or motor schema.
\textsuperscript{288} Merleau-Ponty, pp. 164-170.
Although these actions and movements can seem almost like a bodily reflex, there is an important distinction in that the movement has intentionality as it is directed towards the task being performed. This ties to the experience of kinesthetic empathy, as it is limited and guided by the body schema and habits, as it is through the system our ability to recognize the other body’s movement in one’s own. With Saara in the swinging trapeze, I felt an experience of movement in my body, as if my body was swinging as I sat in the audience. However, I did not imagine myself on the trapeze. A distinction to be made in the empathic experience is whether the kinesthetic experience is the sense of movement in the spectator’s own body or the imaginary sense of being the one on stage moving.

Circus scholar and aerialist Catherine Holmes uses the term kinesthetic fantasy to describe an experience of being on the stage herself, doing the actions herself as she “imaginatively transformed [her] body into his using [her] own aerial kinesthetic understanding” when she experienced a male performer doing a solo strap performance. Using her body schema and habit, she imagines the experience of her own body as the one onstage, but she is still aware that her own body is sitting in the audience. I would consider her experience an empathic experience, but the chosen word highlights the use of imagination in her perspective-taking.

Research of watching dance, suggests that the spectator’s experience differed depending on the spectator’s previous experience of dancing themselves, where former dancers imagine themselves dancing, while non-dancers reflected on wanting to do it but not being able to. The switching of perspective seems to depend on our body schema and habit for the ability to place ourselves in someone else’s action.

Turning to my body schema and habit, I lack both experience of and skill for the swinging trapeze. I do, however, have the experience of playing on a regular swing at a playground, and I can sense the rhythmic flow of tension to gain momentum followed by the relaxation in the flight back. If I did not have this previous experience, I do not know how I would experience the act. I am tied to my inhabited body schema in the experience of others.

So now we have defined that the experience is guided and limited by the possibilities within our system of ‘automatized’ actions. This is however not

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290 Holmes, p. 107.
enough, and there is still more that needs to be clarified for the potential experience of kinesthetic empathy. The way we look at and understand ourselves and our possibilities also plays a part, as it determines our possible engagement in the action. The notion of body image is used to describe the way the own body is perceived and regarded in relation to “conceptual understanding” and “emotional attitudes.”

Theater scholar Stanton Garner writes about how movement is controlled by beliefs of what I can, and I cannot do that extend beyond the physical limitation of previously described ability, in that cultural norms grant or restrict possibilities of action. One way this has an impact is in how girls and boys are treated differently as they grow up, encouraged in and restricted from different activities, and as such never get a chance to fully expand their bodily ability. Another way that cultural circumstances direct our limits and possibility of even imagining a mirroring of a movement relates to what Garner calls I may and I may not. Garner brings attention to Ahmed’s discussion on racialization, norms of whiteness, and how bodies are oriented in relation to what they can and cannot do, and how “[d]oing things’ depends not so much on intrinsic capacity or even dispositions or habits, but on the ways in which the world is available as a space for action.”

The world is constituted by cultural norms that decide which positions we can inhabit in relation to our identity. Through our body image, we might self-police our orientation towards the world, and as such limit our engagement in it, and thus limit our possibility to imagine another body’s movement.

In relation to kinesthetic empathy, the dance scholar Jaana Parviainen suggests the use of the notion of “body topography” that situates a person’s knowledge of the body, both including the body schema and habit, and the body image, and as such focuses on how the body comes in contact with the world both physically and culturally. With this approach, she makes sense of the limitations and possibilities connected to the individual lived body as it moves in the world.

Saara spins around, going in and out of different poses. She stands up again and does another drop, catches herself with her armpit and a leg, ending up in a pose as if hanging on a cross. As she swings up and hangs with a hip, the sound of thunder roars from the speakers; at the same time, the rig of the trapeze starts to move. As Saara hangs from the bar and spins her legs, the trapeze is moving back and forth erratically, making it difficult to balance and to gain

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292 Gallagher & Zahavi, pp. 164-165.
293 Ibid., pp. 86-93.
294 Ibid., pp. 87-88.
momentum. The shaking rig disturbs the flow not only of her movement, but also of my experience, causing a sense of irritation and distress in me. She skillfully manages the situation and gets on to the bar again, and in the final sequence, she does stunt after stunt in an energized fashion, while the backdrop begins to fall apart, into big blocks hanging from the ceiling. The lights flicker and everything shakes, and she just keeps on swinging.


The experience of the scene is intense. I sense the atmosphere around me, the focused attention. In this turbulent action, I did not mimic the experience of movement of the body. The body being thrown around, seemingly uncontrolled against the thunder and the images of a city falling to ruins generated a sense of sadness as the meaning of the act emerged in associations to images of war, the stories told earlier in the show and my sense of privilege. The act suddenly stops, and Saara is being raised up and away from the stage.

Although I was not feeling a sense of kinesthetic empathy in the final part of the act, I did get a sense of motion in my body. In this case, it was more visceral, creating a sense of bodily unease as the rig and the trapeze moved the body in unpredictable ways, and I had a weird sense of my stomach being full and empty at the same time. I consider this bodily sensation more of a visceral thrill than an account of kinesthetic empathy; I will get back to the

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297 Limits, February 1, 2017.
sense of the visceral in other examples throughout the book. I will also return to the concept of kinesthetic empathy as it appears in relation to other analysis. Tait proposes that one explanation for the attraction of the circus is that the bodily sensation and visceral experience give us a reminder of being alive, and as such the feeling of being alive that usually resides in the background comes into consciousness.

Quite often, when I walk out after a circus show, I am ready to quit my job, pack my bags and jump on to the next circus train going anywhere. If only I were 20 years younger and talented. Running away with a circus is still a vivid trope in popular culture, and I do not think I am alone in getting this feeling at the circus. Some might claim it has to do with the charm of the nomadic lifestyle and the myth of circus, but I would argue that there is something else to it, something related to the experience of kinesthesia. Tait recognizes that “[a] spectator’s experience of heightened sensory visceral feelings might connect up with the social idea of a freer life and physicality within circus.” Also, in interviews of spectators of dance, Reason and Reynolds find that many like to imagine themselves on the stage, doing acts they cannot do themselves, and getting engaged and physically activated. It seems like the kinesthetic engagement with acts of sensational bodies is both thrilling and engaging, as they challenge the spectator’s own experience and body topography.

What I hope this example has shown is the complex way in which we engage and experience other’s bodies. What is at times – I would say naïvely – explained as a mere mirroring of another person’s movement, akin to experiencing it as an object, is in reality much more complex. It relates both to the situation, the context, and the ability and understanding of the own body, as well as the other’s body as lived. Sensory experience of bodies moving on stage is real, however, and it is essential to fully grasp the experience of being a spectator and the appeal of entertainment and theater.

**Risk – Experiencing Suspension and Surprise**

The notion of risk has always been intimately connected to the circus. Stoddart argues that “[c]ircus is, above all, a vehicle for the demonstration and taunting of danger and this remains its most telling and defining feature.” From the wild animals that not only roar at the audience but also jump through rings of fire to flying trapeze artists who get the audience to sway, mesmerized, from

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298 Tait, 2012, p. 192.
299 Ibid., p. 193.
300 Reason & Reynolds, pp. 60-62.
301 Stoddart, p. 4.
side to side as if watching a game of tennis. The experience of present danger attracts our attention, as we are programmed to recognize risks, not only to ourselves, but also to others.\textsuperscript{302} As such, the circus is a genre whose very form demands the spectator’s attention. However, the risk does not only give us thrills and pull our attention. Theater scholar Jason Price argues that the “risk provides a context for obtaining a spectator’s interest and helping to forge a connection between the performer and the audience.”\textsuperscript{303} Related to my earlier discussion on the qualities of entertainment, the risk seems to provide both the attention and support a connection, while the circus in itself is a well-recognized concept that provides familiarity and easy access.

\textit{Walking High – Suspension on a Wire}

As the action from the previous act is slowing down, my focus is shifted to the ceiling of the old circus building, where a woman is hanging by one knee from a wire stretched between the walls about eight meters up in the air. She is slowly, and with great care, changing position to hang from the other knee. I am watching the show \textit{Borders}, and the woman on the wire is the French funambulist Tatiana-Mosio Bongonga, who is relentlessly tugging the audience’s attention.\textsuperscript{304} She is wearing soft brown boots that wrap closely around her lower legs and a red short-sleeved shirt with the number eight in pale red on her chest, tucked into a pair of gray pants. Her head is covered with a red cheche\textsuperscript{305} that reminds me of a turban, but with a veil that covers her face and allows only the eyes to be seen. The staging sets a scene in my mind by pulling strings in my memories, adding, relating and comparing.

She reaches up and grabs the wire, pulling herself up with the hands, releases her knee and is using the momentum to get her body to spin onto the wire. When her centerline of the body is in balance over the wire, she lets go of the wire with her hands and balances using only her body. From the speakers, the voice of a refugee talks about the ordeals of being a refugee. Tatiana slowly pulls herself almost to a fetal position, hugging the wire as if her life depended on it. She straddles the wire, and a balancing pole is given to her from the stage floor. With the pole’s help, the position is changed to a knee stand, and the intense stillness combined with the veiled face bears a resemblance to religious prayer. The spiritual intensity is disrupted when she slowly unveils her face and with a smile reaches her arms towards the other artists.

\textsuperscript{302} Garner, 2018, pp. 164-165.
\textsuperscript{304} \textit{Borders}, June 5, 2015.
\textsuperscript{305} A head cloth (also known as a Tagelmust) worn by people, mostly men, in the North African Sahara region. The cloth protects the wearer from getting sand in mouth and nose when winds are blowing.
standing on the stage floor, and with a lifting motion commands them to begin singing. A soft a cappella chant of joy is changing the mode of the scene. From the grave story of the refugee and the bittersweet violin, the voices are now filling the room with hope.

She places her head on the wire. Slowly and in full control, she drags herself up to a headstand supported by the hands on the pole balancing on the wire. There are small moments in the act where the intensity grows, as if the risk is heightened for a particular move. This is one of them. My body, of which I had been unaware so far, suddenly makes itself noticed—not in the sense of my attention being directed to the body as an object, but instead I feel an intense, intentional focus on the balancing act through my body. The visceral feeling is in my stomach, which it tied up in a way that reminds me of the thrill of rollercoaster rides as a child, and I catch myself holding my breath. The atmosphere around me is dense as I sense the energy created by the intense focus. Fischer-Lichte describes the atmosphere as the presence that emanates between the spectator and others, which cannot be traced to the sight or hearing.\(^{306}\) In my experience, the atmosphere originated rather between me and the rest of the audience than between myself and the performer, and although the experience of the other spectators is shaped in relation to their specific situation, context, and impressions, there is something unifying, a sense of a shared presence that is hard to deny.

As she returns to the wire in a knee stand there is a sense of relief, as the moment of heightened risk returns under control. The experience of risk in circus has its counterpart in the equally important sense of control and managing the risk through their skills. Tait argues that while the “circus performs danger,” it “is also a performance of safety.”\(^{307}\) Experiencing the risk of the circus is a constant negotiation of danger and control, which also is well known to the performers, who use different skills to manipulate the spectator’s experience of risk. Erin Hurley writes that in balancing acts like tightrope walking and handstands, the artist uses the control to increase the suspense as the slow tempo highlights the minute precision needed to succeed and control the risk.\(^{308}\) Suspense has a key function in the experience of risk, as it is used as a tool to attune the experience. Philosopher Aaron Smuts writes that “people feel suspense when they fear a bad outcome, hope for a good outcome and are uncertain about which outcome will come to pass.” The intensity of the

\(^{306}\) Fischer-Lichte, p. 116.


suspense is then affected by the uncertainty of the outcome and the stakes involved. If the hope for the desired outcome is strong or the fear of an unfavorable outcome is strong, the stakes are considered higher. As a spectator of a circus act, the stakes usually come down to the risk, such as the fear of danger for the other. A favorable outcome is a spectacular act where everybody walks away unharmed.

The risk experienced by the spectators is a staged risk, created from framing, manipulation, and pacing in order to achieve the thrill. The risk belongs to the theatrical dimension. A serious accident is more likely to be caused by a malfunction in rigging or a material error than by a mistake made by the performer, and the real risk is most often managed by the artist, who is in many ways a professional of safety concerns, rather than a risk-taker. For the experience of the spectator however, the danger seems real, and the notion of risk has a significant impact on the spectator’s experience. At the circus, the spectator is manipulated in various ways to highlight danger or uncertainty in different acts. In the traditional circus, it is common for the music to work up to the most spectacular trick – think of the classic drumroll – and often the artists pause and take some very noticeable breaths before the stunt. This also has a purpose of focus and preparing, but it is also a visual cue for the spectator that what comes next is particularly risky. What the spectator finds most spectacular is not necessarily what is most difficult or dangerous. There is also a long tradition of “faking” mistakes in the circus. This is done to keep the audience’s attention and to remind them of the uncertainty of the act and the risk for the artist.

With regard to risk in circus, another factor is that it is live and happening in front of the spectators. As such, the stakes are higher as the uncertainty is real and the danger is present. In this example from Borders, it is even more intense for some people in the audience, since the action is taking place just above their heads, raising the stakes and increasing the risk in a more personal way. The experience of risk at the circus is a way of getting the thrill of the danger but maintaining a distance, relying on the exceptional skills of the performers.

The song picks up speed. Tatiana is smiling as she starts to walk slowly across the wire. There is a dark ocean moving in slow motion projected on the backdrop, a reoccurring theme during the show, which deals with the risk for

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310 Tait, 2016, p. 529, 532, 539.
311 Ibid., pp. 532-534.
refugees crossing the sea. When she is halfway across the wire, she stops and slowly lets her leg slide back along the wire until she is in a full front split. As she holds in the bottom position, the audience begins to clap. It is the first applause of the act, and it feels like the physical act of appreciation is somehow clearing the air. Mason points out that the thrill of the risk experienced in the circus, especially in acts of suspense, needs to be released for the sense of pleasure to be maintained for the spectator.313

The act continues with some movements where the pole is shifted to different positions, and ends with her sitting on the pole in the middle of the wire. The light is dimmed and the focus shifts to the stage floor where a number of tents have suddenly appeared right in front of me without my taking any notice of it. This is an indication of the intensity of the attention directed at the act.

*Drop it like it’s hot – The Surprise of a Fall*

In several scenes of the show *Limits*, high-risk stunts are combined with information on migration simultaneously being projected onto the stage. In one of the early scenes of the show, statistics of the refugee situation are projected onto a gray ‘wall’ in the back of the stage. The stylized charts make the information easy to follow. How many are people forced to leave in the world,

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which countries host most of the refugees. Intense music is being played on an electric guitar, and as the last chart reveals the number of refugees who actually end up in Europe, I hear a collective sigh in the audience. Only 300 000 of the world’s 60 000 000 refugees end up in Europe. As the final information is presented, one of the performers stands on top of the wall looking down. One of the others slowly walks up to him, stops and also starts looking down. Their faces are serious. Suddenly, one of them turns slowly and falls over the edge, as if having lost faith in the world. I feel a visceral rush running through my body as if falling myself. The experience is both visceral and kinesthetic, catching me completely off guard, and instantly brings my body into awareness. At this instance, I do not only feel through my body, but also my attention is focused on the visceral rush. I hear gasps in the audience around me.

Within a second, he bounces back up again from a trampoline hidden from the audience’s view. I hear the release of air, an instant shared relief. Mason writes that in the experience of intense acts, it is not uncommon for spectators to feel a shared sense of release. The vibe is still intense, I am fully absorbed, recovering from the earlier reaction, and I feel strangely moved by the act. It is as if the hard facts leading into the fall somehow heightened my consciousness, not only of the migrant situation, but it also kept me on edge in the experience of the act. As in my experience of the knife-throwing in the section on politics, the risk of the performer and the risk of the refugee are merged, blurring the experience of meaning. The act continues with the performers bouncing on the trampoline, running on the wall, dropping onto the trampoline again – almost like human juggling.

In this act, the sharp, visceral experience from the first drop is not created from carefully built-up suspense as it is in the high wire act. The thrill in this act is in the surprise of the unexpected fall. Unlike when suspense is built-up, the surprise does not require a state of uncertainty, as that implies that there is an uncertainty in the expectation of what is to come. That uncertainty rather works against the surprise effect, as Smuts argues that the surprise effect is in the “subversion of an expectation.”314 The staging and action leading up to the act did not suggest any uncertainty about what was to come, and as such the sudden turn of action caused an intense surprise effect.

**Flippin’ Dangerous – Suspense and Release on the Teeterboard**

Although both the stakes and the uncertainty of the outcome are great, in this final example, the experience of risk is not easily constructed in relation to

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314 Smuts.
suspense, as it is more dynamic through its constant sense of suspense and release.

One of the final scenes in the show *Limits* is a teeterboard act where the performers perform very amazing, very high-risk tricks. A teeterboard is basically a board placed over a fulcrum, almost like a playground seesaw. One, or several, performers are positioned on one side, weighing the board down, and one or, several, performers jump onto the other side to catapult the other(s) into the air, only to land on the board again, to catapult whomever is on the other side. This jumping up and down creates momentum for tricks like flips and spins.


The act I experienced in the show *Limits* was an act with two performers alternately jumping and landing. On the three occasions that I experienced the act, there were times when the jumps were so high that I could see the performer above the stage rig. The safety measures being used are crash pads around the board. Considering how high the performers fly, the stakes are immensely high. For this case study, I do not have a clear recollection of the

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315 The discipline that I refer to as teeterboard (and the only term I have come across in discussions with people) is also known as – or perhaps more correctly called – Korean board. Further explanations can be found in the chapter ‘Glossary of Circus Terms’, by Anna-Karyna Barlati, in, *Cirque Global*, 2016, p. 301 (Korean Board), p. 306 (Teeterboard).

individual tricks or the turns of the act; my description will therefore be quite
general in relation to the tricks, and the focus will be more on my take on the
experience. One reason that I do not have any good notes or specific access in
my memory is that watching it makes me very anxious; even before the act
begins my stomach is tied in knots in anticipation of what is to come.

The act starts with the performers building momentum by alternately jump-
ing up and landing. When the momentum is achieved and the performers’ air-
time is sufficient, they prepare for a trick. When the performer is in the stunt,
the flips and spins are beautiful and insanely impressive. These impressive
and astonishing stunts are not the most intense part of the experience for me;
it is the coming down and landing part that is terrifying, when the performer’s
body is plummeting at an alarming speed after a stunt, aiming for the small
board with arduously tensed legs. As soon as the feet make contact with the
board, the fall is cushioned by the counterweight, which is the performer on
the other side, who is then flung up into the air and comes down again, and it
starts all over to build momentum for the next trick. In teeterboard, a loud clap
on the legs as they go up into the air is a cue to the other that the next push
will be made for a trick. This cue is crucial for the preparation, so the other
performer knows how hard the pushdown should be, and to increase the focus.
It also works as a communication to the audience that it’s time now; now the
risk is real.

At times, when I’m watching, the action feels like a perpetuum mobile that
will just keep going forever. In the experience of the act, every release in-
stantly triggers another suspense, which leads to a sense of a visceral jerking
in my stomach, as someone was playing with a light switch, setting off an
emotional rollercoaster at a staggering speed.

There are many uncertainties to these acts. The precision in the landing,
which has to be fairly spot-on. Another is that the counterweight needs to be
in place; otherwise nothing will break the fall of the one coming in for a land-
ing, and the hit is going to be hard. As performers do incredibly difficult stunts,
sometimes they lose their balance in the landing, and since the other body
already has been flung up and cannot stop in midair, they are soon coming in
for another landing, and there had better be someone acting as a counterweight
to break the fall. It is at this point that additional safety measures are some-
times used, for instance other performers standing by, ready to correct the bal-
cence of the person landing or replace them as a counterweight. This sometimes
happens when an especially difficult trick is coming up. As such, it also acts
as to communicate to the audience the difficulty, uncertainty and high risk
coming up.
When someone stumbles in the landing and is having difficulties getting onto the board in time for the other, the intensity is extreme. At times, the knot in my stomach has turned into pain, almost like a punch in the gut. Earlier, I mentioned that fake mistakes are used to emphasize the danger in circus, and I must say that I never had an experience of the mistakes being faked in teeterboard. Every time I have seen a mistake or a near-miss, the worry in the faces of the performers was genuine. Faking mistakes raises the risk, and it is probably too dangerous to play around with them in this discipline.

Tait recognizes that the appeal of the experience of risk is somewhat paradoxical, as it brings mountains of pleasure whilst at the same time provoking anxiety.317 For me, the teeterboard is the one act in circus that gives me the most anxiety, but also the most pleasure as the final release is given. It is a reminder of being alive in my body.

The experience of risk, suspense, and surprise are examples of acts that evade understanding, and instead get their meaning in the experience of the spectacular. In the acts I have discussed here, the level of representation is low, and the narrative is weak, but similar elements of risk, surprise and suspense are used in all kind of theater, and engaging in the spectacular could be a useful way to broaden the understanding of the spectators’ experience to any drama.

Circus from a Relational Approach

As I discussed in the introduction, a phenomenological approach engages in the subjective consciousness of the experience. As a spectator, I am stuck in my body with my subjective experience as my only source of information. Regardless of whether this experience is of my own emotions, the perception of an artist flying over the stage, or the sense of the audience in the room, the experience is from me. The I is the point of departure, unavoidable for the discussion of any experience to take place. As I experience people on stage, a relation is created. He or She is swinging in the trapeze; He or She is bringing a basket and wine to grandma, and so on. We experience the action of others as external subjects doing what they do, and I would argue that this is the usual experiential mode of interacting with other people on-, as well as offstage.

However, in the relational engagement with other people, we sometimes have another type of experience, another mode in which we experience the interaction as You, rather than He or She. It is an experience of another con-

317 Tait, 2016, p. 532.
nection, creating another intimacy, other emotions, and other reactions. I believe that most of us have had this experience both in everyday life and directed toward specific bodies on stage, when there is a specific character, or performer with whom we somehow come to interact differently, in another experiential mode. In this experience, there is a sense of an intentional connection in the experience. I would argue that this relation is an essential part of the experience and of understanding the attraction of specific acts and performers. In this part of the chapter, I will discuss these relations using phenomenological empathy as the starting point.

Once again, I emphasize that the experience of the performance is most often a complex experiential chaos of emotions, thoughts, pleasures, astonishments, and meanings. In fact, to think of the performance as separate parts of a whole goes against the fundamental idea of the phenomenal experience. For this discussion on parts of the whole, it is essential to understand that this is a theoretical approach, utilized in order to enable discussion the experience and how it is shaped in closer detail. We do not understand the theater, or the world, as parts we put together to make sense; rather, we instantly experience it, as it is, and it makes meaning for us.

**Intersubjectivity and How We Know Others**

A great value of a phenomenological approach is the fact that it considers the experience as it appears to us, in all its complexity, connecting the body, the mind, and the outer world. This means that we also encounter other people in our experiences, and as we recognize them as other-minded beings, with their specific thoughts, ideas, emotions, hopes, dreams, and experiences, we need to account for this specific relation between two subjects. What is even more intriguing is that we do not only perceive them as other minds; we also experience their minds. Within phenomenology, this is called intersubjectivity, which can be seen as a specific field focusing on how we know other people’s minds.

Questions of how we understand and are connected to other people’s minds have been discussed within philosophy for centuries, and prominent philosophers around the world have tried to answer the question by arguing for different solutions to the problem. That we engage in intersubjective relations is not particularly controversial, but how this works, both from a cognitive and philosophical perspective, is another question. In my earlier discussion of kinesthetic empathy, I presented the mirror neuron theory, which suggests that we have a neurological system with the specific purpose of connecting to other people’s minds. Although this theory seems promising for understanding the neurobiology involved, the philosophical approach is still of importance, as it
focuses on the experience of consciousness, and is as such looking for other answers.

**Phenomenological Empathy**

In continental philosophy, the question of how we know others is usually connected to phenomenology and the concept of empathy. The phenomenological concept of empathy first appeared around the turn of the 20th century, when Theodor Lipps made use of the concept *Einfühlung*, which literally means “feeling into.” 318 Although Lipps introduced it to phenomenology, the term had been used earlier in discussions on aesthetics and was initially made known by the philosopher Robert Vischer in 1873. 319 In the early years, the use of the term within phenomenology was not yet established, and similar philosophical discussions were conducted using different terminology. One of the competing concepts was *sympathy*, a term that predates empathy and had been used by prominent philosophers like David Hume, Herbert Spencer, and Adam Smith. 320 The sometimes overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, use of empathy and sympathy caused some confusion and is still debated within the field. In the early years of the 20th century, phenomenologists found the notion of empathy useful; among them were Max Scheler, who used the word *sympathy*, Edmund Husserl, and Edith Stein. 321

Just as with phenomenology, the notion of empathy is used in a range of different ways, and the definition of what empathy is, and what experiences it actually accounts for, is still a lively discussion in the field. Another discussion is whether empathy only concerns emotion and affect, or if it also includes some kind of mindreading. 322 Other discussions concern the automatization and consciousness of the empathic process, and to what degree the matching of the other’s mind is necessary to be considered an empathic experience.

However, there are a few things upon which most philosophers seem to agree, and which could be considered necessary for empathy. Zahavi & Rochat give a basic understanding and suggest that “[e]mpathy is the experience

of the embodied mind of the other, an experience which rather than eliminating the difference between self-experience and other-experience takes the asymmetry to be a necessary and persisting existential fact.”

In this explanation, we find the necessary requisites for an empathic experience. First, the experience should be directly caused by, and in relation to the other person, and that the experience is in some sense taking that other persons perspective, and finally, that there is the awareness of the other as someone other, with a consciousness distinct from one’s own, and a clear separation between the self and the other.

Some phenomenologists, as Stein and Scheler, consider empathy to be a specific form of intentionality, as a mode of experiencing just like remembering or imagining. As such, there is no need for decoding and interpreting the behavior and action of the other. The experience emerges in our consciousness.

Although not explicitly discussing empathy, Merleau-Ponty makes a similar claim based on the experience as a spectator, as a gesture of anger does not make one think of anger, but is rather anger. The empathic understanding is perceived directly and not assembled like pieces of a puzzle, or solved like a mystery. This relates to the way that meaning appears for us, not as created by intricate interpretations, but just as it is.

For the sake of my use of it, the underlying functions of empathy do not need to be discussed further, and there are better sources offering the latest developments in the field for those interested. The important thing to keep in mind is that we do have access to other people’s minds, and that this is of importance not only in everyday relations, but also on the stage, to which I will now turn my attention.

As my earlier examples have shown, the experience of the shows creates a range of experiences in me as a spectator. The theme of migrants creates a political frame and a potential of an emotional understanding of these individuals’ situations. Yet there is a difference in my experience that has to do with how I engage with the bodies on stage.

By using empathy as a tool to discuss how the experience of the relation to the body on stage differs depending on the level of engagement, I cast some light on an often-overlooked part of the experience: the interpersonal relation to the body on stage, which I would argue is an essential part of the experience.

323 Zahavi & Rochat, p. 2.
324 Gallagher & Zahavi, p. 203.
325 Merleau-Ponty, pp. 214-216.
Experiencing Sympathy in Borders and Limits

As I have written earlier, there are moments in *Borders* and *Limits* when my feelings are strong for the migrants, as well as for the body onstage. In these experiences, my relational engagement was that of the performers as *He* or *She*, as a common interactional experience with the body on stage.

One of these examples was when knives were being thrown at a spinning target with a ‘migrant’ strapped to it. The phrase “30%, 60%” was repeated, stating the statistical risk that a migrant will die at sea versus the risk of dying if s/he remains. In my experience of the act, I had a strong sense of sympathy not only for the body of the actor and character, but also for the real migrants to whom the statement relates. However, this experience was not one of empathy in a phenomenological sense, as I did not engage in a perspective-taking of the character or of the actor on stage.

Empathy in a phenomenological sense differs from sympathy in that the experience of empathy does not have to mirror the emotion of the other. We are perfectly aware that the feeling is the other’s and not our own, and we do not need to put ourselves in their state of mind. As such, empathy is the way in which we experience something, as connected to the other’s experience through perspective-taking, and not the content of the experience. Sympathy is an experienced feeling directed to a person’s situation; we feel for them or with them.³²⁷ This is a significant difference that is crucial for my argument of how the interpersonal relation shapes the mind, not only in content but also in the experience as such.

At times, the use of empathy in everyday language makes the discussion more complicated, since the general understanding of empathy as feeling for someone confuses the phenomenological notion of taking the perspective of others’ experiences. The word empathy is often used in the philosophical sense of sympathy. Empathy in a theoretical sense can be of negative emotions and does not necessarily mean that you sympathize with the person with whom you are engaging in an empathic relationship. An empathic experience of antipathy is also possible.

The sympathy I felt at this shows was mostly directed to the real migrants, who were not even present onstage. In this case, the action, the words, and the context offered sufficient information without the perspective-taking of the person on stage. During the act, I engage with *Him* and the risk he was taking offered an emotional bridge in which sympathy was projected to the migrants, and I experienced a merging of the risk on stage and the risk of people trying to reach safety.

Empathy at a Performance

If one accepts the premise that we do have the ability to engage in empathic relations, it is not farfetched to argue that the potential for an empathic relation also exists at the theater and in other performances, as well as in movies, literature, and other forms of interactions. Arguably, it is even one of the reasons that we enjoy art and entertainment, as they give us an experience of other people and let us join their experiences. However, a distinction needs to be made between a relational engagement that is based on empathy, and one that is not; that is, if we consider empathy as a genuine perspective taking in a phenomenological sense, and not as a casual way of describing an interest in another’s action. In a casual as well as in a truly empathic engagement with a character, actor or performer, the context is necessary for the understanding of the other’s mind. In fact, in most of our interactions with other people, the context, actions and engagement in the shared common world are sufficient for us to get a good enough understanding of the other. The empathic engagement with other minds is the exception rather than the rule.328

I would therefore argue that the empathic relation to the performer, or character, is rarer than we think, and that the normal mode in which we experience other people is as the disconnected He or She, rather than empathic You. This does not mean that we do not sympathize or engage in the action, but rather that the relational engagement is not attuned with the others. A truly empathic experience might only come in small moments, such as empathic moments of a sense of connection. One problem of appreciating this experience can also be that we are often focused on the content of the experience rather than the experience of it, and as such do not recognize the importance.

There is also an essential difference in empathy experienced in everyday life and in empathy that is experienced at the theater or in other arts: the awareness that the empathy is directed at something if not fictional, at least constructed.

Dressed for Empathy

Earlier, I discussed the problematic stereotype in some acts in Borders. As for the potential of an empathic relation to take shape, I argue that a sense of identification with either the character or the performer helps. To engage empathically in a fictive character demands more work since the suspension of disbelief is needed, and the empathy is fragile since the spectator has to play along in what could be considered a constructed empathy.


98
6, Costumes in Borders, Cirkus Cirkör and Malmö Stadsteater. Photo by Frans Hällqvist © 2015 Malmö Stadsteater.


8, Costumes in Movements, Cirkus Cirkör and Malmö Stadsteater. Photo by Emmalisa Pauly © 2017 Malmö Stadsteater.
One significant difference in *Movement* compared to the earlier shows is in the costumes of the ensemble. Whereas the costumes in *Borders* had an exotic inspiration drawn from North Africa and the Middle East, and the costumes in *Limits* had a kind of fantasy, junkyard aesthetic, the costumes in *Movements* were everyday clothes, suits, and dresses that emphasize that the migrants are just like the people in the audience, living similar lives, dealing with the same issues and problems, having the same dreams. While the costumes from the two earlier shows create a division between them and us, the costumes in *Movements* create a sense of unity. How we identify the other on stage has an important effect on our understanding of the body on stage and how we react to it.\(^{329}\) Although we tend to overestimate our understanding of other’s experiences, as we take for granted that their reactions would be similar to ours if we put ourselves in their shoes,\(^ {330}\) I would argue that the potential of empathy seems greater when one identifies with the other. This is most certainly the case if one considers representational approaches to empathy, as an intellectual matching of previous concepts and understanding with the experience of the other. Ahmed suggests that how we experience others is dependent on the place from which we look, such as what we are oriented around, as well as what is unifying.\(^ {331}\) In *Borders* and *Limits*, the costumes enhanced the experience of the other, as their appearance resisted inclusion in our understanding of our culture, while the everyday costumes in *Movements* created a common reference around which to orient ourselves.

However, to identify with someone is not the same thing as having an empathic relation with someone, and there is a risk of confusing these. In an early text on empathy by Lipps, his experience of an acrobat was used as an example to argue for an empathic experience when he was absorbed by the moving body on stage. Both Scheler and Stein later challenged this, arguing that Lipps’ experience was not an experience of empathy, but rather an experience of identification.\(^ {332}\) Today, the experience that Lipps was describing would probably be considered an experience of kinesthetic empathy, where the spectator’s body is “mirroring” the movement on stage, rather than a genuine perspective-taking. The issue Scheler and Stein have with Lipps’ argument is in the lack of differentiation between self and other. When Lipps places himself as the body on stage, he stops experiencing with the acrobat, and instead ex-

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\(^{329}\) Tait, 2005, p. 143.


periences as the acrobat himself. As such, Lipps’ attention is on his own fictional self as the other, rather than on the self experiencing the perspective of the other. 

**Constructed Empathy – Empathy Directed at Art(ificial Situations)**

Experiences of artistic representation often call for our empathic attention, be it in theater, circus, film or literature. This experience of empathy may very well be a big part of its attraction, since it has the potential to create strong emotions in us as spectators. Because the empathic experience of artwork, theater, and entertainment relates to a situation that is constructed, the empathic experience differs in significant ways from a sincere empathic experience in everyday life where true inner emotions are expressed. As a spectator, I am constantly aware that the situation I am experiencing is fictive, and that my empathic experience is directed towards a non-real person. In this way, the empathic relation towards a representational character is something different than an experience of a sincere empathic experience.

A question that arises is how empathy could be directed both at the representation presented, as the character of a play for instance, as well as towards the performer creating the representation. Live performances differ from literature and film in that the real body on stage is at the same time the body of the character. Watching a performance on stage is not merely an experience of the fictional characters telling the story. The actor or artist is also present, and quite often s/he steals the attention from the characters on stage. In circus, this double focus is even more elaborate since the body is so obviously the performer’s, and the use of characters is often quite subtle. Often, the act does not even have a narrative, but is rather an artist showing off. However, this does not mean that what is being experienced is just the performer. The staged and constructed aspects of the act make it something different than an experience of a ‘sincere’ interaction in everyday life.

When it comes to the experience of risk, empathy is also put to the test. The empathy for the circus artist taking the risk in their presentation of an act is different from the empathy experienced towards the represented character on stage. I would argue that when the audience experiences the risk, the potential empathy changes and an eventual focus on the character and her situation is switched to the performer at risk. The empathic experience of an artist at risk often turns into a kinesthetic experience. Common audience reactions when high-risk action is presented on stage are physical reactions like covering the mouth and eyes, turning the head away, holding the breath, or sudden audible outbursts. The potential empathy directed to the performer at risk has more

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similarities with ‘sincere’ empathy for everyday situations, as the presentation is what it is, and the stakes are recognized.

In this discussion on an empathic relation at the theater, Fischer-Lichte’s notion of a feedback loop in which the response and reaction constantly trigger each other is useful, as it suggests the way in which connection is established between spectator and performer. It also directs attention to the specificity of empathic experience at the theater, as it relies on co-presence. However, she arguably misses an important aspect of her own theory. In his dissertation *Over the Threshold, Into the World* (2018), Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen engages in a discussion on Fischer-Lichte’s feedback loop in which he identifies a lack, since the notion fails to account for the spectator’s imagination.334 He argues that “the spectator mentally engages with the character on stage, or even engages physically in the event by taking on a role in an immersive narrative, as is evident in interactive theatre or ritual.”335 For Skjoldager-Nielsen’s purposes, the introduction of imagination in the feedback loop enables expansion on the spectators’ transcendence and potential experience of spirituality. For my purposes, the imagination is needed in relation to the experience of a connected relation, and empathy. I would argue that the potential of responding and reacting as a spectator is not only in relation to the performer; the feedback loop can be – and as I would argue in most cases, is – a response and reaction in relation to the fictional character. Consider the way a clown at the circus interacts with the audience. The clown is a fictional character that interacts with the audience within the realms of reality; as such, any response and reaction also acknowledges the fictionality of the interaction. In this case, the feedback loop’s function in a fictional setting is evident since the interaction is highlighted, but I would claim that the same is true in any experience of a fictional live performance.

The typical discussion of empathy within philosophy is directed to sincere situations where people express themselves without a need to consider the representational aspects of the experience. In order to make use of empathy as a theoretical approach to theater, one needs to be cautious about this difference. In sincere empathic experience, the perspective-taking is informed by the simultaneous presence in a joint world, whereas in constructed empathy, the spectator needs to suspend one’s beliefs in order to accept a fictive world as the frame of the empathic relation. As the empathic experience demands a separation between self and other, the spectator has to simultaneously recognize the self, in the audience as in the real world, and the perspective of the character, and their engagement, action and intention in relation to their fictive

334 Skjoldager-Nielsen, pp. 133-143.
335 Ibid., p. 134.
world. As such, the empathic experience at the theater is not only an intersubjective exercise, but it also entails a trans-fictional understanding, whilst continuously demanding a separation of self and other.

When *He* and *She* Becomes *You* – Experiencing Connection

I will now shift focus to a few examples where *I* in short moments experience an empathic relation to the body on stage, in short moments where *He* or *She* is experienced as *You*. In both examples, the circus feats are toned-down, and the character and the performer have a strong presence.

Empathy of Recognition – Experiencing Their Life as my Own

Coming back from the break in *Movements*, the curtain opens and there are large, empty picture frames hanging over the stage. In the sparsely lit room, I see contours of the performers next to them. Some are standing, others are sitting on the frames. On the stage floor, there are small islands with miniature models of houses and trees. Dispersed piano chords are playing on the speakers, creating a solemn air. One of the frames lights up, and a woman dressed in black pants and a black top is sitting there. It is the Syrian dancer and choreographer Nasreen Al-Janabi Larsson. From the speakers, a voice starts to tell a story. “In my childhood home in Damascus there is a garden with many different trees, green apples, ordinary apples, olives, and grapes, but the biggest, oldest and most beautiful is a fig tree. That tree was planted by my grandmother’s bare hands.” On the frame, which acts as a swing, the woman is starting to move around, balancing and swinging in and out of poses. “Fig trees grow very big, and the roots dig into the ground, which makes it hard for other trees to grow close to it, as the fig tree takes all the space in the soil.” The motion in the frame is slow and beautiful, tenderly complementing the text without stealing too much attention. “But in our garden, all the roots entwined so the trees could grow together. When I was in middle school, I was always the first to come home. We didn’t have any spare key, so I used to climb over the fence into our garden and sit in our fig tree.” The reading is slow and serene, like the movements on the frame. “I was often hungry, so I picked all the figs I could find, and ate them. They are delicious. In 2014 a missile landed in our garden.” A large thump is heard as someone onstage hits the wet stage floor. “Right in my fig tree. Thanks to the fig tree it never exploded. The fig tree saved us many times.” The light is turned off, and another performer comes into focus.

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During the act, my mind took the perspective of her body slowly dangling from the swing, envisioning the precious garden with its beautiful trees, merging my own memories of the past and the stories of her childhood. The calm voice came with a foreboding of something other, something darker. As she described how the missile landed in the tree, I felt tears slowly running down my cheeks, and her reality was projected into my memory. In this act, the body onstage slowly disappeared, and my attention was focused entirely on the voice and the story being told. As a spectator, I do not know if her story was real or fiction. Fischer-Lichte argues that the experience of presence is a “purely performative quality,” and that it is experienced when the performer’s phenomenal body appears for the spectator.  

I will disregard her somewhat confusing use of the “phenomenal body” for now, but the claim seems rather stark, as it denies an experience of presence created by the fiction. I would argue that the experience of a presence of a fictional body is equally possible. In this example, the sense of You that emerges in my experience can be either connected to the character or the real performer, or it can be both. Rather than accepting Fischer-Lichte’s argument that the heightened experience comes from the experience of the real body, I would argue that the experience is heightened when the real and the fictive merge and create one experiential unity. At first, I considered this experience as a liminal experience of being ‘betwixt and between,’ as it seems to be emerging from uncertainty. But I would argue instead that it is the direct opposite, as it is both performer and character, and an experience of astute certainty, where the horizons of understanding merge, and the fiction becomes real, and the suspension of disbelief is no longer necessary. In my sense of You, I fully connect with the full entity.

Another question related to the experience of empathy is whether there is a need for reciprocity in the engagement to be considered empathy. As empathy is usually discussed in relation to everyday, face-to-face situations where two individuals engage in an interaction, it seems that there might be a point in discussing the interactive aspects of the experience. Considering the claims I have made in my discussion on spectatorship, where I agree with the understanding of performances created by both actors and spectators, and in my understanding of the embodied mind, I would argue that the experience is created in the interaction. But what does that mean for the understanding of the experience of empathy? A short answer is that it does not matter. Even if the experience is created through the interaction, and as such needs some aspect

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338 I will return to this discussion in the section on staging in the chapter on freak show.
of reciprocity, my understanding of it is what is central. If I experience reciprocity in the intersubjective relation to a body onstage, that is my experience. What an outside analysis of the interactive relation would say does not really matter for my experience as a spectator.

*Empathy of Resemblance – Experiencing my Thoughts in the Other*

The stage is completely dark. I am sitting in the audience watching *Movements*. Two walls revolve at the back of the stage and reveal four lit rooms, two on top of each other on either side of the stage, like small apartment buildings. In the top room on the right side is a man sitting in a chair reading, while the man downstairs is running on a treadmill. On the upper left there is someone sitting behind a computer at a desk, and in the bottom left the circus performer David Eriksson is laying on the floor in a pair of tight white pants and a white tank top. The lights go off in the other rooms, and now only David can be seen. He stands up, looks out into the audience, blows up a balloon and ties it. He takes a wine glass and a spoon from the floor and places the spoon in his mouth, balancing the balloon with the glass on top. With a nail, he pops the balloon and catches the wine glass on the spoon and balances it. The crowd applauds.

"I have six nervous breakdowns a day, if I am out of yogurt, I won’t go to the store and buy new yogurt; no, I break down instead. The whole day is ruined. I can’t exercise, I can’t pay my bills. My life is over. After about ten minutes I try to get myself together.” He leaves the room and steps onto the stage floor and walks into the area that is filled with water from an earlier ‘rainfall.’ ”I take a deep breath and … hehe… say to myself, how dangerous can it…”, he slips and does a classic slapstick fall, landing on his buttocks. I hear laughter from the audience, but my mind is contemplating his words. He slowly gets up “How dangerous can it be?” From his pocket he takes out his cellphone, he points at it and says ”700 bucks.” He laughs anxiously, “Ha-haha, all my contacts, all my messages, all my jobs, my career, my life, I am scared.” He freezes in a pose reminiscent of Jesus on the cross and drops the phone onto the floor. The room is filled with an intense quietness. In the suspense of the seemingly forced comedy, the energy produces an atmosphere of attention and contemplation. He inhales in panic and comes back to life, he loses his balance and falls head first into the water on the floor. “No, oh no, I swallowed water from a pool that people have been going in and out of all day, it’s dirty.” He puts his hands to his temples. ”Catastrophizing”. He puts his hands on his stomach. “I have a fever, and I am cold.” He hugs himself and cries while small white balls start spraying onto the stage from a noisy

340 **"7000 spänna."** My translation.
machine. David tries desperately to throw them back. He screams and falls and throws, but the balls keep coming, hundreds of them, maybe thousands, bobbing slowly in the water. The noise of the machine disturbs the earlier serenity. Finally, the machine stops, and it becomes quiet. David is on his hands and knees, panting. “I have six breakdowns a day. In 43 years, that is…” He is counting. “In 43 years, that is a helluva lot of catastrophes.” He lets go and falls flat into the water.

One of the other rooms lights up, and one of the actors steps out and starts talking about meeting migrants at the train station. The next room lights up, and a new story of meeting the people trying to seek refuge in Sweden is heard. While the stories continue, David gets up and starts juggling balls and slipping around in the water. Music starts playing with a distinct drumbeat, eight of the other performers step onto the stage and start dancing a dabke around him, connected by holding their hands.341 They are all dressed in suits and dresses that you might see at any office, party, or restaurant in Sweden. The water splashes as they dance and celebrate. Meanwhile, David is running around in fear, falling and getting back up. The mood shifts as another actor, standing on the top of the ‘apartment’, starts to read texts about the migration situation.

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Dabke is an Arab folk dance done on joyous occasions. The dancers move in a line or in a circle, following step patterns that make the entire line move in unison.
the arguments of officials and the final decision of “adjustments to the European Union minimum refugee quota.”

During this act, I never once had the inclination to laugh. Quite early on, my experience started to shift perspective, as David’s words made total sense to me and put the finger on issues with which I myself struggle. In my identification with this white male, born and raised in Sweden and just a few years older than me, I came to see myself, and for a short moment, I experienced an empathic connection as I tuned in to his perspective. I related to his struggle with everyday issues, catastrophizing, anxiety and the guilt of not being able to focus on the bigger picture. David became a reflection of me, showing me my privileges, but I still stayed in the experience as mine of his perspective. As soon as the juggling began and the music started, the connection was gone. While I had the empathic connection, this act did not have any complex movement or feats that pulled my attention away from David and his character. The character and the performer merged again, and it felt like the issues being discussed by David as the performer, as much as a character in an act. I realize that this very well might be in my mind only, but the fact that no suspense of disbelief was necessary might have made it easier to engage in the empathic relation.

The phenomenological theory of empathy is complex, and one could argue that these examples are not empathy proper, depending on the stance taken towards self-orientation vs. other-orientation, or the fact that the level of reciprocity is low. However, the relational engagement for me as a spectator is experientially different in these moments. As for the experience, a basic framing of an empathic relation to the body onstage might well suffice to give a greater understanding on the spectatorial venture, and in the experience when He or She becomes You.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, my aim was to explore how the bodies of the circus create meaning in the experience, and how that meaning appears to consciousness. I also focus in this chapter on how the relation between the body in the audience and the body on the stage is experienced.

Starting by introducing entertainment as an aspect is not only about the circus as such, since the entertainment aspects are common to all of my examples, and in some ways also hint at the overall appeal of the genres, because at the core is the fact that they entertain us. However, entertainment is not

merely something fun or full of joy, and a range of experiences can cause one to be entertained. As such, the following themes in the book can be seen as aspects of entertainment in that they discuss different experiences of entertainment. Crucial to entertainment is directing the spectators’ attention to the stage and creating an interest that keeps the attention. This entails a balance between novelty – which in circus often is created by the sensational – and the familiar – as the experience needs to be easily accessible for the spectators. Even though the entertainment relies on easy access, that does not mean that it evades difficult subjects or intends to inform or challenge the audience’s minds. In the intermingling of entertaining actions and framings of despair, utopian moments appear that direct attention to what is lacking in the world and give hope of another possible world by a shared sense of community. However, in the staging of the Other, great care needs to be taken, as stereotypes might cause problems as they can reinforce hierarchies and power structures.

The circus is full of sensational bodies performing amazing feats involving bodily movement and immense skills. These bodily action can trigger bodily responses in the audience both as visceral thrills, and more elaborate sensations of movement. Our bodies are wired for experiencing movement, and through kinesthetic empathy we have the ability to connect our experience as spectators to the body onstage. The visceral and embodied experiences also connect to the cognitive experience. As Tait reminds us, “[a] spectator’s viscerality and bodily thrill cannot be detached from his or her cognitive, emotional and unconscious response to culturally shaped artistic representation that is intended to stimulate them.”

The element of risk has always been at the core of circus is. For a spectator, the experience of risk can be both visceral and kinesthetic as it turns the attention to the body on stage. Depending on the dynamic of the act, the experience can be sensed as an intense suspense, through sudden surprises, or a rollercoaster of emotions.

Finally, I show that the phenomenal experience of other people is complicated, as we need to acknowledge them as minded beings. Our ability to empathize with others creates a potential for the relation between spectator and performer to take on different modes of intersubjectivity, and therefore be experienced as more or less connected. It is not just the content in our mind that shapes our experience, but also the mode in which we experience this content.

The connection between the spectator and the performer is central in this chapter, and this is suggested already in the understanding of entertainment

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343 Tait, 2005, p. 144.
not only as a maintenance or passing time, but also as a mutual connection. Stoddart suggests that “the circus, without exception, engenders a relationship of spectacular immediacy with its audience and…the adjectives which surround it indicate that its aesthetics prioritise effect over thought.”344 The sense of connection is also central as we face the risk, when we feel the kinesthetic empathy, or in experiencing utopia in the political.

344 Stoddart, pp. 82-83.
Chapter 2. Burlesque

I enter the club through the hallway of Nalen, the classic entertainment establishment in Stockholm. I’m immediately taken by the cheerful atmosphere and the joyous laughter. All around me are people wearing playful costumes, and the awkwardness of my own outfit instantly transforms into a sense of community. I hear a DJ playing club-style jazz as I enter the main room. The lamps bathe the room in red light and it feels like stepping into a fantasy. The bar area at the far end of the room is crowded, but the people waiting for their drinks seem friendly and at once I find myself engaged in conversation, probably about my beard. Suddenly, the music is turned off and everybody’s attention is directed towards the stage. A slender, dark-haired woman wearing a 1930s style dress walks onstage and the cheers and applause are instant.

The show is about to start, and my heart is thumping hard in anticipation...

Background

Of the genres I am studying, burlesque has probably had the most remarkable revival, as the once obscure and narrow form of entertainment most associated with undressed bodies and sexuality has become a part of the common mind through the constant circulation of images in the internet era. In most cases, burlesque striptease is now socially accepted and almost presented as family fun – with burlesque bingo, flea markets, and workshops in tassel-twirling. At the same time we are in an era when gender equality and feminism are simultaneously gaining ground. Something about the staged body in burlesque calls our attention and gives us attractive experiences.

If the circus was the colorful tent in the backyard of the theater, the burlesque is at the very back of the tent, closed off and invisible until darkness falls. That’s when a new kind of entertainment begins, with laughter, song, and dance, teasing the crowd with comedy, and bodies of all kinds and shapes.

My first experience watching a burlesque show was in Stockholm, sometime around 2010. I remember being terrified, and not only because the club’s dress code required me to wear a costume, but mainly because I did not know what to expect. As an eager student, I was struggling with how to understand the undressing in relation to my feminist values. I thought the burlesque objectified the female body, in a cultural setting that suggested that it was no big deal. I didn’t know what to make of it. Among my feminist friends, opinions on burlesque ranged from it being yet another objectification of the female body, to an emancipatory tool in the fight for equality. I find the revival of the burlesque intriguing in relation to the circus and freak show, as it not only relates to the bodies on stage in another way, but there is also a different audience culture in which the spectator is joining the play in a more obvious way.

In this chapter, I will take a closer look at burlesque, and on the experience of acts’ playful reveal. I will focus on popular culture in relation to burlesque and how burlesque has the potential to be subversive. My embodied experience focuses on the comical aspects of the acts, and laughter is discussed. Then I turn my focus to my embodied experience of desire. The final part deals with my interpersonal experience of other bodies in the audience and how the sense of a We changes the experience and creates a sense of community.

The Field of Burlesque

In the following section, I will provide a background of the genre to frame my study and to provide a general idea for readers not yet acquainted with burlesque. Although the historical overview might seem a bit far from the scope of my study, I argue that the spectator’s experience of the genre is shaped in relation to the previous knowledge of the very same. I will start by defining burlesque in general and my use of the concept. Then I will give a short overview of the history of the genre and its revival, and briefly present the genre in a Swedish context. Before moving on to the specific research questions connected to the chapter, I will frame burlesque within the current field of research.

Defining the Genre

Burlesque is a term that can mean several things depending on the context of its use. Although it might not always seem like it, the core of the various concepts is similar. The word burlesque has its root in the Italian burla, which means a joke. This term was used in commedia dell’arte to describe a comic
interlude involving some horseplay or practical jokes. In early 19th-century London, burlesque came to refer to a specific genre where comical plays were staged to mock or ridicule famous operas, dramas, or books. Today, this genre is usually called Victorian burlesque. This was the genre that later came to the USA and became the American burlesque, which over time became less parodic and more aligned with striptease.

As such, burlesque today should be understood as a form of onstage entertainment where a play on sexuality is performed, with the body in focus, and most often with undressing or a reveal. The act often uses comedy and parody to ridicule power and expose oppressive norms.

The burlesque can also be closer to retro nostalgia and a vintage homage to female sexuality inspired by glamorous striptease and the star culture of the golden days of burlesque.

**Neo-Burlesque and the New Burlesque**

At times, the concept neo-burlesque or new burlesque is used for the contemporary genre after the revival in the 1990s. This new take on burlesque follows the feminist development in the 20th century and mostly what is known as the third wave feminism, and as such the focus is most often on a critique of norms concerning gender, sexuality, and identity. The new burlesque is often considered a bodily emancipation, as it shows the diversity of the body, and uses the body as a tool in the struggle for equality, as it highlights the construction of norms. I will describe this evolution briefly in the section on the roots of the burlesque and return to the issue when I discuss burlesque and the potential of subversion.

Male burlesque in the new burlesque is often called boylesque, and it is at times considered a subgenre to burlesque, with festivals and events of its own. Often, boylesque acts play with norms relating to gender, and different forms of cross-dressing are quite common.

**Burlesque in my Study**

Just as with the labeling of contemporary circus as “new”, the prefix “neo-” is growing outdated, and there is a tendency to simply call contemporary burlesque “burlesque,” as there is little need to distinguish it from the original genre. Contemporary acts that use a vintage burlesque style often also resemble the classic burlesque, and the differentiation is thus problematic. For

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346 Willson, p. 155.
347 Mason, p. 170.
348 Ibid., p. 169.
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the rest of my thesis, I will use the term burlesque for any of the acts on the stage.

The Roots of Burlesque

American burlesque, which is the one to which contemporary burlesque relates, emerged in the latter 19th century, as several performance traditions influenced each other in a time of urbanization and redefined gender roles. The history usually starts with Lydia Thompson’s debut with the play *Ixion* at Wood’s Theater in New York in September, 1868. Thompson and her troupe, known as *The British Blondes*, had a background in the Victorian Burlesque, and by the use of popular songs, dance, and aesthetics, the play, which was based on the Greek myth of Ixion, mocked the social elites of the time. The details of the staging, the aesthetics, and the text are unknown, but it is known that there were cancan dancing and breeches roles.

Historian Robert Allen writes about the early American burlesque in the book *Horrible Prettiness* (1991). He argues that the reception of the Ixion needs to be put in the theatrical context of midcentury America, and he highlights three important occurrences for the rise of the “feminized spectacle” in the 1860s: the staging of *Mazeppa* at New York’s Broadway Theater in 1861, in which Adah Isaacs Menken played the lead character in breeches, and the way Menken made herself public as an actress at the time; the burlesque that was performed in the American variety; and the female dance where legs were shown in the ballet spectacle *The Black Crook* in 1866. The fundamental parts of what would become the American burlesque were already being put on stage, but not at the same time. With *Thompson and the British Blondes*, the parts came together as a whole. The women in breeches roles, showing off their legs and teasing the men in the audience, were not just showing off; they also had a voice that mocked and challenged concepts of femininity and masculinity, and they refused to confine to narrow ideals and the conventions of acting. Performing in trousers was not an attempt to hide their femininity, but rather to position in a place where they could show off their legs and make insinuations about female sexual passion. Female sexuality had been on display earlier in concert salons, which also were associated with prostitution,

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351 Ibid., pp. 96-117.
352 Ibid., pp. 134-135, 144-146.
and where working-class men were in the audience. With Thompson’s burlesque, a middle-class audience that included women found its way to the theater.

After the success in New York, Thompson’s burlesque troupe went on tour across the USA in 1869. During this time, several other burlesque troupes formed in order to meet the demand for burlesque entertainment in the wake of Thompson’s success. Many burlesque troupes joined forces with minstrel shows and toured with a combined form of entertainment with the racialized stereotypes of blackface and the female body as an object of male desire. This joining of performances, which was primarily for economic reasons, also led to a change in audience, as the bourgeoisie from the theaters in urban areas was replaced by a working-class audience common at the minstrel shows. In the last decades of the 19th century, the burlesque managed to establish itself as a genre that catered to working-class- and lower-middle-class males, which also led to the emergence of specific burlesque theaters that were separate from ordinary theaters.

At the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, cultures from around the world were presented for the audience. The fair was in line with the anthropological exploration craze of the time. At the fair, there was a display of exotic belly dancing in an exhibition of an Algerian village. This dance, with a woman wearing baggy trousers and showing the top of her belly, was soon introduced in burlesque shows around the country. The “cooch” or “hootchy-kootchy” as it came to be called, brought a flare of the exotic to the burlesque, and the tantalizing explicit sexuality was accepted as a trait of the Other, and hence less threatening to Western morals and decency. This was the start of a more explicit undressing that later became striptease. From that point, the burlesque became a more explicitly sexual exhibition, and the voice of the performer and the comical mockery and the jokes disappeared. Lydia Thompson comments on the evolution and finds little of the burlesque in the emerging burlesque at the time. The burlesque continued to evolve, and the display of the female body became the main attraction. When it comes to the actual content of the burlesque shows, scholars draw different conclusions. Allen argues that although the tease and sexuality were in focus, performers rarely took off their clothes onstage, and when they did disrobe, it was usually concealed behind a screen that distorted the view, and the “nude” legs

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353 Ibid., pp. 73-76.
354 Ibid., pp. 159-163.
355 Ibid., pp. 163-177.
357 Ibid., pp. 225-229.
358 Ibid., p. 231, 236-240.
shown were covered by tights in a color that matched the performer’s skin tone.  
Irving Zeidman on the contrary argues that undressing was “not uncommon.”

The difference is somewhat minor, since both claims are made with caution and in relation to an expectation. However, it shows the difficulty of describing a history of a popular genre that was not fully accepted in the established culture.

By the early 20th century, burlesque houses had opened across the USA, and around this time staged undressing found its way into the vaudeville and the revue. The most famous example was Florenz Ziegfeld’s revues, known as the Ziegfeld Follies, which from 1907 became the socially acceptable display of feminine sexual spectacle, as Ziegfeld managed to present them in such a way that the audience associated them with the “cosmopolitan worldliness of Paris” rather than the “working-class sexuality of burlesque.” Ziegfeld’s shows consisted of chorus girls standing in line, dressed in silk stockings, kicking and dancing in unison. The revues, as well as the cinemas and vaudeville, became a competition for the burlesque, as they provided similar attractions. The burlesque needed to cut costs and adapt in order to survive. Some burlesque producers established their own troupes and took over rundown theaters to save money. These came to be called stock burlesque, and besides the change in management, the shows were stripped down to the bare essentials, focusing even more on the undressing on stage.

One of these producers were the Minsky brothers, who opened a burlesque theater on the roof of Manhattan’s National Winter Garden in 1917. By parroting an upscale establishment like Ziegfeld’s, they managed to get a flare of glamour and class while at the same time showing stripping and nudity on stage. In the 1930s, opposition to the burlesque grew, and several attempts to shut the theaters down were made by the authorities in New York. These years are usually considered the heyday of burlesque, with famous performers such as Gypsy Rose Lee, probably the most famous burlesque performer of all time, and Carrie Finnel, who introduced tassel-twirling. The burlesque of this era has had a great impact on the aesthetics of the neo-burlesque.

359 Ibid., pp. 243-244.
362 Allen, p. 245.
363 Ibid., pp. 246-247.
364 Shteir, pp. 61-66.
365 Allen, pp. 251-258.
When the New York burlesque scene struggled with new regulations the burlesque continued in other cities around the country, and soldiers returning from the Second World War further increased the demand for burlesque strip-tease. In the years after the war, striptease continued in burlesque theaters but also spread to supper clubs, which were established to offer a striptease that was more glamorous, and also catered to another crowd. These clubs were usually operated by former nightclub owners, and as such the burlesque was disappearing from the striptease. In the years up to the 1950s, one could also argue that the burlesque was a part of the striptease, or that striptease was a part of the burlesque, but as the times changed, the burlesque quality slowly disappeared, and as strip clubs became established, pornography became accessible and nudity more common, the burlesque fell out of fashion. The last operating burlesque house was the Trocadero in Philadelphia, which finally closed in 1978.

The Revival of Burlesque

In the 1990s, the burlesque once again found its way onto the stage, and a new era of bodily entertainment began. Exactly when and where this happened is hard to know; it seems to have happened in several places around the same time. Curiously, Jacki Willson claims that it happened in 1994, but she provides no evidence or support for the claim. What most scholars agree on, however, is that the revived burlesque reconnected with the intentions of the early burlesque, turning the spotlight on gender norms, stereotypes, inequality, and using the body and sexuality to challenge narrow societal norms. Sally Lynn writes that “[n]eo-burlesque is glamorous, campy, parodic, excessive, and salacious (or blue). It has an ‘anything goes’ sentiment that implicates both performers and spectators in its all-consuming path, creating a participatory space.” Compared to earlier eras of burlesque, the women were now not only in the majority on stage but also in

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367 Ibid., p. 250.
368 Foley, p. 53.
371 Sally, p. 7.
the audience, and at the events, the sense of community became a key element.

There are different ideas regarding the revival of the genre. Willson ties the revival of the burlesque to earlier key periods of burlesque, claiming that turbulent times are the soil in which the burlesque grows. The burlesque first emerged in a time when the role of woman in society was being re-defined, as urbanization and the labor market changed. The second golden era of burlesque was during the Great Depression, and in the 1990s, the dot.com boom ended in yet another depression around the turn of the millennium.

An alternative explanation is that the neo-burlesque movement emerged in the wake of the third wave feminism, which focuses on the individual right to identity and sexuality. This perspective relates to a postmodern queer view in which the objectified body on stage can be understood as an act of emancipation, as it empowers the individual and asserts the right to one’s own body. I will get back to this later in my discussion and analysis of the experiences.

Although there are some concerns about the more mainstream acts, most of the literature that discusses the neo-burlesque movement does so in a positive manner. However, one exception is Rachel Shteir; in a short section in the conclusion of her book on striptease, she turns her attention to the contemporary neo-burlesque – of which she is quite critical – and questions the radicalness, as well as the aesthetics and political motivation. However, Shteir references only one example of contemporary neo-burlesque, The Los Angeles Pussycat Dolls, and she does not develop her arguments in any detail, making it difficult to understand the position she takes. Some of the more puzzling critiques of the neo-burlesque she makes are that there is a lack of fluidity and androgyny, as if it were nostalgic about the stable gender roles of the past, and that the play of taboo is lacking. It is as if she is writing about another genre. Queer sexuality, gender fluidity and critique of societal norms have been central to most of the burlesque I have experienced, and concerning the taboo, I have seen multiple acts that address issues dealing with what is considered taboo; this will be obvious in my analysis of the acts. It is even more puzzling, since Shteir promotes a positive view on striptease in general in her book. Perhaps the reference Shteir has chosen says something about her narrow scope on the neo-burlesque. It should also be taken into consideration that her book came out in 2004, and that the genre has continued to evolve since then.

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373 Willson, pp. 20-33.
374 Mason, pp. 169-170.
375 Shteir, pp. 337-342.
376 Ibid., pp. 338, 341.
One rarely mentioned aspect of the revival that I would argue is crucial to the development and reach of the new burlesque is the evolution of the internet, which quickly became a platform for sharing images, popular culture, and pornography. Images of striptease, classic beauty, and glamour with a vintage flare were picked up by commercial interest looking for ways to brand their products as a luxury.

**Burlesque in Sweden**

The early burlesque of the latter 19th century never made it to Sweden, and because of strict regulations, public displays of nudity were quite rare, at least before World War II. Some nude dance acts were announced earlier, but there are no sources that show that they ever took place.\(^{377}\)

In the 1950s, a strip club called *Pigalle* opened at the amusement park Gröna Lund in Stockholm, where it ran until 1980.\(^ {378}\) Striptease and sex shows appeared at the carnival variety at the Kivik Fair from the 1960s to the 1980s.\(^ {379}\) Neither of these had any similarities to the burlesque other than the undressing on stage.

The first burlesque in Sweden came in the shape of the new burlesque, when a group of people inspired by the queer American neo-burlesque, started the *Hootchy Kootchy Club* in 2006. With the club came the first Swedish burlesque troupe, called *Hootchy Kootchy Kittens*, who later split into two groups: *Hootchy Kootchy Hussies* and *The Amazing Knicker Kittens Burlesque Revue*.\(^ {380}\)

In the years following the success of the *Hootchy Kootchy Club*, the burlesque spread and several new initiatives enriched Sweden’s burlesque community.\(^ {381}\) In Gothenburg, the club *Tip the Velvet* started in 2008 with inspiration from the *Hootchy Kootchy Club*, which had visited the city in 2007 for a

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guest performance connected to the city’s annual book fair. Since then, burlesque clubs have been organized a few times each year.\textsuperscript{382}

In 2010, \textit{Burleskapader} became Sweden’s first burlesque festival, returning in 2011 and 2012. \textit{The Blackbird Burlesque Cabaret} organized an \textit{Afternoon Tea Burlesque} at Berns Salonger in 2011, and the following year they put on the show \textit{Grandma Tease’l Tasse’l} at Hamburger Börs.

The most influential person in the Swedish burlesque scene for the last ten years has been Fräulein Frauke, who not only performs at a high level, but also produces and organizes some of the largest burlesque shows. Since the first club in 2009, \textit{Fräulein Frauke Presents} has become the largest and most renowned burlesque club in Sweden. Organized several times a year, the club is usually presented with a specific theme and an impressive line-up of both international and Swedish performers. Since 2012, Fräulein Frauke has also organized the renowned \textit{Stockholm International Burlesque Festival} with her partner John-Paul Bichard. In 2015, Fräulein Frauke and John-Paul Bichard were internationally recognized as they were voted 47th on the prestigious Burlesque Top 50 in the magazine \textit{21st Century Burlesque}.\textsuperscript{383}

In the last 10 years, burlesque has influenced society more broadly, and people are now going to clubs all dressed up, doing fitness training, visiting flea markets, fighting the patriarchy, and playing bingo in the name of burlesque. What used to be considered immoral and dirty is now presented as family fun.

\textbf{Research on Burlesque}

Research that is focused on the specifics of burlesque is so far quite rare. There are a few scholarly books written in the field of theater- and performance studies and within culture studies and American history. When it comes to articles, the scope is broader, and scholars from diverse fields such as gender studies, sociology, marketing, and economics have found interest in aspects of the genre. There are also several popular books focused on the genre, stage techniques, or specific performers.

For the discussion on the roots of burlesque, historian Robert G. Allen’s book \textit{Horrible Prettiness} (1991) has been crucial, as it not only presents the history of the emergence of the genre but also places it in a wider context of the American culture and entertainment industry, as well as in relation to the


representation of gender and class. Allen emphasizes the aspects of comedy and transgression in his discussion of the burlesque – this is what defines the genre in relation to striptease and other genres of sexual spectacle, and the undressing is rather an unfortunate evolution than the core of the genre. He argues that “[t]he true strip was burlesque’s last-ditch and ultimately unsuccessful strategy to stay alive. It represents not the symbol of burlesque’s golden age – although it is remembered as such – but rather its ultimate failure to sustain a performance medium sufficiently distinct in its appeals from other forms to draw an audience.” This stance towards the performance rather than the stripping is quite different from the perspectives on burlesque found in discussions of the genre from the perspective of striptease in other books. The focus on the comedy and transgression is something to which I will return in my discussion on the subversive potential of the burlesque.

In studies of the contemporary burlesque, issues of gender, sexuality and female empowerment are among the most common. Jacki Willson’s book *The Happy Stripper* (2008) focuses on aspects of empowerment in relation to burlesque and not only draws on feminist and post-feminist theories, but also uses burlesque to understand the post-feminism of our times. Starting in her own experience of mixed emotions of “pleasure, anger and embarrassment” when watching a burlesque performer, she sets out to explore how the burlesque can be understood both as an expression of female sexual liberation with the potential to subvert structures of gender and sexuality, and as an objectification of women and their bodies. Willson writes the neo-burlesque into a modern continuation of feminist performances starting in the early burlesque of the late 19th century, via the heyday of burlesque in the early 20th century, to the feminist performance art of the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on aspects of business, the power of the female subject, and the body on stage.

Yet another use of a post-feminist approach is to be found in the chapter ‘Cross-Dressing and Grrry Shows’ in the book *Naked Exhibitionism* (2013). In it, Claire Nally discusses the radical potential of burlesque, as it is somewhat stuck between the commodification of the glamour and beauty and the subversion and the diversity of bodies being celebrated. Starting in the 19th century burlesque’s gender play, Nally discuss how cross-dressing is used to queer identities and argues that the burlesque needs to align with camp and

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385 Ibid., p. 244.
critique the heteronormative gender. Mainstream burlesque, with Dita von Teese as its obvious poster-girl, tends to draw on commercial images that do little to empower women, and Nally comes to the conclusion that the “burlesque is Janus-faced: simultaneously seeming to reproduce stereotypes whilst also operating to question them.” In the final pages of the chapter, Nally directs some attention to the audience, the gaze of the spectators, and how it affects the empowerment of burlesque; this is an often-overlooked aspect of the burlesque that I will discuss in my analysis.

The issue of whether neo-burlesque is empowering and could be seen as a tool in the fight for equality, or if it is instead yet another sexual objectification of women that enforces the structures of patriarchy, is an ongoing debate both in the field of performance studies and gender studies. I will get back to this discussion when I write about the burlesque’s potential for subversion.

Although there only few books that specifically deal with burlesque, research on striptease is much more frequent. Some of the books do discuss the burlesque as well, either as a genre in itself or as part of the history of striptease. In the book Striptease (2004), Rachel Shteir discusses the evolution of striptease from the early days in the 19th century to the decline in the latter parts of the 19th century. Shteir is eager to treat the striptease as a popular cultural phenomenon and focus on it as a social force tantalizing the pleasures of the American public, while it reflects the gender roles and possibilities of women to succeed. The history of burlesque is tightly interwoven into the general history of the striptease, and at times the lack of distinction makes it difficult to follow the trajectory of the evolution of the burlesque in particular; this also shows how difficult the genre distinctions are as the genres emerge and the performers move between different stages.

Brenda Foley’s book Undressed for Success (2005) discusses the woman on stage in genres where the undressed body is in focus, such as striptease and beauty contests. The undressed body on display in striptease and beauty contests is in many ways similar; both are regulated by the same view on the American woman in popular culture, and similar moral judgment is passed on the body, and the same normative view polices the bodies. Morality becomes crucial in what is to be displayed, where and how, and the “place” of the woman is negotiated through the public display of the female body. In the

388 Ibid., p. 129.
book, the burlesque appears more as a historical aspect of the striptease than a genre on its own.

Questions for the Chapter

In this chapter, my aim is to explore how the body onstage, as well as the bodies in the audience, shape the experience for the spectator. As a genre focusing on the undressing body, bodily norms and popular images in society affect the experience. Therefore, I want to broaden the understanding of how this informs the experience.

- What experiential meaning appears in my subjective experience of the body on stage in burlesque?
- How do these experiential meanings appear to consciousness in the subjective experience, from a cognitive, embodied and relational approach?
- How are the subjective experiences, and the meaning that emerges from the bodies on stage in burlesque, informed by the world outside the mind, as in the specific situation, and in a broader cultural context?

Material

The empirical material that I analyze in this chapter has been collected at three different burlesque venues on a number of occasions over the past five years.

_Fräulein Frauke Presents_ is a burlesque club that presents a few themed burlesques at the classic entertainment venue _Nalen_ in Stockholm every year. The club has a dress code shortly stated as “dress to impress” – this means that visitors are required to dress up either in line with the theme or to other styles appreciated in the subculture. This can be vintage clothes, fetish clothes, masks, uniforms, feathers, hats and so on. At times it can be difficult to tell the performers and the audience apart. At the club, the audience is standing and can move around on the floor while the show is performed on a raised stage. A bar serves alcoholic and other beverages during the performance.

The second venue is the _Stockholm Burlesque Festival_, also organized by Fräulein Frauke with her partner John-Paul Bichard. The event consists mainly of two shows, one with a sitting audience at _Södra Teatern_, which is another classic entertainment venue in Stockholm, and the other at Nalen, with a standing audience in the same format as the burlesque clubs. The dress code at the theater show is less strict, and my impression is that the audience is more varied with quite a few people in the audience who do not usually visit burlesque clubs.

The final venue for my examples is the _Helsinki Burlesque Festival_, which was one of Europe’s first neo-burlesque festivals. I visited the festival in 2016,
when it was at *Gloria Cultural Arena* in central Helsinki. There were two days of shows with an impressive number of acts. At the venue, the audience sat on chairs while the act was performed on a raised stage. Although there was a dress code, some attended in everyday clothes. As for the specific performers and acts being discussed, they will be presented as they appear in my analysis throughout the chapter.

Since the burlesque is an entertainment genre that stages the spectacular, the novelty of the acts is important; this means that the same act rarely is performed more than once at a particular venue. The majority of the performers in the shows I have experienced are international and travel between different clubs and venues. I have thus rarely had the opportunity to watch the same act more than once, meaning that at times I may miss details or misremember specifics. To correct this, I have sometimes used images and video recordings for specifics about costumes, choreography, and music in my presentations of the acts in order to give you as a reader a better image of the experience. The phenomenal experience as such is however described from the live event, and new aspects found in the re-viewing have been left out. All of the examples I am using have been experienced live, as an ordinary member of the audience.

**Burlesque from a Cognitive Approach**

In the first chapter, I started the discussion by turning to the notion of entertainment in relation to circus. Now I turn to the popular, a notion often combined with entertainment and a term that often defines the genres of my study. However, the popular in itself is elusive and a difficult term to define, as it is used in many different ways depending on the scope being discussed, and the field in which the discussion is taking place. I will then turn the discussion to how burlesque can be subversive and challenge ideas of gender, bodies, sexuality, and power.

**The Popular – Experiencing Shared References**

In the introduction to the book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2015), cultural studies professor John Storey tries to map out some general features of popular culture. He proposes three terms that are central to the understanding of it, and that need to be defined: culture, ideology, and popular. Defining culture is a notoriously difficult task, as it describes a range of different

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formations and is used accordingly depending on the field. Storey turns to Raymond Williams’ definitions and considers culture as “lived culture” and culture “as a particular way of life,” which includes subcultures and specific groups of people; and “culture as signifying practices” where expressions, performances and “texts” are produced to create meaning. This definition is well aligned with the way I approach my study, focusing on the lived experience of certain genres, and how they create meaning in the experience.

Storey’s second central aspect is ideology, and how popular culture is a terrain of constant power negotiations, and that the sometimes seemingly trivial entertainment is full of political dimensions. A general understanding of culture within the arts is formed through these two definitions, but the essential defining component needs to be added. The final notion – and the most difficult one to pin down – is popular; how to define it and what it means.

Storey presents six different ways in which popular culture is defined in scholarly research within the field of cultural studies. The first is quantitative and relates to the everyday use of the word popular, as in “widely favoured or well liked by many people.” This definition can be applied to popular culture that reaches many people, like music, books, television shows, movies, and other formats that can be widely distributed. A question that arises from this definition is how to decide how many people need to favor something for it to become popular, and if it does not reach that number, what is it then? Storey points out that this definition can become useless, as it is too inclusive. Holt Parker, professor of classical studies, sees a problem at the other end of the spectrum and argues that this definition risks excluding some things that we do consider popular. A reframing of the discussion from liked by many to ‘aiming to be liked by many’ can be helpful. It would, however, create new questions on how to decide what that appeal would be, and ultimately leave the quantitative and turn into a discussion of qualitative aspects of the popular.

The second definition is the “culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture.” In this case, the popular is defined in opposition to something else. There are a number of issues with this qualitative definition.

392 Ibid., pp. 1-2.
393 Ibid., pp. 2-5.
394 Ibid., p. 5.
395 Ibid., p. 5.
396 Holt Parker, ‘Toward a Definition of Popular Culture’, History and Theory, n. 50, 2011, pp. 150-151. I use Holt Parker’s text on definitions of popular culture despite him recently being convicted of a hideous crime. Although a difficult question, I consider the biography of the researcher and this article in this case separable.
397 Storey, p. 5.
The most apparent is that it is a non-definition, relying as it does on another definition. It also suggests that there are no alternatives to either popular or high culture, which would define certain cultures as popular that generally aren’t, such as cultural expressions within religion; these are neither considered high culture, nor popular culture. This definition is also based on judgments, and ultimately differentiates between good and bad culture, and in all its contradiction the popular can be labeled good because it appeals to many people, while it is considered bad for the very same reason. Another concern is what happens when high culture becomes popular, and vice versa. Is it possible to be both high and popular culture at once? Parker throws the pizza into the oven, so to speak, as being both mass-produced popular fast food and artisanal fine dining at once, and at the core, universally loved. Which is hard to deny.

The third definition is popular culture as mass culture, closely connected to commercial culture, as it is produced for consumption by the masses. This definition fixes the popular as inherently connected to the technical development in the wake of industrialization and urbanization, and as such, earlier expressions of popular culture become something else.

The fourth definition is popular culture as “the culture that originates from ‘the people’.” This definition is linked to the definition of folk culture and makes a claim of authenticity. One concern with this definition is to decide who the people are, who is included and who is not. Another issue is how this definition relates to commercial mass culture that often is defined as popular as it is made for the people, such as consumer goods, but not made by the people in a cultural sense.

Storey’s fifth and sixth definitions are more approaches than definitions. The fifth is the popular culture as “a site of struggle between ‘resistance’ of subordinate groups and the forces of ‘incorporation’ operating in the interest of dominant groups.” This approach leans on a Gramscian analysis of a constant exchange and negotiation to determine the hegemony in the field. From this approach, popular culture often interacts with the analysis of perspectives concerning gender, race, age, sexuality, disability, and other factors that are negotiated between the culture’s subordinate and dominant groups.

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398 Ibid., p. 7.
399 Parker, p. 152.
400 Storey, pp. 8-9.
401 Ibid., p. 9.
402 Ibid.
403 Ibid., pp. 10-11.
404 Ibid.
this definition highlights the political and ideological aspects of popular culture.

The sixth approach is in a sense a disappearance of the popular culture, as “postmodern culture is a culture that no longer recognizes the distinction between high and popular culture.” I can see the points being made from this approach in a broader discussion, but as a definition of popular culture, it has little to say as it rules out itself in the definition.

Storey’s structured discussion of popular culture works well as a basic and general understanding of how popular culture has been approached and defined in the field of cultural studies, and gives a good overview on current discussions on the popular. However, all of the definitions Storey presents treat popular culture as “a culture that only emerged following industrialization and urbanization,” as a product of a capitalist market. This view on popular culture is problematic for any scholar who works with popular culture in earlier history, and it ties the cultural power struggles at play in the popular unnecessarily close to the capitalist market. As I read Storey, he does not advocate any of the definitions he discusses, but rather creates an overview of the use within his field of study. On the very first page of his introduction, he states that popular culture is an “empty conceptual category, one that can be filled in a wide variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context of use.” At the end of the introduction, Storey adds two perspectives on the popular that are not discussed as definitions, but as central for the understanding; popular culture as the other, and the importance of context in the meaning of the popular. Later in the text, I will return to the importance of context, and propose an alternative approach to the popular.

The Popular as Genre

The term popular in relation to different cultural expressions and art forms has become quite common, but use differs depending on the genre. Popular in relation to music is probably most common, either referring to music that is widely appreciated, or, more commonly to pop music, which is considered a range of styles of music. The use concerning literature is similar, use as popular fiction describes a range of styles in popular literary genres. Within art, pop art is a distinct movement with a specific style. Popular science and popular history are terms used to describe work that approaches a wide audience, contrary to the often rather narrow and specific readers of science and history.

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405 Ibid., p. 12.
406 Ibid.
408 Ibid., pp. 13-16.
Other genres like television and film are often considered popular as the mediums themselves, although there is a wide variety in the content.

The term popular theater has been used sparsely in the field of theater. When it is used, it is generally in relation to specific genres like pantomime, commedia dell’arte, circus, cabaret, vaudeville, revue, puppetry, physical comedy, melodrama, and musical, but also as an aspect of avant-garde or political theater by people like Berthold Brecht, Ariane Mnouchkine and Peter Brook. In the book *Modern Popular Theatre* (2016), Jason Price discusses the difficulty of defining the popular theater and addresses some of the same issues mentioned earlier in relation to Storey’s definitions of popular culture. The returning theme throughout Price’s book is the focus on aspects of the people, and the popular as a site of struggle of power and hegemony.

If I were to consider burlesque from Storey’s definitions, there would be certain issues relating to each of the definitions. With the first definition – that is, as widely appreciated and liked by many – the first question is how many people are actually in the audience. Burlesque is a small genre. If the need for actual audience numbers is read instead as appeal for many, there are still issues, as even the potential audience is rather limited.

The definition of the popular as the culture that is left when the “high” culture has been defined is problematic, suggesting as it does that there is no overlap of the two. It is quite common in contemporary burlesque to have acts that make use of different forms of cultural expressions such as classical ballet or opera, which usually are considered high culture. This definition is also closely related to the last approach and how the high and the popular culture are rejected in a postmodern understanding of culture, and burlesque is often expressed in relation to challenges of categories central to a postmodern culture.

The definition of the popular as mass culture can instantly be rejected, at least as long as we consider the specific acts and bodies on stage since they are not mass produced. However, if we start in the experience of the spectator instead of the act, the definition of mass culture might still be usable. I will get back to this later.

Concerning the definition of popular as the culture of the people, the problem with defining the people is just as relevant in relation to burlesque.

The one definition that seems most promising in relation to burlesque is approaching the popular as a site of struggle for power. This approach is often

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410 Price, pp. 3-23.
found in research dealing with burlesque, such as in Allen’s discussion on how the early burlesque challenged the idea of femininity but also the social structure in terms of class, or in Willson’s discussion on how the new burlesque challenges contemporary views on female sexuality and feminism. What I take issue with in this definition, which I consider more of an approach, is that it steers away from the popular as such, and focuses rather on the power struggle. This perspective is relevant, and I will return to this discussion when I discuss burlesque and the subversive.

The Popular as Experience

Although the definitions Storey discusses relate to the people of the popular, they are focused on the popular as a genre, starting in the production of the popular as a culture. This causes some issues, as the definition needs to fit a range of utterly different cultural expressions. Parker, who needs a definition of the popular that can be used on cultures expressing themselves before industrialization, suggests a shift from a definition tied to a Marxist point of view focusing on the means of production, to a focus on consumption that is more in line with Max Weber’s thoughts, moving from a perspective of class to status, starting in the realization that although it is hard to define, we do recognize the popular when we see it. Parker turns to Bourdieu and discusses how the consumption of popular culture requires little training and a low cultural capital; for example, watching MTV in contrast to watching opera, which requires a high cultural capital. Using the notion of artworld as the authorization of art through institutions, Parker suggests that popular culture is an unauthorized culture; the popular is what is not authorized, or recognized by the institutions that have the power of the field.

Following Parker’s shift of focus to the consumption rather than the production, I tie the discussion to the general notion of my thesis and consider the popular as created in the experience of the culture. There are several scholars who recognize the importance of the receiver in the discussion of the popular, but who still fall back into a discussion of the popular as a trait of the culture being produced. In Price’s discussion on popular theater, he rightfully claims that the “[p]opular is more connected to exposure than manufacture. It is about being widely consumed, shared and recognized.” But he then moves on to speak primarily of different forms of theater and performances, rather than the

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411 Allen.
412 Willson.
413 Parker, p. 147.
414 Ibid., pp. 158-170.
experience. John Fiske, professor of communication, discusses the meaning of popular culture as made in a constant process of social and intertextual relations. He argues that “[p]opular texts are inadequate in themselves – they are never self-sufficient structures of meanings [...] they are provokers of meanings and pleasure, they are completed only when taken up by people and inserted into everyday culture.” For Fiske, popular culture is not only a consumption of a commodity, rather, the “user” actively takes a cultural resource and ascribes a popular meaning to it. The focus on the meaning of the popular shifts the focus from production to reception, and ultimately places the popular as a trait of the experience rather than the production.

Turning back to Storey, similar reasoning can be found in his short discussion on “the contextuality of meaning,” in which he goes back to his argument that the popular is an “empty conceptual category” that can be shaped depending on the needs of the researcher. He then goes on to discuss the importance of the context in the reading of the popular text as to give them meaning. In this discussion, he hints at a filling of the “empty” category of which I am not sure he is himself aware. The popular is seen as connected to the experience and the context of the experience in which the meaning is given. By shifting focus from the stage to the experience of the spectator, I suggest an exploration of what is at the core of the popular.

With this shift of focus, I turn back to the earlier definitions discussed by Storey and consider how they change and whether they still are valid. The first definition focuses on the quantitative dimension that Storey argues is necessary for the word popular. A shift towards the experience could consider the appeal of many, regardless of the number actually experiencing it. This is also tied to the second definition, concerning the qualitative aspects, where the shift of focus suggests that the popular is accessible and not difficult, as I discussed in the earlier chapter on entertainment and circus. Considering the definition of mass culture, the reach and circulation of popular ideas and concepts, rather than the specific cultural expressions could be a way of refocusing the popular, also in line with Parker’s claim that we recognize the popular when we see it. The popular as a culture of the people is unavoidable, since the meaning is based on the experience of the people, as accessible and liked.

In a sense, the final two approaches are already focused on the reading of the culture rather than as definitions of the culture, as a site of struggle, and in

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417 Ibid., p. 6.
419 Storey, pp. 14-16.
420 Ibid., p. 5.
line with postmodernism. Focusing on the experience highlights the individual aspects in relation to structures that both lend meaning and create an identity.

Shifting the focus from performance to experience, in my case from stage to spectator, gives flexibility, and potential for factoring in intertextual references and genre-crossover, and follows the main trajectory of the phenomenological experience at the core of spectatorship. This is closely tied to my choice to switch focus from a semiotic approach, in which an inherent meaning of the performance leads the analysis, to an approach in which the meaning that appears is in the experience for the spectator. This might seem like a semantic difference, but I would argue that it redirects the attention of what is being discussed, how it is being discussed, and what to bring into the discussion at the first place. Fischer-Lichte argues for a similar approach as she recognizes that the tools of semiotics miss aspects of the experience of the modern theater and performance art, and therefore favors the perception rather than the interpretation.421 This approach has been criticized by theater scholars who argue that Fischer-Lichte fails to see the permanence created by the staging, and that the approach devalues the performance as a work of art.422 I would argue that this reading of Fischer-Lichte is unnecessarily harsh; in my understanding, the focus on meaning and perception does not mean that semiotic signs are not possible or not important, but rather that they unavoidably appear in the realms of the spectating rather than in the performance, which is often implied when focusing on interpretation.

*Experiencing a Popular Schoolboy*

Onto the stage steps Titsalina Bumsquash, dressed in a classic British school uniform with a plaid skirt, a white shirt and a striped burgundy and yellow tie. Her red hair is buffed up and placed in two pigtails on each side of her head. On her nose sits a pair of round, black glasses, and there are freckles painted on her cheeks. She has a long, black coat over her uniform, and she is wearing a pair of green gloves and a striped burgundy and yellow scarf the color of the house of Gryffindor, where Harry Potter goes to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. She is even wearing a Gryffindor badge on her coat. She waves a wizard’s wand with her left hand; the other is holding Harry Potter’s arm, which has been severed in an explosion caused by failed magic. The storyline is that her spell gives life to the arm, which is then controlling the act, undressing her and playing with her body. As for the trick behind the act, the real hand is the one that appears to be Harry Potter’s, while the green glove holding the severed arm is a fake. It is very well crafted however, and the

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421 Fischer-Lichte, pp. 11-23, 140-147.
422 Skjoldager-Nielsen, p. 101, 332.
precise choreography of the act adds to the magic. Harry’s hand, which is doing the undressing, is at times playful and cheeky, and at times quite dominant and forceful, creating a dynamic in which Titsalina can act out surprise, shyness and the struggle to keep her clothes on. At the end of the act her panties – on which there is a picture of Ron Weasley, Harry Potter’s loyal friend, framed by a red furry heart – are revealed.423

The experience of this act is highly influenced by popular references that the majority of the audience recognizes easily. As for the storyline, the use of Harry Potter creates a familiarity that lets the spectator quickly follow the storyline and get a sense of being in on the joke. Besides the Harry Potter reference, the act has several other layers where popular references add to the experience. Titsalina’s childish hairstyle and the classic schoolgirl uniform create friction against the undressing that is anticipated, much in the same way that the schoolgirl uniform is used as a signifier of innocence, but with a sexual undertone, in popular culture. It is perhaps most common in Japanese popular culture, as in the Sailor Moon series, but also in references to Catholic schools in the USA, as in Britney Spears video, Baby One More Time (1998).

In this act, however, the schoolgirl is quite different from the mainstream norm of the schoolgirl body. Titsalina is quite voluptuous, and the undressing

423 Titsalina Bumsquash, Stockholm Burlesque Festival, Södra Teatern, October 2, 2015.
reveals a style more in line with BDSM culture and the bestselling book *50 Shades of Gray* (2011), which is a rather common theme in burlesque performances. Usually, the schoolgirl is an object of an older man’s fantasy or desire, but in this act, the tables are turned as a grown woman steps out of the schoolgirl uniform, and in BDSM fetish-style, reveals her desire for a young, insecure schoolboy in the shape of Ron Weasley. This reveal is not only one of improper desire, but also of how our meanings are experienced in relation to the previous contact with object inscribed with meaning. The choice of a schoolgirl ties in to a trope in popular culture, a set of assumptions that comes with the idea of the schoolgirl, as it is inscribed with the play on innocence and being the object of straight male desire. By combining it with the grown-up BDSM mistress, the usual meaning of the schoolgirl meets friction, and the former impression is challenged, and in the experience, a new impression might take form. In this way, the experience has the potential to be subversive, which is something to which I will return.

*Experiencing References of Giant Proportions*

Another act that makes use of popular references is that of the Australian performer Kitty Litteur, who uses the storyline of the 50s cult movie *The Attack of the 50-Foot Woman* (1958) as a framework for her reveal. The movie is a classic low budget sci-fi film where a housewife grows into a giant after encountering aliens. In many ways, the movie is similar to other sci-fi movies of the era – but with its female protagonist, the movie attained cult status. In Kitty’s version, her look bears a close resemblance to the iconic dark-haired glamour model and vixen Bettie Page, who became famous in the 1950s for her raunchy movies and pin-up pictures, which are now closely associated with BDSM and fetish culture. Dressed in a black and white polka dot dress, her black hair in a classic 1950s style with bangs, Kitty has the quite innocent “girl next door” look of one of Bettie Page’s more decent photos. Using the friction between an innocently dressed look and the anticipation of the reveal is a common way of holding the attention of the spectators in burlesque.

At the beginning of the act, Kitty steps on to the stage with a couple of purple feather fans, dancing and playing the role of a burlesque dancer in the 1950s. A recorded voice sets the scene as Kitty climbs into a pink convertible Mustang, made out of painted cardboard, to ride home. All of a sudden, aliens are casting a beam of light on her. After some screams and over-the-top acting of fear, the cardboard car flips over, and Kitty has become a giant; the pink car now is stuck around her waist, and her clothes no longer fit. The audience reacts with laughter, and Kitty’s surprised facial expression really adds to the tease. As the act continues, she steps out of the car and is returning to the fan
dance of the early part of the show, now with tiny purple feather fans, all in line with the illusion of her becoming a giant. The feather fans are an iconic tool in the act of burlesque, used to extend the reveal and hide the body in a teasing manner. In this case, the fan dance is a play with the traditions of burlesque, since the small fans do not really cover her body and the effect is quite comical.\footnote{Kitty Litteur, Stockholm Burlesque Festival, Södra Teatern, October 2, 2015.}

11, Kitty Litteur as the 50 foot woman at Stockholm Burlesque Festival 2015. Photo and © 2015 John-Paul Bichard.

\footnote{Kitty Litteur, Stockholm Burlesque Festival, Södra Teatern, October 2, 2015.}
This act uses the reference of the movie as a backdrop and as a way to get into the story while at the same time playing with the idea of these miniature feather fans as a reference to the burlesque tradition. Depending on the spectator’s frame of reference, the reading of the popular affects the general experience of the act. In this way, the popular could be understood as a recirculation of widely known and recognized images with the purpose of adding extra layers of understanding to the act. The names of burlesque performers themselves quite often suggest popular references in different directions as to tease and create anticipation of the acts. As an obvious wordplay on kitty litter, Kitty Litteur immediately sets up the anticipation of a comedy act. Some names use places and nature to give a flare of the exotic, such as Havana Hurricane, Kiki Hawaiji and Sea Breeze. Others use gemstones like Lou Safire, Amber Ray, and Miss Diamond, or colors like Bella Blue, Indigo Blue, Hazel Honeysuckle, and Perle Noir. Using animals is quite common as well, as in Tigger!, Raven, Sheila Wolf, Cleo Viper, and Vicky Butterfly. Others reference drinks such as Dirty Martini and Scarlett Martini, or different flavors like Lola Vanilla, Gigi Praline and Coco Framboise. The names are not only fun ways to keep performers apart, but they also work in line with the general concept of the tease in burlesque, and create another layer of interpretation of the acts. I would argue that the use of reference in the names has a similar effect as the constant circulation and cross-references common in popular culture. I came across a name-generator on social media where you could create your own burlesque name. My first try gave the name Pinky Paradise, a name that I find suitable both for a burlesque performer and a scholar.

The Popular and Community

The use of popular references lets the audience quickly create an understanding of the act that goes deeper than the action on stage, either as a commentary on the popular culture referred to or on the act itself. As the popular works via understandings based in shared references, another aspect is the function of the popular for creating community. Price argues for the strengths of the popular theater for its “ability to draw people together” and that the coming together has a potential to stand against oppression.425 On a similar note, Mason argues that one of the attractive features of the popular is in the experience of togetherness that comes with shared references.426 The recognition of the reference creates a feeling in the audience of “being in on the joke,” and in a sense creates a stronger feeling of a shared experience as someone in the group that gets it. What we consider references to popular culture within these acts

425 Price, p. 183.
426 Mason, p. 25.
depends on our previous knowledge, our impressions, on how we create meaning of the act.

In relation to experiencing a sense of community, the popular could be seen as a way to create a group that reaches beyond the acts on stage. When a spectator ‘gets’ the popular reference, the sense of being a part of a group is imparted; depending on how obscure or wide this reference is, the size of the group varies. At a burlesque show, the references range from very broad, relatable for most people in modern society, as with the Harry Potter reference, to really niche references to dance moves of burlesque artists of the 1930s. Like rings on the water, each potential group is part of a larger group, which is part of a larger group. I argue that the use of references is often an important factor in creating a sense of community, by creating a shared understanding of the experience, and at the same time creating a group with borders that create an in-group and an out-group.

However, in the modern internet era, the potential of shared references is greater than ever, which creates an overload of input, and at the same time a narrowing of references as previous channels of mass-distributed media controlled by few people are now challenged by millions of media distributors and the audience’s choice by the flick of a thumb. What used to be a campfire activity of classic broadcast media has become a tailored stream of selected input for the individual. This means that popular references depend on the choices made by the individual, rather than those created by the mass media distributor. Social media channels like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Snapchat become the hub of the popular, and depending on whom you follow, and the group to which you subscribe, the frame of reference will differ. The popular as mass culture has been replaced by a people’s DIY-culture, where the means of production are widely available. In this multitude of cultural expressions, individual choices become central, and as such the popular changes face and becomes popular bubbles that grow stronger, smaller communities, while on a general level, the universal popular references are at risk.

It is said that while art says something about what it is being human, the popular says something about the times we are living in, and we could say that we live in interesting times. Popular culture is not only a refuge from boredom and a source of amusement and pleasure. Through the continuous circulation of images and ideas, the impression in our consciousness is constantly reconfigured and realigned, in accordance with norms, wants, dreams, ideologies, and desires that are shaped in contact with others who confirm, challenge, or deny certain expressions and properties. Our world is shaped in our experience of everyday popular culture. By switching focus from the production and per-
formance of these to the experience and how it is shaped in contact with others, through sharing, liking, retweeting, commenting, joining, or blocking, reporting, or shaming, new aspects of the popular and how it affects us are explored. In the following section, I will discuss how bodies on stage can challenge, and subvert, these norms and ideas created by our frame of reference.

Subversion – Experiencing Bodies Challenging Norms

In the first chapter, I discussed political aspects of circus, primarily in relation to issues of migration and the potential of experiencing utopia. In this chapter, I will continue a discussion that is political, but instead more in line with identity politics and the potential experience of subversion. The subversive powers of burlesque are a complex matter, since it consists of several discussions. The mainstream image of ‘burlesque’ in popular culture and the real experience of burlesque shows can be quite different, and as such the subversive potential has to be considered in relation to the different experiences of burlesque. In this way, there is an outside understanding of burlesque, as in the image of burlesque in popular culture and mainstream media, and an inside understanding, for those present at events. It is important to consider these different perspectives in order to get a fair understanding of the diverse positions taken on burlesque, and the paradoxical subversive potential in displaying sexualized bodies onstage.

The image of burlesque from the outside vs. the experience from the inside also reflects the differences of styles within burlesque, where I would argue that there are two main tracks: the vintage glamour striptease burlesque, which is common in the mainstream image of burlesque, and acts that work with gender play, taboos and transgression, which are common at live events. I am well aware that this division into two main styles is an oversimplification – in reality, the acts are more complex and intertwined – but I think that it serves a purpose to show the different approaches to the use of sexuality and tease at play.

Another perspective to consider is the subversion in relation to performers vs. audience. In many cases, the feminist potential of the burlesque is discussed from the perspective of sexual liberation and empowerment for the performer, as the choice to get undressed and ‘tease’ the audience brings the agency and control of the own body as an object into the hands of the person onstage. As such, the burlesque can have a strong empowering potential on an individual level for the performer, while the experience of the spectator is something else. Considering the representation of the burlesque in popular culture, the subversive powers can potentially reach even further.
The Image of Burlesque in Popular Culture

Since the revival of burlesque in the 1990s, images of the genre have become increasingly common in different types of popular culture. In the music videos for the cover of the song *Lady Marmalade* (2001), Christina Aguilera, Lil’ Kim, Mýa and Pink, dressed in lingerie and danced in a vintage cabaret style with clear references to the reemerging burlesque. The song was on the soundtrack to Baz Luhrmann’s movie *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), which also tapped into the craze of vintage glamour and showgirls of the time. Another example is The Pussycat Dolls, which started out as a burlesque company in 1995 but became widely recognized for their songs and music videos a decade later. Most known are probably *Don’t Cha* (2005) featuring Busta Rhymes, *Buttons* (2006) and *Stickwitu* (2005). The group’s burlesque background is hard to see in the videos, and the choreography and style are more of contemporary street dance, but some classic moves from burlesque and cabaret can be found. The most apparent misuse of burlesque is in the film entitled *Burlesque* (2010), in which Christina Aguilera plays an aspiring singer finding her place on the stage of a burlesque club. Despite its name, the movie does not really show any burlesque, as there is no undressing, no comical undertones, and no play on sexuality. The movie rather shows singing and dancing in a vintage cabaret style, where the bodies onstage are tiresomely conformed and stereotypical.

Another place where the imagery of burlesque has become popular is in commercials, in advertisements for cosmetics, perfume, lingerie, fashion, cars, liquor, water, chocolate, and other items that should give an air of glamour and luxury. Most famous in these commercials is burlesque performer Dita von Teese, whom many consider the pinnacle of contemporary burlesque. With her glamorous style and classic beauty, her face and body lend themselves well to companies that want to tap into the emerging fascination and interest in ‘burlesque’ without any risk of scaring off potential customers. It is not just that these images in line with normative bodies reinforce the beauty standards through the recirculation of objectified female sexuality, but also they change the public idea of burlesque. These images only show a small part of the burlesque, using only the images that fit easily into the mainstream ideal, desire, and fantasy of undressed female bodies. Repeatedly linking normative bodies to the notion of burlesque as a genre affects the way people understand burlesque, as the images stick to the object. It inscribes meaning that does not necessarily belong, as these images offer little or no context that

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427 *Lady Marmalade*, 2001. The music video was directed by Paul Hunter, and the original song was written by Bob Crewe and Kenny Nolan in 1974.

makes use of the comical, transgressive and subversive undertones crucial for contemporary burlesque.

I would argue that this is one of the reasons for the feminist critique on burlesque, as this is the notion of burlesque that through continuous repetition sticks to the idea of burlesque. This misuse of images has more to do with mainstream media, commercialism and consumer culture at large than with the burlesque as a genre of stage performances. I will now turn to some experiences from live burlesque and discuss how the situation and context are completely different.

Bodies that Challenge the Idea of Beauty

The act begins with two women from the stage crew coming out on stage, each wearing a paper mask with a picture of a male face on it, and a sign saying “patriarchy” hanging around their necks. They are walking with big steps, demonstratively scratching themselves between their legs, and kissing their muscles. Onto the stage come four women wearing classic black and white striped prison shirts with matching striped hats and black skirts. Their bodies are different in shape and size, and they have dyed hair, piercings, and tattoos. They are completely normal bodies, but none of them would meet the narrow beauty standards set by our popular culture.

One of the women is sweeping the floor with a broom while two of the others are playing rock, paper, and scissors to the beat of slow stroking chords of an electric guitar. Someone is yawning; it’s a slow day in the prison. A fight breaks out, and two of the inmates start to fake fight using big swings to the beat of the song *Riot in Cell Block #9* by Wanda Jackson. The woman with the broom steps in and interrupts, by rolling out a flag on the broom that says “SMASH THE PATRIARCHY.” The inmates stop fighting and join the battle with patriarchy, which ends with them shooting the men down using their hands as pistols. The audience immediately cheers, and a celebratory dance begins on stage. The skirts, which are just black pieces of cloth, are untucked and cast aside to reveal that each of them is wearing shiny panties in different colors. They join hands and start to shake their hips, showing off their bodies, to the supportive cheers and applause from the audience.

Two of the women kneel down, pick up two prison windows and start shaking the bars as if they being were held prisoner by patriarchy. One of the women picks up a large tube that with a twist of the hands explodes into a rain of confetti. They jump up and shake their upper bodies in celebration, pull off their shirts and swing them around over their heads, revealing bras that match their panties. The audience is hooting and applauding, creating an atmosphere...
of excitement and support. After some further dancing, two of them are starting to take off their bras, one shoulder strap at the time, prolonging the tease. For the final, all four of them turn their backs to the audience. Two off them pull off their bras, and as they turn to face the audience, they start to twirl their tassels, while the other two are twirling tassels on their buttocks. They are all shaking their bodies, and one of the women is giving the finger to the world, or to the patriarchy that is keeping them prisoner. As the song comes to an end, they are all standing with one fist raised.429

12, Ravishing Byrds is smashing the patriarchy at the Stockholm Burlesque Festival 2015. Photo and © 2015 John-Paul Bichard.

This act is quite typical for the burlesque scene I am used to. Women of all ages, shapes, and sizes, showing a multitude of bodies that can be sexy, framed in relation to the patriarchy that polices not only bodies, but also opinions of bodies. The images that circulate in popular culture set the narrow standards of beauty, acting as impressions in our encounters, creating ideologies, norms, and judgment that stick, and influencing the way we create meaning in our experiences. The display of bodies that challenge the narrow beauty standards and ideas of who can be sexy, and who has the right to claim the stage, works to create alternative meanings that change our perception. Willson argues that “[t]he burlesque performer negotiates afresh the space between herself and the

429 Ravishing Byrds, Stockholm Burlesque Festival, Södra Teatern, October 2, 2015.
viewer by challenging the way in which she should be judged and per-
ceived.\footnote{Willson, p. 183.} Dolan suggests that in most cases, female sexuality on stage is un-
avoidably passive, directed by the active male spectator’s gaze and fantasies, but she finds an exception in an act that refuses to play the game that allows for the male objectification by regaining agency through a subversive act.\footnote{Dolan, 1988, pp. 65-67.} Theater scholar Jennifer-Scott Mobley writes about fat actresses on the Amer-
ican stage and concludes that “[t]he audacity of a fat woman dancing erotically without apology is in itself a political statement in our culture.”\footnote{Jennifer-Scott Mobley, Female Bodies on the American Stage: Enter the Fat Actress, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 151.} However, for an act to be subversive, the body needs to be framed in a way that makes the audience see how it ties to the structures of power in society.\footnote{Kay Siebler, ‘What’s so Feminist about Garters and Bustiers? Neo-Burlesque as Post-Fem-
inist Sexual Liberation,’ Journal of Gender Studies, vol. 24, no. 5, 2015, p. 567.} This also entails an audience that is open to the experience and can engage in the desire of a body outside the norms. In this act, I find this subversion, as it re-introduces agency in the women as sexual subjects in their lived bodies, filled with experiences and rightful anger at the patriarchy.

**The Sexual Object on Display**

In the last example, the subversive potential is explicitly visible in that the bodies on stage challenge the beauty standards with their very appearance. It is, however, hard to deny that the act does display sexual bodies on stage. As such, the burlesque offers a paradox in that it is at the same time empowering and exploiting, which can be seen in the stance different scholars take in their research.

Going back to the very first burlesque, as we recognize it today – Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes – the group’s subversive potential lay in them claiming their space on stage and displaying “nudity,” and acting out by the use of comedy, questioning norms and ideas on gender in the bourgeois culture of the time.\footnote{Allen, pp.146-148.} Allen, however, argues that when the striptease became more prominent and the voices were lost, the subversive potential faded.\footnote{Ibid., p. 240.} Although the situation is different in contemporary burlesque, there are some similarities, as certain acts are more in line with the transgression and comedy of the early burlesque and other with the glamour striptease of the early 20th century.
In general, there seems to be a consensus that the subversive and empowering potential can be strong for the individual performer. Consumer culture encourages women to be interested in their looks, to make themselves into objects of others’ judgment and appreciation, as sexual objects, but then disciplines and judges any attempt to claim agency over this sexuality.\textsuperscript{436} Thus, a safe space where the pleasure of displaying sexuality can be experienced is created. Willson recognizes “a stark difference between being a \textit{sexual} (coming from within) and a \textit{sexualized} (imposed from the outside and therefore passive) subject.”\textsuperscript{437} I would add however that the imposed sexualization from the outside treats the body as a passive object, rather than a subject, which I would argue implies taking the lived experience of the body under consideration.

The potential for the burlesque to be subversive in a broader context seems to depend on the type of burlesque, and the possibility for the audience to understand it in the right context. Dance scholar Sherril Dodds sees a potential for the burlesque both to empower the individual performer, as well as to change the way women on display are to be considered, although she expresses some reservation about whether a wider audience can appreciate the subtle codes and conventions necessary for the reading of the bodies.\textsuperscript{438} Claire Nally argues that the “burlesque is Janus-faced: simultaneously seeming to reproduce stereotypes whilst also operating to question them.”\textsuperscript{439} Bim Mason sees the burlesque as having a potential to be both subversive and objectifying, depending on the subtlety of the framing that contextualizes the reading.\textsuperscript{440} Willson is a bit hesitant, but seems to arrive at comedy being necessary in order for burlesque to be empowering, as she claims that “[b]urlesque performers offer up a powerful position for young women – but in order for there to be pizzazz there must also be a wink, a nudge and a ‘knowing’ smile.”\textsuperscript{441} This points to a reoccurring question in research on burlesque – how to deal with acts that lack comical framing. Willson discusses how the way Dita Von Teese that is represented in media is a problem, as the lack of winks and tease to frame the experience of the body can easily makes the reading slip into an understanding of the feminine sexuality as “vulnerable, silent and fake.”\textsuperscript{442}

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\textsuperscript{436} Willson, p. 137.  \\
\textsuperscript{437} Ibid., p. 40.  \\
\textsuperscript{439} Nally, p. 129.  \\
\textsuperscript{440} Mason, pp. 171-174.  \\
\textsuperscript{441} Willson, p. 172.  \\
\textsuperscript{442} Ibid., p. 148.
\end{flushright}
It would be easy to jump to the conclusion that any act that displays a body in line with the norms reinforces them, and that the subversive potential is therefore lost. However, I would say that this is settling for a simplified conclusion. Another reading of the acts is possible that is closer to the classic striptease, and uses the performers’ own normative bodies as a site of discussion of power relations and the right to their own sexuality.

If we consider the burlesque as a performance of a disidentification in which the sexualized normative body is considered an object of other’s gazes, it is being re-inscribed with a new meaning. José Muñoz uses the notion of disidentification as a way to discuss how minority artists are reusing elements of the majority culture, which are then encoded with new meaning in order to negotiate, challenge, and subvert the dominant culture. As an act of disidentification, it rejects an identification as it is either impossible, or hurtful for the subject, but it also rejects a counteridentification that fully opposes it. The disidentification becomes a third way of working on transforming the cultural logic from within the dominant ideology.

Although Muñoz’ use is directed at minorities who have a more vulnerable relation to the dominant ideology, I find the term useful, as it turns the attention to how subversion can be performed within the dominant culture. Relating this to Ahmed’s term sticky, as to describe how the understanding of and emotions towards objects become inscribed with a certain meaning that is accumulated through continuous repetition, I argue that through the constant repetition of the sexualized body on stage as a passive object, this passivity sticks to the general experience of sexual bodies on stage. Through disidentification, as in displaying the sexualized body as a strong agent that chooses to be a sexual subject, an alternative meaning is produced – a meaning that through repetition challenges the understanding of female sexuality as an object of the male gaze. Willson recognizes the same potential as “[t]he contemporary burlesque performer does not necessarily depart from masculine ideas of sexiness but embraces and appropriates the many sexualized clichéd codes and stereotypes embedded in visual culture.” Seen through the scope of disidentification, glamour burlesque, with a display of a normative body, can instead of dismissing the potential of a staged female sexuality, re-claim it and re-inscribe new meaning to it, and create a space defined outside of the common beauty ideals, norms, and hierarchies. The act and the body can therefore

444 Ibid., pp. 11-15.
446 Willson, p. 46.
potentially be subversive and empowering for the group at the burlesque, and even in a broader popular sense through the group that can be seen as the extended ‘inside’ group outside of the specific event, but still be considered as reinforcing beauty standards and normative bodies, and ultimately objectifying female sexuality in a general context. Perhaps the subversive is to be found in approaching the sexualized body on stage as a subject with a lived experience, rather than as an object that is treated like any other object.

There are however problems with this approach, as although it might reconfigure dynamics of agency and render the object a subject with lived experiences, the sexuality is still performed within, and possibly through, the patriarchal system that is setting the rules. As Kay Siebler, who writes on the feminist potential of neo-burlesque, argues, female sexuality is defined through the patriarchal culture, and that which is associated with female sexuality, like clothes, sex-toys, and fetish items, is framed through ideas of male pleasure. To be truly subversive, the patriarchy and gender as such need to be challenged.

**Genderbending and Subversion**

From the early beginnings of burlesque, the subversion of gender has had a place, as performers have challenged the idea of conventions on the woman’s role in society. As my discussion has shown, this struggle is still ongoing. I will now turn to an example of a Boylesque performer challenging narrow norms of gender and sexuality.

As the green stage light comes on, the silhouette of a figure with feathers appears. A rhythmic beat on a conga drum gives an air of mystique, and the feathers become fans that flap slowly to the beat. Music from *Swan Lake* is playing over the distinct drumbeat, and the black figure comes up on pointe at the same time as the main light comes on, showing the back of a bald man dressed in black stockings with black satin shorts. On his upper body, he wears a black decorated corset with black feathers creating a high collar. As he turns around with small steps, still on pointe, and the feather fans spread. The look makes me think of a peacock displaying his plumage. Lou Safire, as the performer is called, is waving the feather fans beautifully in sync with the music. He wears dark red lipstick and dark makeup around his eyes. After a minute or so, he puts down the feather fans and continues to dance to the music. He sits down on a chair and pulls off his ballet slippers. As he stands up the reveal is about to begin. With his back towards the audience, he begins untying the knot on his corset. His arms are covered in tattoos. He dances around and starts to unhook the corset, but holds it together with his hands, toying with it as he

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447 Siebler, p. 571.
winks at the audience. He turns his back to the crowd again, to add suspense to the reveal. He pulls the corset off and reveals a tattooed back. He strikes some poses. When he turns around, he instantly starts to shake his body to set the tassels on his nipples twirling. His body is quite bulky, and his chest is covered with hair. After some dancing, he turns his back to the audience and pulls down his black shorts to reveal a pair of tight sparkling underpants. He puts one leg up onto the chair, pulls down the stocking, spins around and, balancing, reaches behind him and slowly pulls it off. The second stocking is pulled off in a classic striptease manner, sitting and slowly sliding it off the leg. He throws the last stocking over the stage floor and takes some light steps over the stage. Gripping the sides of his black sparkling underpants, he pulls them down to reveal a pair of white sparkling briefs. He grabs a pair of white feather fans from a table; the black swan now has turned into the white. For the final reveal, Lou covers himself with the fans, as he reaches down and pulls off the underwear, and teasingly swings them around his finger before setting them in flight over the stage. He then starts dancing again, covering himself with the fans. With his back turned toward the audience, he lifts the fans and reveals his almost completely naked wiggling bottom, with only a small stripe of taped sparkling fabric covering his crack. He continues to dance with the fans, and in the end reveals a small sparkling silver pouch that barely covers his genitals and nicely matches the silver sparkling pasties that cover his nipples.448

I chose this act as it is a good example of the variety of burlesque, and Boylesque, and how the bodies on stage are used to challenge the idea of gender. Judith Butler argues that the idea of male and female is constructed in accordance with a heterosexual matrix that imposes certain traits concerning bodies, gender and sexuality, and that these traits should match up. Butler uses the analogy of drag to describe how gender is not inherently natural, but rather constructed by constantly being performed through imitations of what we assign to the gender.449 What drag does is challenge the assumption of an existing original and highlight the performance of the imitation. Butler’s use of drag has been mistakenly interpreted to mean that she considers all drag subversive per definition; as Butler later clarified, the subversion is only in that it refutes the idea of an original behind the imitation.450 There are many examples where drag performances work to uphold rigid notions of gender, race,

and sexuality, in their ridicule and mockery of the performed identity.\textsuperscript{451} Gender scholar Debra Ferreday argues that the subversive potential of drag is limited, as the impersonation of gender in the acts still falls back on the dichotomous relationship between male and female and reproduces the hierarchy.\textsuperscript{452}

13, Lou Safire is turning into the white swan at Helsinki Burlesque Festival 2016. Photo and © 2016 John-Paul Bichard.

\textsuperscript{451} An example is feminist scholar bell hooks’ review of the movie \textit{Paris is Burning}, in which she finds the drag misogynic, which Butler also discusses in \textit{Bodies that Matter}. \\
I would argue however that the act described above is not a drag performance. Lou is not using comedy, and there is no intent to create laughter, and there is no attempt to impersonate, or ridicule, a woman or femininity; nor is Lou trying to pass for a woman. Mobley writes about her experience of how a Boylesque performer almost had her fooled, as he so resembled a woman, and how he was the one performer of the show that most resembled the female beauty standards, and as such it reflected on the extremes of the female beauty standards. This experience differs from mine in a significant way, as her attention was directed to the female norms, while my experience of Lou’s act rather directed attention to his masculinity as such, as the act is a display of him as a complex subject that transgresses the binary imposed by society. As such, I would argue that this act has more in common with the first examples of the subversion of beauty standards, but directed towards the standards of gender. The lipstick and the makeup are paired with the bald head and beard, and the graceful ballet steps are taken by a male body with a hairy chest. Lou is embodying a feminine masculinity that queers the understanding of gender as fixed and binary. By not accepting the impressions that so powerfully “stick” to the understanding of a man, the body subverts ideas on how bodies, gender, and sexuality must align.

In the examples and through my discussion, I have shown that the burlesque has a potential for subversion as it disturbs and challenges the habitual idea of bodies, gender, and sexuality. This potential is often highlighted by the use of comedy in the acts. In the following section, I will discuss the experience of laughter in relation to bodies on stage, and then my experience of desire for the bodies onstage.

Burlesque from an Embodied Approach

As my earlier discussion has shown, the burlesque is a genre in which bodies and sexuality are revealed in a comical way. As I approach the experience in this section, I will therefore focus on the comedy and the laughter as an embodied experience. Then I will turn the attention to my experience of desire, and how queering the gaze can challenge the way I think of norms, and myself.

Laughter – Experiencing Comedy in the Flesh

The presence of comedy in burlesque is not surprising, considering the roots of the genre as well as those of the name itself. Through my earlier examples,

I have shown that the comedy of burlesque is a central feature, at least in acts that have a subversive aim. The mockery and the play on the spectators’ prejudices and un-reflected assumptions on the world is what makes the undressing more of a tease than a strip. The embodied reaction closely connected to the experience of comedy is laughter, and I will thus focus on this experience in relation to the bodies and the tease.

Laughter is an embodied experience with a number of curious features that make it notoriously reluctant to be explored and explained. Laughter interrupts us, directs our focus to the intentional object of the laughter, as well as to the own body laughing. Laughter is elusive, and as soon as we think we grasp it, the rug is pulled out from under our feet, and we tumble deeper into laughter. We laugh at jokes, at kids saying cute things, at animals looking like humans, and at people falling over or dropping things. We laugh with people, and at people. We laugh in joy and happiness, and in scorn and with contempt. We fake laughter to fit in and to show support, and we laugh in the wrong places – at seminars, in the classroom, at funerals – and we cannot stop, and it is embarrassing. At times we laugh so hard that we can’t breathe, and at other times laughter comes as a release that makes it possible to breathe again. Some of us know people whose very presence makes us laugh, and others get annoyed and feel excluded as they do not get it, and then you realize that you do not get it either, you just laugh. We laugh in the audience at the theater and in the cinema, but rarely when we are on our own. The role that laughter has in our culture and in our life, how it appears, why and when, is utterly complex and no laughing matter.

A Theory of Laughter
In research, laughter is approached in a range of different ways, depending on the field of study. A neurobiological or medical explanation considers laughter a physical response in which certain regions of the brain are activated, causing rhythmical contractions in the diaphragm and often a corresponding sound. In psychology, the cognitive function, and the behavior of laughter are often in focus, and in philosophy, laughter has been discussed in relation to human life and existence.

In research that focuses on laughter as a human experience, rather than a physical response, there have been three primary, dominant theories discussed to explain the psychology of laughter. While I will not go into these theories at any length, I do want to mention them as a frame of reference. The Superiority Theory is the oldest, dating back to the philosophers in ancient Greece. It suggests that laughter appears when we feel superior to others. It has since been rejected, as the feelings of superiority are neither necessary nor sufficient
for the laughter to appear. As the Superiority Theory did not manage to explain the laughter, two other theories were proposed. The Relief Theory connected the emerging understanding of medicine to the laughter and suggested that a nervous energy builds up, and the laughter is a release of this excess energy. Although this explanation makes use of faulty biological analogies, it touches on something that is experienced in relation to laughter. The final theory, and the only one that still has some merit, is the Incongruity Theory, which suggests that the mismatch, the incongruity, between what is expected and what is happening causes laughter. This theory relies on the way our experience uses patterns and previous experiences to predict what is coming and situate us in the present. Although the incongruity on its own usually does not cause laughter, other conditions are necessary as well; the experiential mismatch is crucial in many experiences of laughter.

These theories have the purpose of explaining laughter as a simple correlation between cause and effect, trying to explain the stimuli that cause the response. This understanding of laughter does not take the complexity of the full experience in consideration, as the narrow scope assumes that there is one single cause for the laughter. They do however point to aspects that are paramount for the experience. Philosopher John Morreall takes a step back and sets laughter in relation to the experience in the broader sense as he describes the basic pattern of humor and suggests four conditions of the experience. “We experience a cognitive shift – a rapid change in our perceptions or thoughts” in which our consciousness is interrupted, and our thoughts and perception re-align with the intentional object of the experiences. “We are in a play mode rather than a serious mode, disengaged from conceptual and practical concerns.” This is an important claim, as there is nothing in the cognitive shift in itself that makes us respond to it as funny. In other circumstances, a sudden cognitive shift can hurl you into entirely different emotions and experiences, to which I will get back to in the next chapter in my discussion on the uncanny. The framing or the mood of the situation needs to be set in a way that allows for play and enjoyment. “Instead of responding to the cognitive shift with shock, confusion, puzzlement, fear, anger, or other negative emotions, we enjoy it.”

to be experienced as enjoyable. Morreall argues that the enjoyment of humor has three characteristics, "it is social, exhilarating and liberating."\(^{461}\) That the social situation affects the experience of laughter and humor is well established, and I would argue that this is a good reason to explore laughter from the experience, rather than the object at which we laugh. As for the pleasure felt in the enjoyment, it is exhilarating in that it is dynamic and keeps one’s attention, and liberating as it allows for experiences of taboos, challenging authorities and beliefs.\(^{462}\) "Our pleasure at the cognitive shift is expressed in laughter, which signals to others that they can relax and play too."\(^{463}\) The laughter as a response to that which we experience as amusing, expressed through the body both visually and vocally, confirms the social aspects and how laughter can be seen as a form of communication. The way amusement is communicated, in this case through laughter, has an impact on the mood of the experience as a spectator, as it not only gives feedback to the performer, as explained in Fischer-Lichte’s feedback loop, but is also a way for the audience to experience a sense of community and a shared experience. This ties in to the feeling of being in on the joke and belonging to the group.

**Revealing Womanhood**

There is going to be a short pre-act on the small platform stage at the small bar in a room next to the main stage. Fräulein Frauke welcomes the audience and says that she hopes we all can be ourselves for the night, then introduces Märit, who walks onstage in a long white glamorous satin robe, wearing long white satin gloves and a pearl necklace, mimicking the glamour style of the early 20th century burlesque. Her body is voluptuous, and her pinkish-orange hair is arranged neatly in an appropriate style.

The early arrivals are now crowding in front of the small stage, cheering and clapping for the performer. The energy in the room is friendly, and the atmosphere is engaging and supportive. Some old jazz tune that I recognize but cannot place is turned on. Märit moves her body gracefully in sync with the music, at times Micky-Mousing, using the dynamic of the melody to accentuate the motion. The moves are familiar, and I recognize the style from previous burlesque performances – smooth in a way that attracts attention to the body, but with a devious expression in her face. She unties her belt and the robe comes off, revealing a white satin dress hanging from small straps over her shoulders. It is short and just barely covers her white panties. The crowd shouts and cheers; since people are still arriving, it is getting more crowded.

\(^{461}\) Ibid.
\(^{462}\) Ibid., pp. 56-57.
\(^{463}\) Ibid., p. 50.
Märit is moving around, taunting and teasing with a devious smile that promises more. She runs her gloved hands over her body, caressing herself, down into her panties whilst simultaneously leaning forward in a Marilyn Monroe-esque pose that brings her breasts into focus. As she pulls her hands out of her crotch, the crowd instantly begins roaring with laughter, because the tips of her gloves are now scarlet red. My sudden laughter interrupts the action whilst at the same time drawing the attention even closer. I become aware that the experience is felt through my body, and as such the sense of presence is intensified. The surprising turn of the act from what was expected to be an act of glamour striptease into a political commentary on being a woman is a cognitive and emotional shift that creates intense laughter. Through the act’s display of the taboo to which the majority of the spectators could relate, the energy in the audience instantly changed as it worked to question and subvert the norm of menstruation, and the laughter is felt as liberating. However, as a man, I felt both invited to the sisterhood and alienated from it at the same time, both as one of the group but also distanced by not being able to fully share the experience.

Märit acts as if she is unaware of the red now covering her gloves, and moves on to a characteristic action in burlesque, taking off the gloves. As usual, the tip of the fingers is put between the teeth and with a yanking motion and in sync with the music, the hand is freed from the glove. Putting the red fingers of the gloves in her mouth creates an extra layer of the act, breaking the audience’s anticipation of a sensual act and disrupting any potential male gaze that might be lurking in the audience. The second glove comes off in a similar way, and once they are off, Märit is whipping them at the audience, as if to splash them with the “menstrual blood.” The spectators in the first row react by playfully shielding themselves, and we all are laughing. This acceptance of play creates a feedback loop that gives energy to the atmosphere, but also creates room for laughter as its highlights the acceptance of laughter as an accepted reaction.

The evening’s theme is bloody Valentine, and I imagine a lot of us are surprised by the literal rendition in this first act of the evening. As the act continues, the audience is on board, and the attention and anticipation create a dense and intense atmosphere in the room. Märit moves onto the floor, laying on her back and spreading her legs in a classic striptease pose, the difference being that she exposes a big red spot in the crotch of her panties. As the act continues, the dress comes off, revealing menstrual pads taped to her stomach, and as Märit removes them, she licks the red spots before throwing them away. The tease of the act is disturbed by the gore, and squeamish laughter is heard along with the cheer and support. In many ways, the act is so classic, with all
the moves and looks of glamour burlesque, but the addition of the color red and references to menstruation changes the experience. Turning back to the potential subversion of burlesque, this act works to challenge the female body and the taboo of menstrual blood, as it is a sticky subject, closely associated with disgust.

As the act nears its final reveal, the undoing of the bra, Märit turns her back to the audience, yet another classic way to prolong the reveal, and with a last taunting look over her shoulder, she turns around and reveals her breasts, where nipple tassels have been substituted with “bloody” tampons, and the twirling sets off a last big roar in the audience. Cheers, claps, and laughter follow Märit as she completes the act and leaves the stage.  

**Wrestling with Masculinity**

I am sitting in the middle of the audience at Södra Teatern, waiting for the next act of the burlesque festival to begin. It is hot, and the atmosphere is filled with energy after several acts with amazing performers. As soon as the host Armitage Shank’s powerful voice rolls off the final syllable of the performer’s name – Sandy Sure – the audience begin cheering and applauding. A wrestler walks onto the stage, draped in a red cape with a big yellow collar, wearing green high wrestling boots and a green and yellow mask that is closely tied to the Mexican wrestling known as Lucha Libre. A rock ‘n’ roll song in Spanish begins to play as the wrestler slowly turns away from the audience. The wrestler’s arms are raised to the beat of the song, and the cape forms a big semicircle of shiny red fabric. Turning towards the audience, the wrestler’s body is shielded by one arm, while the other is outstretched to show the green and yellow inside of the cape. The wrestler is slowly walking across the stage, turning and switching the arms that present the cape, still covering the body. Turning away from the audience again, the wrestler raises both arms, and the body is slowly exposed as the full cape is presented. The wrestler’s body is clad in a nude bodysuit with patches of curly black hair on the chest that run down in a line over the chubby belly, and onto the lower legs. A pair of red shorts, red wrist-wraps, and a golden necklace with a cross hanging down over the stomach complete the image. I am laughing. It looks ridiculous, and the mismatch between the female performer’s body, and the portrayed macho masculinity with the patchy hair, and the pouting belly are funny. The aesthetic of the act is well chosen, with the popular references to the Mexican Lucha Libre wrestler and Latino-machismo culture. Compared to my earlier example of genderbending, this act has the direct purpose of ridiculing masculinity through its representation. By exaggerating popular ideas on macho culture and impersonating a man, she shows that gender is created by repeatedly performing it. As such, the toxic masculinity is not tied to the body, which suggests that it can be cured.

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The action continues; the cape is being whirled around with circular motions, the way the muleta is used by bullfighters to play with the bull, by teasing and taunting. The wrestler is showing off the body in different poses. Then the cape is untied and slowly dropped to the floor, and the body is again highlighted by the slow gait to the center of the stage. After a short pause while the music changes to a faster beat, a warm-up is performed, with intense jumping jacks, a weird pumping of the legs to the waist and then the kind of stretches that only people who never exercise do. The funny movement and the image of masculinity are causing laughter. The wrestler starts challenging the audience with raised fists, giving us the finger, kissing the cross and flexing muscles. The atmosphere is intense as people are shouting and applauding to give energy to the performer.

Then a blow-up-doll wrestler is thrown on stage. Almost immediately upon catching it, the wrestler starts hitting the doll in the face; holding it up in the air, furiously pummeling its face, throwing it to the ground, stomping on its head and again hitting it with full force. The audience is laughing and cheering. The reference to the macho man, and the constant worry of a sudden switch from the controlled masculinity, to male uncontrolled violence and rage acts as a mockery of macho culture, and of toxic masculinity in general. In this act, the violence becomes a way to hit back at patriarchy, and in the liberating laughter, there is a shared release of anger, in this pre-me-too action of equality and female empowerment.
Finally, the doll has been beaten, literally, and victory is declared with fists raised into the air, once again giving the finger to the world, or is it patriarchy. The wrestler walks off stage, then returns without the mask, sporting a big black mustache and a towel casually thrown over one shoulder. The body is put on display again to the beat of the song *Love Train*, shown off, caressed, the belly rubbed. The wrestler blows kisses to the audience, dancing, and air humping. Turned away from the audience, the wrestler’s shorts are pulled down to reveal a G-string, and as the wrestler turns around, there is curly black hair sticking out of the leopard printed fabric. After some final dancing, the wrestler’s hand descends into the underwear and pulls up a handful of tortilla chips, which are promptly eaten.⁴⁶⁵

As the examples have shown, the experience of laughter is the result of a complex process in which embodied cognition and emotions, the relation to others, previous experiences and impressions, popular references and the context create meaning for the spectator. Leaving the embodied experience of laughter, I now turn to another essential experience connected to burlesque, the feeling of desire.

**Desire – Experiences from a Queer Gaze**

Since Laura Mulvey introduced the *Male Gaze* in 1975, the concept has been used to address issues of objectification in art and the way the power of patriarchy shapes the gaze.⁴⁶⁶ While the notion of the male gaze has been highly influential and used in a range of studies in different fields, the concept has also been criticized from various points of view. Some of the problems have been due to misunderstandings and the misuse of central aspects of the theory and subsequent attempts to apply it to studies where it is not suited. One problem is the lack of understanding of the difference between gaze, which is from a position of desire, and looking, which is simply a focused visual perception.⁴⁶⁷

The general argument of the theory is that in the display of women a power relation is created that suggests a male active gaze on a female passive body, and that thus turns the female body into an object of his pleasure, fantasies, and desire.

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⁴⁶⁵ Sandy Sure, Stockholm Burlesque Festival, Södra Teatern, October 2, 2015.

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Of importance in Mulvey’s theory is also the implied use of the camera, and how it directs the attention, edits, and chooses the image for the spectator, creating the lure of a voyeuristic gaze.\footnote{Mulvey, p. 26.} This shows in a direct way how the cinematic eye is controlled by directors, photographers, and editors, who steer the way in which spectators look and what they should desire. Returning to the discussion on the popular, as well as Ahmed’s use of impressions, the cinematic male gaze does not only make use of the conventions and norms created in the constant repetition of understandings, but also creates them through the repetition of the gaze. Rather than being the individual spectator’s objectifying look, the male gaze relates to the structure that shapes the way looking is engendered, and implies a hierarchy of male agency and female passivity.

The live performance is in this way already more ‘queer,’ as the audience is in a position to choose their attention and gaze, and the gaze can be also be met by another look, stare or gaze. In the burlesque, the reciprocal gaze is a way to subvert the position of a passive objectified body on stage, as the “performer returns ‘the gaze’ through gestures (winks, glances, expressions directed at particular audience members), and thus confounds an audience-driven scopic drive.”\footnote{Nally, p. 132.} This challenges the spectator as it both creates a connection and turns the attention to the body on stage as having agency, as well as lived experiences.

In an article where Dolan writes on the gaze in relation to pornography and striptease, she suggests that being a spectator of an event that includes undressing is not only a matter of a gendered experience with either a male or female gaze exploring the body on stage; the gaze is also shaped by other experiences, as “sexuality is as large a part of spectator’s response as gender and that, by altering the assumed sexuality of spectators, the representational exchange can also be changed.”\footnote{Jill Dolan, ‘Desire Cloaked in a Trenchcoat’, in, Jill Dolan, \textit{Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance}, Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1993, p. 125.} Dolan, who focuses on how a lesbian gaze differs from a female gaze, challenges the “[h]eterosexual readers… to confront their own homophobia, just as I, as a white reader grappling with work by racial and ethnic minorities, was forced to examine my own racism.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 130.} What she proposes is a shift from an understanding of the gaze as informed only by gender, in which a heterosexual desire is implied and “cloaked,” to a more complex gaze that considers other positions of the spectator. In the discussion that follows, Dolan then fails to take on the intersectional approach that she promotes and goes on to only speak of sexuality. However, in her
‘afterthoughts,’ which are included in the updated edition written five years later, Dolan addresses the intersectional aspects of the gaze more thoroughly. “Positionality moves us all around some other space than a center or a margin, through the complications of considering (and living) more crossed, intersected identities. Giving up the notion of a center, of a privileged fixed position to which spectators might aspire, will have useful implications for reconsidering the focus and power of unidirectional gaze.”472 In order to understand our experiences, we therefore need to consider a range of aspects that shapes our understanding.

In the article *The Gaze Revisited, or Reviewing Queer Viewing*, Evans and Gamman ambitiously review the field of the gaze, and end up with a suggestion for a theory of the gaze that is open for the “discourse” brought to the experience by the spectator, and without solely falling back on the patriarchal structure of power, and the fixed position of male/female, straight/gay.473 However, they do not support the notion of a queer gaze, as the word set yet other connotations in play; rather they “make the case for identifications which are multiple, contradictory, shifting, oscillating, inconsistent and fluid.”474 For my understanding of queer, as in the way queering troubles a range of norms and refuses to be simply contained as a term, it works as general notion to describe the looking from a desire that troubles fixed notions of gender, sexuality, race, and identity.

In my earlier discussion on the subversive potential, I showed that the burlesque challenges a range of norms and ideas of bodies, gender, and sexuality. At the burlesque, desire is rarely tied to the male gaze, as the structure that emerges in the temporary community challenges that gaze and creates a new set of norms and “rules” about how to look and desire the body onstage. On a few occasions, I have experienced that the ambience has changed when a group of men have appeared and disturbed the atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance crucial for the community with their presence. It is hard to pinpoint precisely what in their behavior created the sense of toxic masculinity that makes a space unsafe, but they brought with them a sense of the male gaze.

But the usual experience of desire at the burlesque is not tied to a male gaze, nor is it directed at passive female bodies on stage. The desires experienced are far more complex and interesting. For this case I have chosen to approach a boylesque act and discuss how my desire was experienced in relation to my gaze, queerness and my identity as a white, straight male.

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472 Ibid., p. 132.
473 Evans & Gamman, p. 47.
474 Ibid., p. 34.
As the light comes on, the song *Thrift Shop* by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis with its characteristic “what, what -what, what-what” lyric over an old school hip-hop beat starts to play and a figure emerges on stage. Starting from a rock-star pose, looking down with one hand up in the air, the face comes up and a body starts to move slowly. Moving slowly, Luminous Pariah waves and smiles confidently at the audience in a diva-esque manner, striking poses as if to receive the audience’s love. He is dressed in a silver-grey fake mink fur coat, unbuttoned to reveal a sparkling sequined bodysuit in purple, pink and green with a deep ‘v’, showing off his smooth, muscular chest. He wears high-heeled sneakers in the same sparkling color and a matching police hat on his head. His seemingly hairless, well-trained black body reminds me of an athlete or a fitness model, like the ones you see on the cover of health-and-lifestyle magazines. He wears red lipstick that accentuates his broad smile, showing a row of perfect white teeth, heavy black eye makeup, large fake eyelashes on his eyelids and above his cheekbones, to frame and accentuate his eyes.

As the beat drops, his hips set in motion, and he takes small steps with his heels pointed, to constantly show off his chest and his crotch. With small playful steps, he directs the attention to his lean and muscular legs. He is smiling, looking at the audience, which instantly responds and gives him support with their cheers and whistles.

Moving in slow motion, he begins gyrating his hips, sinking down in a broad squat, again directing focus to his crotch as he shows off his body. The audience shouts. I see a devious smile on his face; he knows that the audience loves him. He gets up and starts dancing to the beat of the music, his moves are a mix of hip-hop and jazz dance, and he really knows how to move. His dance background is obvious, and he switches deftly between masculine moves, wide-legged and powerful, and feminine sashaying and hip movements.

Suddenly he stops, facing the audience, and smells the collar of his coat, as the lyrics of the song go: “Draped in a leopard mink, girl standin’ next to me, probably shoulda washed this, smells like R. Kelly’s sheets, Piss, but shit, it was 99cents!” The whole act is in tune with the song, which tells the story of buying clothes at a thrift store. As the first reveal is coming up, Lumi, as he is called, turns his back to the audience, directing the focus to his body as he takes the coat off. His precise movements command the audience’s full attention, and I am mesmerized by his skill and the beauty of his body.

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As he continues dancing, he shifts from moving to the music, and sometimes against the music, on beat, or in slow motion, but it always seems right. He starts to pull down the zipper in the back of his body suit, teasing, but stops. He walks off the stage and into the audience, passes some guys and turns his back to a woman in the audience. She helps him with the zipper, and the act is an obvious play with the established ‘zip me up’ scene of men helping women in or out of complicated clothes, in popular culture. As he walks back on stage, he teasingly reveals his shoulders, a highly eroticized body part in burlesque. He turns towards the audience and pulls the body suit slowly over his hips, while looking out in the audience, squatting with his knees together he untangles the suit from his shoes, and when he stands up, he kicks the suit from the stage with a big smile and starts dancing to the beat, now wearing only a pair of briefs in the same sparkling material.

He grabs the fur coat from the stage floor, caresses it, slides it up along his body and puts it back on. Moving swiftly with his back to the audience, he pulls his briefs off; as the coat slides down his shoulders, he winks at the audience while spinning his briefs with his hand and throwing them offstage. As the coat falls to the stage again, he starts dancing intensely; his buttocks bounce, separated only by a thin, sparkling G-string. He turns around, showing off some final moves to the beat, before returning to the slow motion diva poses that display his amazing body. The audience applauds, howls and whistles. When he walks off the stage, he gives some playful ‘feminine’ shakes with his butt.476

As I watch the act, I am totally immersed. Tantalized by the amazing body so teasingly revealed. The posing male body, re-creating images from body-building and showing off a hard body, displaying a position of power.477 The male body being shown as active makes the male gaze impossible and ties to a long tradition of displays of men not only being looked at, but also looking back.478 Compared to the female burlesque performers, whose looking back can be seen as an act of subversion, the reciprocal gaze in this act does not work to subvert or challenge the spectator’s understanding of the power hierarchy of men and women. It does, however, challenge other norms and impressions. As the body on stage is a black body, I cannot ignore the hyper-masculinization of black men, ambivalently being made out as a threat connected to the sexual force of nature, and the sexually fetishized black body in sport and popular culture.479 The reoccurring moves to direct attention to the

478 Ibid., pp. 62-63.
groin (or is it just me looking there?) could be understood as an expression of a phallic power, and in this case also referring to the myth of the size of the black man’s phallus.\footnote{Mercer, pp. 187-188.}

I am struggling with what to make of my experience of this black body. I fear that there in my gaze is a domination, or a fetishization, of which I am unaware. An ethnographic gaze, as I realize that in my experience of the performers onstage, I make a mental note if it is a woman, or a person of color, while the white male passes by unnoticed. Dyer describe the white as “no color because it is all colors,” and that “the invisibility of whiteness colonises the definition of other norms – class, gender, heterosexuality, nationality and so on – it also masks whiteness as itself a category.”\footnote{Richard Dyer, ‘White’, \textit{Screen}, vol. 29, no. 4, 1988, pp. 44-47.} In a similar way, Ahmed argues that whiteness is invisible only for those who inhabit it, and that whiteness becomes the invisible place around which we are oriented; as such, we do not face our whiteness.\footnote{Ahmed, 2006, p. 133.} My own whiteness, which inevitably changes my orientation toward the experience, is a non-experience that makes the other the ‘Other’. A reframing of the gaze in line with Dolan’s intersectional understanding Luminous looking back makes me challenge “the privileged fixed position” I take as a spectator.\footnote{Dolan, 1993, p. 132.}

Another position being challenged by the body onstage is that I as a man should only desire female bodies. As mentioned in my earlier discussion on the potential of subverting gender, there is a norm that imposes a view on bodies as either male or female, and says that these binary positions are tied to their gender and their sexual desire. Butler argues that our gender and our sexuality are constituted from performances that are being repeated within the frame of a power discourse that she calls the heterosexual matrix. This structure of power imposes a ‘heteronorm’ that impels us to desire the other sex; to become straight. Ahmed argues that the “compulsory heterosexuality operates as a straightening device, which rereads the signs of queer desire as deviations from the straight line.”\footnote{Ahmed, 2006, p. 23.} Stepping out of the “straight line” is ‘troubling’ the system and as such queering. Muñoz suggests that queerness is to be intentionally lost, by straying away from the straight map of heteronormativity, and also knowingly stepping away from privileges that come from acting straight.\footnote{Muñoz, 2009, pp. 72-73.}

When I am experiencing Luminous Pariah onstage, I find myself immensely entertained, excited, inspired and in awe, but never sexually aroused.
My identification (or non-identification) as straight has its reason in the constant re-production of straightness, in a society that encourages the same. As Ahmed puts it; “In the case of sexual orientation, it is not simply that we have it. To become straight means that we not only have to turn toward the objects that are given to us by heterosexual culture, but also that we must ‘turn away’ from objects that take us off this line.” My past is filled with a ‘turning’ towards straightness, and away from the ‘queer.’ As such, I can potentially feel attracted to a man, but the stickiness of straightness, produced by the repeated performance of heterosexuality, makes me unable to even interpret my desire as erotically directed to another man, and if that is the case, I cannot experience it, at least not yet.

One desire that I feel is that of being on the stage, almost an envy of the position where attention, gazes and desire are directed towards you. Willson argues that “[b]eing desired (as opposed to desiring) does not necessarily have to be passive. Burlesque performers willingly indulge in this controlled compliancy, in wanting to be appreciated and adored […] They want to be sensational.” As a spectator, part of me wants to get that admiration. In this experience, the less explored part of Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze can be of use: the second pleasure position of the male spectator, not as a voyeuristic objectifying viewer, but as a narcissistic gaze functioning as an ego libido, in that the gaze is working as an identification of oneself with the “object.” Steve Neale makes use of this idea of identification in a study on masculinity in relation to men in cinema. He follows Mulvey’s claim; “Narcissism and narcissistic identification both involve phantasies of power, omnipotence, mastery and control.” As such, the gazing is more about the gazer than the object of the gaze.

My desire is also tied to belonging to a specific cultural context. Feminist scholar Jane Ward argues that “our desires direct us not simply towards bodies with particular “parts,” but towards the complete cultural experience that those bodies represent and make possible.” The idea of queer as interchangeable with gay or bisexual, or necessarily connected to sexuality, is problematic, and as Ward discusses, many monogamous gay couples adhere to a heteronormative lifestyle of fitting in, where the only exception is that they have same-sex

Willson, p. 177.
Mulvey, pp. 18-19.
relations. As Ward concludes, “the relation between straightness and queerness is more a complex network than linear dualism.”

In the article ‘Queer Masculinities of Straight Men,’ Robert Heasley suggests a typology to discuss queer masculinities that are straight, and argues that this typology could make identities that are now living “in the shadow” able to step out in the sun, and to challenge the hetero-masculine norms, which are quite narrow.

I immediately wonder if I am not one of those shadow-dwellers, not a closeted gay man, but a closeted queer, never feeling at home in straight masculinity. My desire is a queer desire and perhaps all desire is somewhat queer, as Neal points out; “desire itself is mobile, fluid, constantly transgressing identities, positions and roles.”

At the burlesque, the display of bodies onstage acts to challenge the fixed position of the spectator, making the own position and potential privileges visible, and directing attention to the desires being experienced. To step off the ‘straight line’ is difficult, as the correcting devices are continuously redirecting us towards straightness, by images and experiences recirculated in and through popular culture. Muñoz sees the utopia embedded in the queer and argues that queerness “lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.”

In the queer is the possibility to experience new horizons emerging, and perhaps the same is true in the theoretical switch from a male to a queer gaze.

**Burlesque from a Relational Approach**

As my examples have shown, experiencing burlesque is not only about the experience of the other body onstage. As a spectator, I am in the moment of the experience among other people both onstage – a relation which I discussed at the end of the first chapter – and in the audience. This is among other changes my experience of the body I perceive, just as it is in itself a part of the experience as a way to experience. In this section, I will discuss spectatorship in relation to aspects of community and intersubjective experiences of being together with others, and the sense when I experience *We.*

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491 Ibid., p. 46.
493 Neale, p. 4.
**Sensing Community**

A central part of the experience of any theatrical event is the feeling of being together with others. We might join our family to go to the circus, meet our friends for a concert, a soccer game, or the burlesque, and we go out on the streets to celebrate at festivals. We join others in celebrations, in joy, or sorrow and hardship, in protest and to show support. Forming different types of community is a central part of human life.

Although coming together with others creates potential for a sense of community, it is hard to predict whether it will be experienced, as it does not appear at any designated time, and the quality of the experience might differ from one time to the other. In the article ‘Vital Contact: Creating Interpretative Communities in a Moment of Theatrical Perception,’ theater scholar Heather Lilley discusses the potential feeling of unification and community from the theatrical reception.\(^\text{495}\) By focusing on the dramaturgy of the performance, she suggests three main areas of importance for the creation of community. First, a “shared recognition of cultural symbols,” which for Lilley creates a basis for an interpretive community; second, “audience-performance contact,” which aims at creating a fellowship between the stage and the spectators; and third, “sharing of time and space,” where the response and reactions can influence each other.\(^\text{496}\) Although Lilley’s approach is related to the dramaturgy and thus leans towards the production side of the event, the general framework is useful as it gives a structure of what is needed for the experience of community. By using examples from the burlesque, I will now discuss how different aspects of the performance shape the experience. After this framing, I will turn to a discussion on how the phenomenal quality of the experience can be different and connect it to the experience of *communitas* and utopia.

**(Ad)Dressing the Community**

I am standing on the sidewalk outside the classic entertainment venue Nalen, which is famous as Stockholm’s best venue for jazz music and dancing between the 1930s and the 1960s, waiting on line to get into the burlesque club. When I enter the building, I show my digital ticket and pass some security guards dressed in everyday clothes, then step into a foyer with red velvet walls, a high stuccoed ceiling, checkered stone floor and marble columns. The impressive interior – perfectly suitable for a burlesque extravaganza – has an air of timelessness and tempts me to forget the modern world outside, just a

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\(^\text{496}\) Ibid., p. 45.
few meters away. It is almost like transitioning into another mode, like entering a circus tent, or walking into an amusement park. My eyes scan the room, looking at people in magnificent costumes, trying to spot familiar faces, searching for a mirror, just a quick glance – do I look ok? Is my collar properly folded, are my suspenders covered by the vest, and are my shoes shiny enough? The sense of excitement and eagerness are growing. Everything is fine; I just need to drop off my coat and get to the bar. I look back, and the line for the cloakroom is growing ever longer. People are fidgeting, fixing their costumes, chatting and laughing. I leave my coat, and as I walk to the small bar, I hear a remix of an old jazz tune and see people hurrying to the restrooms. The bar is still pretty empty. Clips from old black and white silent movies are playing on a screen. There are a few people hanging out in different parts of the room; they look at me as I enter. I look back and smile; the atmosphere is friendly, and there’s an unspoken agreement that it is ok to look at each other here.

At the club from where most of my examples were experienced, Fräulein Frauke Presents, the dress code makes the audience dress up but is still broad and inclusive; the only thing banned are everyday clothes like jeans and trainers. There’s also a range of suggestions on what to wear; as mentioned earlier, the short version of the dress code is “dress to impress!” Each club usually has a theme, which visitors are encouraged to keep in mind when choosing their outfits. Examples of themes are “Bloody Valentine,” “Weimar Cabaret,” “Victorian Circus,” “Cuba Libre,” “Jungle Fever,” and “Duty Calls.” The events are linked to image boards on social media with inspiration on what to wear. Many visitors create amazing costumes in line with the theme, and it is often quite hard to tell the audience from the performers. Besides the themed costumes, there are other, more ‘generic’ burlesque looks, such as vintage military uniforms, fetish-style clothes with rubber and leather, underwear such as bustiers, corsets, silk stockings and garter belts, and all kinds of cross-dressing in different styles.

Lilley suggests that a crucial part of creating the potential of community is the formation of an interpretive community, where symbols are interpreted and imagined similarly within the group through common horizons of understanding.

498 Lilley, pp, 40-42.
cultural referents. What this implies, and I agree on this, is that a common understanding of the experience in the audience is necessary, at least to some degree. As my earlier discussion has shown, this understanding is framed in relation to the popular culture in which ideas and images are circulated. Through the shared culture, horizons of understandings take shape and also create norms, ideals, and ideology that then create still other new horizons of understanding, as I discuss in relation to subversion and desire.

Dressing up at the burlesque is thus not only a fun part of the experience, but it has the purpose of laying down some rules and ethics that guide the event, and as such establishing a safe zone for the visitors who have decided to play along; it is a shared understanding of tolerance, acceptance, and decency. This also means that a group is also already implied, by creating a separation from the everyday world outside. While this does not guarantee a sense of community in the experience, it increases the potential for this feeling.

*Community through Winks, Smiles, and Feedback*

The next point Lilley makes is that the contact between the performer and the audience should build a sense of fellowship, in that the action creates a space of co-presence in the experience. This can be understood in relation to Fischer-Lichte’s use of the feedback loop and how it sends energy back and forth between stage and auditorium. I have given some examples of this happening in the burlesque. For the experiences that create laughter, the winks and smiles that set the play mode are a central aspect and crucial for the reaction, and laughter is a trigger for the performer’s engagement. In the experience of desire the body on stage is not a passive object as the gaze is turned back to the spectator, and the cheers and support that create the energy in the acts subvert the patriarchy.

Lilley’s final point is how the shared time and place influence the sense of community. I would argue that this point is closely linked to the second, as the co-presence in the experience is intertwined with aspects of time and space, as well as the relation to others in the room. As for the examples I use in this study, there are some differences depending on the space in which they are experienced. I would argue that the sense of community is stronger in the club setting, where the audience is standing and moving around, since there is a constant flow and movement in the audience as people orient themselves and interact. When the audience is sitting down, the focus is more intentionally

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499 Ibid., p. 42.
500 Ibid., pp. 46-47.
directed towards the body onstage, and although I have experienced community in this setting as well, it seems to be experienced as a temporarily moment of being together, while the experience of community at the clubs have a longer reach. I will get back to this shortly.

Through this framework, certain crucial aspects for the potential of experiencing community are highlighted. However, I would argue that the way we experience being together and joined in community differs. Therefore, I will now turn to the phenomenological understanding of intersubjective sharing for the following discussion.

When I Experience *We* – Notions of Sharing

The intersubjective experience of other people in a group situation can take on different shapes, and as such have different intentional ‘qualities’ to the phenomenal mind. What might seem similar experiences are in fact radically different in the way they turn towards the self and others, and how the connection in the togetherness is experienced. This sense of being together and belonging with others affects the depth of the feeling of community, and I would argue that it opens up for persistent communities and moments of utopia.

Philosopher Dan Zahavi turns the attention to how the intersubjective experiences of being in a group differ depending on their intentional direction of the experience. The three modes of intentionality are *emotional contagion*, *empathy* and *emotional sharing*, which he also calls *We-ness*. Since I have already discussed empathy in the first chapter, I will just remind you that the empathic experience takes the perspective of the other, but with a clear distinction of the self and the others, and in recognizing this experiential difference it is connected, but not shared.

Experiencing emotional contagion is in a sense the opposite; it entails feeling the same emotion, but without it being connected, as you catch the same emotion as your own. In this experience, the emotive state of the others is transferred to you, and you join in the same emotion as the group. As an example, Zahavi uses the experience of walking into a bar filled with a cheerful crowd that instantly puts you in the same mood, compared to the sad mood at a funeral. In both of these cases, our phenomenological experience of the emotion is as our own and not as someone else’s, even though we all experience the same emotion. If we experience powerful emotions such as anger, rage, or panic, we might not even be aware that the others in the group are feeling the same thing, as we are occupied with our own feeling. The experience of emo-
tional contagion would not constitute a we-experience, since the other-directedness of sharing is not recognized.\textsuperscript{502} The experience of emotional contagion is well recognized in the experience of being a spectator, as a part of a crowd, or in an audience, and it has a strong impact in a range of situations such as sporting events or protests and demonstrations. I will now give you an example of this experience at the burlesque.

\textit{Getting Caught by the Emotion}

I am standing at the back of the audience at the Gloria Theatre in Helsinki. It is the ninth annual burlesque festival, but my first visit at the event. An impressive range of performers is putting on shows during two hectic days of burlesque. The acts are quite varied over the two days, and as usual, some get a larger response from the audience than others. Most of the time, the audience seems to be triggered by the same acts, joining in laughter, whistles, cheers, and applause. However, at the beginning of the third act, something suddenly happens when I experience that the rest of the audience appreciate an act in a way that I do not understand. Onto the stage step a man and a woman, dressed in white clothes that look like a hippie version of the Flintstones’ outfits. The crowd instantly begins cheering. The man is fake-playing a string instrument that looks like an early version of a lute, while the woman is overacting, using classic poses from the opera. The classical music that was being played from the beginning suddenly stops, and instead heavy metal starts streaming from the speakers. The white costumes are thrown off, and underneath brown garments in leather are revealed, and the crowd instantly goes wild. The reaction surprises me; I fail to see why the performance is so appreciated. I know that heavy metal is a big thing in Finland, but I do not see how this accounts for the crowd’s entire craze. The longhaired performers start to headbang, and it starts to look more like a Viking metal show than burlesque. As the act continues, the energy of the act and the audience’s enthusiasm start to get to me, and I start to enjoy it. On stage, the woman is bending over, and the man is engaging in fake intercourse, reminding me of scenes from the fantasy series \textit{Game of Thrones}. Simulating sex is not unusual in burlesque, but it is usually as masturbation or playing with objects. As the final reveal is coming, the performers are getting rid of their leather tunics and exposing leather straps with chains in a fetish style. By now I am caught by the emotion and cheering like anyone else. I still cannot understand why everyone likes this act so much, but I give in, and let myself get swept away by the crowd’s cheerful energy.\textsuperscript{503}


\textsuperscript{503} Betty Blackheart & Frank Doggenstein, Helsinki Burlesque Festival, March 4, 2016.
Later I got to chatting with a performer in the break, and I learned that the performers, Betty Blackheart and Frank Doggenstein, were the festival’s organizers, and celebrities of the Helsinki burlesque scene. That explained the audience’s wild appreciation and cheers. In my experience, I lacked the horizon of meaning to be able to experience it in the same way as the locals at the event. For me, the act was an experience of getting caught by the energy of the group, alluring me into the same emotions as the others, although I did not feel a sense of sharing this experience or being connected to the others. In this case, I experienced the same emotion, but not as our emotion.

Experiencing the same emotion as the other does not entail any knowledge of the origin of the other’s feeling, or the similarities between my own feeling and the other’s. It is in this way similar to sympathy, as it is a feeling along, but there is no perspective-taking.

The Shared Experience as We

Emotional sharing (and a We-experience) needs more than just individuals who happen to have the same emotion. The sharing involves a plurality of subjects sharing the ‘same’ kind of experience, and also an experience of the experience as being shared, with a reciprocal awareness. The people sharing the emotion also need to be unified by some affective bond or identification with each other. A feeling of togetherness. Zahavi argues that “[e]motional sharing must encompass ‘the other as participating, with me, in that experience.’”

It is worth noting the different uses of the word We in the language. One use is for me and someone else experiencing something independently of each other. One can say that we felt the earthquake, in the meaning that we all felt the earthquake, but were not necessarily together, experiencing it at the same direct place. The experience is the same, but it is not as ours, or as a shared experience. But then there is also as a We that implies togetherness, an experience of something as ‘ours’. When coming from a football game, the utterance “We won!” implies that it was something done together, as a part of We. This could also be said by the game’s spectators, who share the experience of winning without actually playing, as the attention is joint towards the same experience. Joint attention is not a mere matter of pointing the attention to the same sources; the awareness of attending together must also be present.

504 Zahavi, 2015, p. 90.
505 Ibid., pp. 90-91.
As such “[J]oint attention requires both coordination and differentiation. There is no merged unity here, but rather a preserved plurality.”⁵⁰⁶ Zahavi suggests adopting a second person perspective on how we relate to others in shared experiences. Central to the second-person perspective is the reciprocal aspect of being aware that ‘you’ understand(s) me as their ‘you’. I am being aware of me as your ‘you’, and vice versa. This implicates that I am aware of myself, the other, and me as the other of the other, at the same time. To experience a sense of togetherness, we need a balance between this difference and similarity.⁵⁰⁷ The We-experience demands a certain amount of self-alienation in which I become more like the other, and where I understand me as their other, and also them as aware of me. Then I can become aware of me as one of them, or I as a part of We. What constitutes a We-experience is a conscious feeling of being a part of the group, of consciously sharing the emotion with others.

Attending a burlesque performance has the potential to cause both shared emotions and just the experience of the same emotions as the other. Without the notion of the difference, one might not even recognize these experiences as different. However, in relation to creating a sense of community, it is important as one is directed towards the shared emotions of the group and the other towards one’s own experience.

The We-Experience of Community

I am standing in the audience, quite close to the stage. It is hot and crowded, and as the audience moves, we bump into each other. So far, the acts have been very good, and the anticipation is high. Out onto the stage walks Soa de Muse, a tall creature in a slender black skirt and a black cape that covers the upper body and head. The only body parts visible are the black hands with long fingers shaped into the tail-feathers of an imaginative bird. The music is powerful, and as the silhouette flows over the stage, the beauty strikes me. I get a sense of sadness, of serenity, but at the same time hope; the experience is utterly bittersweet. In many acts, the audience is cheering, shouting, whistling, howling, laughing, and applauding, usually for comedy or the conscious raunchiness of the act. In this act, the mood is different. The audience grew quiet, astonished by the beauty of the performance. As the act moves along, the cape and the dress are taken off, revealing a well-trained black body dressed in black shorts in a sheer material, with black leather straps shaping a harness around the torso, and the arms dressed in black bird feathers in the shape of a raven’s wings. The birdlike movement, the beautiful body and the

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 92.
⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 92-95.
sense of darkness demand the audience’s attention, and the experience is really intense. As the shorts are taken off, the body is covered by tight black underwear; the harness and the wings create a ballet-like image of a female ballerina in a male body. With the long black eyelashes, black lipstick and black make-up around the eyes, the look is quite androgynous. With a few pulls to the black harness, the wings are changing shape, becoming more rugged, and as he turns to show the black tail-feathers, the birdlike actions are revealing something precious and strangely human. In the very same movement, I get an intense feeling of belonging in the audience, the sense of all of us being in this together, sharing a beautiful and important experience. Something in the barely audible sounds of joint admiration and the dark sadness and vulnerability of the act made me feel empowered.508

The strong sense of vulnerability in the act may influence the intention to seek connection with others in the audience, and when the unity is confirmed the sense of community is created. Dolan also recognizes this and repeatedly argues that the generosity and the vulnerability of the performer are crucial in the construction of utopia and the sense of community.509

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508 Soa de Muse, Fräulein Frauke Presents Can-Can, May 9, 2015.
509 Dolan, 2005, p. 52, 57, 77.
One approach to the sense of belonging as an audience is found in the notion of *communitas*, which has its origin in anthropology and was introduced to performance studies by Victor Turner to describe the specific temporary community that is created through a joint experience. It differs from a more general notion of community, as it is sensed as togetherness through the experience; that is, it includes everyone and rises above social and psychological structures.\(^{510}\) In the experience of the burlesque, communitas is created from the shared horizon of understanding created by the dress-up and stepping into a world, accepting its rules of play, the shared ethics relating to norms and ideology. In the shared space and time of joint attention, the experience of being together becomes apparent. In the sharing, the experience becomes more appreciated and more intense. This sense of being together with others is in fact changing the very experience as such. Turner calls this form of temporary community an *existential* or *spontaneous communitas*, as it appears in the specific moment of experience; he does, however, suggest two other modalities of communitas that develop a structure as they expand the experience of the spontaneous moment. *Normative communitas* appears when a group needs to organize resources and gain control, in order to pursue a specific goal.\(^{511}\) Following this differentiation, the burlesque could also be understood in relation to normative communitas, which is continuously being recreated in line with the values and ideas advocated, through repetitions of actions and expressions forming a counterculture. I would argue that this has an affect on the difference in experience of events where you sit at a theater and of others in which you are standing and moving around, that I mentioned earlier. As you walk around, direct your attention to others, and bump into each other; the sense of agency in the experience increases, and therefore the movement is not only a movement of the body in the room, but also a belonging to the movement in a broader sense. Turner suggests a third modality, an *ideological communitas*, which is an outward expression of the existential communitas and as such relates the values tied to the experience as a utopian model.\(^{512}\) This can be related to the way the burlesque reaches out into society through popular culture and social media, potentially showing the core values and subversion within. This potential reach is however disturbed by other images of burlesque in popular culture, as I discussed earlier.

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\(^{512}\) Ibid.
I would argue that the experience of communitas is closely connected to the potential experience of utopia. For Muñoz, the utopia gives an idea of what is missing in the now and helps visualize a potential of a future that is queerer, and the way to move forward is in the collective of belonging.\textsuperscript{513} Through the subversion of strict norms and ideals, the burlesque is an obvious arena for this collective utopia.

Dolan also recognizes the importance of togetherness, arguing that the experience of community and utopia are closely intertwined and relate to the experience of the performers’ skill, generosity, and vulnerability. In my experience of Soa de Muse’s amazing act, in an audience seemingly equally amazed and full of heart, I turn to Dolan’s words: “The performance creates a need, a desire to strive for this affective measure of goodwill, so that the glow of intersubjectivity and community might extend not just through the rest of this night, but through many others, as well. By creating this hope, by engaging this anticipatory illumination and watching these fantasy pictures, the performance can change consciousness and move people to change social conditions.”\textsuperscript{514}

What this discussion has shown is that the sense of belonging to a group is important in the experience of burlesque, and I would argue in all performance art. The shared feeling of being together is of importance for creating a sense of community or communitas. Lilley argues that “[e]xperiencing a sense of community is a sensory, bodily and imaginative experience, at one and the same time personal and socially constituted.”\textsuperscript{515} At the burlesque, framing and anticipation set a horizon of understanding that creates a potential for a shared meaning in the experience. I need to assume that their understanding is similar to mine, and that they recognize mine as similar to theirs. The interaction between the performer and the spectators is strengthening the co-presence experienced through the liveness, and the feedback loop is underlining the flow of energies and the co-creation of the experience. Getting a sense of being together, not only in the same room, but as a shared experience in communitas sensing a belonging to humanity, the potential of utopia appears, as I experience We.

\textsuperscript{513} Muñoz, 2009, pp. 176-177, 189.
\textsuperscript{514} Dolan, 2005, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{515} Lilley, p. 439.
Chapter Conclusion

If the first chapter on circus focused on the attention and connection created in the experience, this chapter on burlesque has revolved around the subversion of norms and the experience of community.

Beginning in a discussion on how the popular can be reconfigured using an approach that starts in the experience rather than in the genre as such, the importance of the circulation of ‘images’ and ideas is important, as they create impressions and change the way we experience the world. With a few examples, I showed how a broader popular culture is used to create other meanings and a sense of ‘getting it.’ The popular is more accessible than ever in the social and digital society we live in, but through its ephemeral quality, common referents might get lost, and smaller communities are created with specific interests. As such, the popular is expanding and narrowing at the same time.

The norms and ideals of bodies and beauty, created in part by circulation in popular culture, are restricting and impose ideologies and hierarchies. In the staging of bodies that do not conform to these narrow ideals, the burlesque can be subversive as it challenges the spectator’s understanding of norms. Even bodies that do match the beauty ideals can be subversive, as they in their staging challenge other structures of powers, concerning the right to female sexuality and agency.

In the embodied experience, I turned the focus to laughter and the way that comedy in the acts supports the subversive potential by mocking and ridiculing the power. The examples showed that laughter often appears when familiar events create an expectation of what will happen next, and suddenly the action changes direction, and an incongruity emerges between the expectation and the experience.

The burlesque does not only consist of comedy, but also some sort of play on sexuality and usually some form of undressing of the body. Starting in the notion of the male gaze, I switched focus to a queerer approach as I engaged in an analysis of my desire directed at a black male body on stage, and how my own position and identity were challenged.

In the final part, I engaged in a discussion on aspects of community and the intersubjective notion of sharing experiences with others. In the experience of bodies on stage, I cannot ignore the other bodies present at the event and how my relation to them changes the experience. This experience can have different phenomenal qualities, such as either experiencing together as in an emotional contagion or as a connected experience in which a shared sense of belonging emerges. This ties on to the experience of communitas as well as utopia.
In this chapter, the returning theme is the way our shared culture shapes our understanding, not only of our culture, but also of ourselves – how the revealing bodies do not only reveal themselves, but also our society. As such, the burlesque becomes a place of sharing, as well as challenging, popular beliefs by creating community.
Chapter 3. Freak Show

Under a parasol in the scorching Californian sun stands a man holding a microphone in his hand; on a small table next to him is a plastic container. He calls to people who walk by, just as others have done through the ages, trying to “turn the tip” – to get people inside to see the show. A two-headed turtle floats quietly in the plastic container. “They are right here. Alive! You can see them for free!” He continues, “There is a whole circus sideshow inside, we call it the strangest show on earth for a reason. You’re gonna see the female fire eater, you’re gonna meet the littlest lady in LA inside, Larry The Wolf Boy that you read about in the Guinness Book of World Records!” “It’s only five dollars!” I enter through red curtains that remind me of the entrance of an old circus. To my right is a small stage with a row of chairs placed around it. Straight ahead and to the left side I see old sideshow banners, cabinets filled with weird stuff. I see taxidermy animals, jars of preserved animals, dried sea-creatures, two-headed lizards, snakes and turtles, and a bunch of other things I have never seen before. I take a quick look around as more people are gathering in front of the stage.

The show is about to begin, and I feel curiosity about what is to come …

Background

In this final case study, I direct my attention to a genre where the reputation and the “idea of” the shows are far more wide-reaching than people’s actual experience of live performances. If I continue the analogy of the genres in the backyard of theater, the freak show is the smallest tent of all, pitched on the furthest outskirts, hidden behind a bush, where it looks forgotten, outdated and out of place. A place where you should not want to go, but excitement and curiosity get the best of you, grab your attention and reel you in. As a genre, the appeal of freak show is similar to that of horror movies or a rollercoaster ride, of becoming intrigued while passing a car crash, or watching accidents waiting to happen on Instagram. Experiencing the freak show is not all about

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516 Venice Beach Freakshow, July 15, 2016.
pleasure and enjoyment. It is rather about the thrill and the curiosity, about being there in the liveness of experiencing the rare and strange of others, and of ourselves.

Freak shows are usually understood as a display of people with some form of deviancy. The collective image of the freak is that of bearded ladies, little people,\textsuperscript{517} conjoined twins and so on. Live “freaks” were being put on display, but it is important to keep in mind that the acts were highly staged and made use of a potentially abnormal physical attribute, or a special skill, to create amusement and amazement. The freakery was created by the staging of the act, by using theatrical props, clever advertisement and well-rehearsed performance, to create an opposition of the norm, to create an experience of the “freak” as an ‘Other.’ Some of the acts certainly did, and still do, use deviant bodies, but the freakiness was created as a certain practice in line with a tradition of curiosity and wonder.\textsuperscript{518} What was being considered interesting changed, and freak shows were quick to adopt novelties that could make a quick buck. Some of the freaks of history, such as tattooed people, “wild men” or obese people, would not be considered freaks today, since they would no longer be read as opposed to the norm.

As a genre, the freak show is the one with the most recent revival, if it can even be called that. Freak shows are still quite rare, and maybe the revival is rather in a collective memory of freaks, than in the staging of real live shows. The first memory I have of the concept of freaks is from an episode of \textit{The X-Files}, where we got to follow Fox and Mulder to the town Gibsonton, Florida, to investigate some mysterious murders, in a case that uses the history of freak shows as a backstory.\textsuperscript{519} Two real sideshow performers appear in the episode. One of them is Enigma, famous for having blue jigsaw puzzle pieces tattooed all over his body, and for eating anything. In the episode, we see him munching on a fish, scales and all. The other sideshow performer is Jim Rose, who does a human blockhead act, and wriggles himself out of a straitjacket.\textsuperscript{520} Jim Rose calls himself the “Godfather Of Modern Freak Show,” and he is the man behind the \textit{Jim Rose Circus Sideshow}, which was founded in the early

\textsuperscript{517} Throughout the book I have chosen to use the term ‘little people’ as long as a specific source does not use another term. According to the organization \textit{Little People of America} the terms “little people”, “L.P.”, “person of short stature”, and “dwarf” are all acceptable. In historical sources the term “midget” is at times used, a term which today is generally considered derogatory as it connotes ‘little people’ being put on display for public amusement. \url{https://www.lpaonline.org/faq}, accessed March 26, 2019.


\textsuperscript{519} Gibsonton is also known as ‘Showtown,’ as it used to be the winter home of traveling sideshow performers.

This was one of the first in the new era of the freak show. The Jim Rose Circus Sideshow might be familiar for a Swedish audience after their notorious appearance at Hultsfredsfestivalen in 1993.

As the image of freaks has been used in popular culture, I would guess that most people have an instant reference when they hear the word. However, I would guess that many of the same people believe that this form of entertainment is a thing of the past, often referred to as a dark part of the history of entertainment. Few seem to know that the freak shows still can be found, and even fewer have ever experienced a live performance.

The Field of Freak Show

In this section, I will define the use of the terms freak show and freaks and give a brief account of the history of the genre as a short introduction and in order to establish a frame that serves as the base for my experiences and analysis. Just as with the circus and burlesque, many contemporary freak show acts also hint at or reference the history of freak and sideshow, either by the use of nostalgia or as a way to position the act.

For the sake of those interested in freak show in a Swedish context, I will briefly discuss a few examples of performances that somehow relate to the genre or that have been performed in Sweden. Finally, I will frame the study within the current field of research on freaks and sideshow.

Definitions

As the preceding pages might have shown, there are certain terminological difficulties when it comes to freak show and sideshow. One problem is that different performers sometimes use different labels for seemingly like acts; another is that people writing about the genres at times use the terms loosely and often interchangeably.

Freak Show vs. Sideshow

I would argue that a freak show is the display of human oddity staged in a way so that the odd feature is the focus of the act. It is therefore not the body as such that creates the freak, but rather the staging of the body.

A sideshow is, as the name implies, a show that was performed as a part of a supplementary entertainment to increase revenue for traveling circuses and carnivals. Sideshows were often placed on the side of the big top circus tents.

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or on the way leading to them, hence the name. The sideshows, shorter acts were presented to smaller audiences that could go in and out as they pleased. Since the acts were not as demanding for the artists, the shows could run with just short breaks in between, sometimes with as many as twelve runs a day. The freak show could be a part of a sideshow, but not all sideshows were freak shows. Other attractions could be illusion shows, menageries with animals on display, wax shows, curiosities, and girlie shows with dancing women. At nighttime, the girlie show could turn into a cooch show that we would call burlesque today.

I will primarily use the term freak show, as my discussion is focused on how the oddity is used to create an experience for the spectator, rather than a discussion on the genre as such.

Different Types of Freaks

Usually, freaks are divided into categories depending on their oddity or act. Freak show scholar Robert Bogdan suggests five categories. The born freak is someone born with a body that is somehow deviant. This could, for example, be little people, giants, Siamese twins or people with strange features. Self-made freaks are people who change their bodies to become oddities. This includes tattooed people, living skeletons and bearded ladies. Novelty acts or Working acts rely on trained skills. These are the sword swallowers, fire-eaters, snake charmers, human blockheads, and so on. Non-western people are people who look “exotic.” In earlier freak shows, these could be called savages, cannibals or pygmies. Finally, there are the Gaffed freaks, which are fake freaks. These could be Siamese twins that were attached only by the clothes, or “limbless” people who were just hiding their missing limb(s).

In the contemporary freak- and sideshow, the working acts are by far the most common category. The non-western people have disappeared for obvious reasons, as there is no entertainment value in something that is experienced in everyday life. The same goes for most of the self-made freaks, as tattoos, piercing, and other body modifications have become quite common. Gaffed freaks are quite rare, if they exist at all, although many of the working

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525 Nickell, p. 48.
527 As my earlier discussion on entertainment suggests, there is no novelty that can trigger our curiosity and maintain our attention experienced, just from the sight of these bodies anymore.
acts can be using some form of tricks. There are still some acts with born freaks, which I will come back to in my analysis.

**The Roots of the Freak Show**

The earliest roots of the freak show are in many ways the same as those of circus, as public entertainment of different sorts. For the more specific entertainment of human oddity, some sources that claim that “dwarves” have been a part of entertainment in different forms throughout history, and in England, at carnivals and fairs, freak-like performers could be seen as early as the 13th century.  

The more direct roots could be traced to the displays of curiosities in 17th-century London. For a few shillings, people got to see wild animals, chained lunatics, and various human curiosities. In America, fortunetellers, dwarves, showmen, and curiosities traveled around the country in the 18th century. However, these display of a variety of performance were not considered freak shows at that time, since the way the oddity is established and used, as the attraction of the show, was yet to be established.  

The display of curiosities led to the establishment of dime museums across America in the mid-19th century. The inspiration for the dime museums was the great success of P. T. Barnum’s American Museum, which opened in New York City in 1841. Barnum filled the four-story building with all kinds of attractions that could bring in a crowd. Besides the exhibitions of curiosities, a lecture room was set up for a mix of entertainment and education, and then there were the human oddities on display. The platform performers showed off their oddities for the curious audience passing by. Several famous freaks were introduced on Barnum’s stage or platforms. The most famous of them was “General Tom Thumb,” or Charles S. Stratton, which was his real name – a little person whose fame led him and Barnum to Europe, where they performed in front of Queen Victoria. The Siamese twins Chang and Eng Bunker, conjoined at the torso, were not only famous as freak show performers, but also through the word Siamese twins, which was coined for them, as they were from Siam, now known as Thailand.  

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528 The word dwarf is the one being used in the referenced book.
530 Fahy, pp. 4-7.
532 Springhall, pp. 44-46.
533 Ibid., pp. 42-43.
known as “Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy,” as he resembled a Sky Terrier,\textsuperscript{534} the “Bearded lady” Annie Jones and the “Nova Scotia Giantess” Anna Shannon Swan were other famous freaks who performed with Barnum.\textsuperscript{535}

Barnum was a pioneer entrepreneur with a flair for marketing and creating buzz about his enterprises. However, many considered him a charlatan who only attracted the uneducated working class. For a Swedish audience, it might be of interest that Barnum was the one to introduce the renowned Swedish opera singer and actor Jenny Lind to an American audience in 1850, in an attempt to gain middle-class respectability and attract a broader audience.\textsuperscript{536}

In the second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, Barnum got involved in the circus industry. At the same time, touring attractions like circuses, dime museums, medicine shows, and carnivals started to use human curiosity as an attraction. The “midway” became a description of the amusement area at fairs, carnivals, and circuses. At the world’s fair \textit{World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago} in 1893, the amusements were arranged on a mile-long stretch called the \textit{Midway Plaisance (Pleasant Midway)}, and the midway has since been synonymous with an amusement area related to fairs, carnival or circuses.\textsuperscript{537}

The interest in curiosities and freaks was vast, and at the peak, there were hundreds of shows touring America. Freak shows became one of the most popular forms of entertainment between 1840 and 1940.\textsuperscript{538} In the first decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, medical sciences started to view deviant bodies in a new light, as pathological rather than monstrous, and the ethical dimension of staging odd bodies was questioned.\textsuperscript{539}

Besides the ethical concerns, the freak show was challenged by the technical inventions of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Mechanical rides became popular at fairs and amusement parks, pushing freak shows further to the side. When the cinema could provide cheap entertainment for a constantly growing audience, the live performances’ attraction faded.\textsuperscript{540} The freak show, ever-dependent on novelty, finally grew old, as new novelties demanded the attention of the potential audiences.

\textit{The Revival of the Freak Show}

The revival of the freak show is arguably more of a revival of the idea and image of the freak and sideshow, triggered by a number of appearances in

\begin{itemize}
\item Nickell, pp. 155-156.
\item Springhall, pp. 40-44.
\item Ibid., p. 175. Fahy, p. 92.
\item Nickell, pp. 18-25.
\item Fahy, pp. 1-3.
\item Ibid., pp. 10-13.
\item Dennett, p. 125.
\end{itemize}
popular culture around the turn of the 21\textsuperscript{th} century, and sparked by the possibilities that have emerged as the internet has spread. Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned an episode of \textit{The X-Files} that was my first experience of freaks, but others have been equally important. In 2003, the HBO tv-series \textit{Carnivàle}, set in a traveling carnival in the American Depression of the 1930s, brought the freak show tradition back to the public’s consciousness. In the series, we met freaks like a bearded lady, a lizard man, conjoined twins, a giant and a little person. Other sideshow performers, like a fortuneteller, a strongman, a mentalist and a snake charmer also appear. The show got mixed reviews, but the sideshow theme, the visuals, and the characters were praised.\footnote{Carnivàle, 2 seasons, 24 episodes. The first season premiered on HBO September 7, 2003. The final episode, Season 2, aired on March 27, 2005.}

In 2013 the reality documentary tv-series \textit{Freakshow} premiered. The show followed Todd Ray and his family, who ran the \textit{Venice Beach Freakshow}. In the show, we got to meet several freak show performers and see how they prepared and presented their acts.\footnote{Freakshow, 2 seasons, 24 episodes. The first season premiered on AMC February 14, 2013. The final episode, Season 2, aired on June 24, 2014.} As the show dealt with a contemporary freak show, it differed quite a lot from the other examples, which used the freak show as historical material.

In 2014, the critically acclaimed HBO horror series \textit{American Horror Story} chose the freak show as the setting for their fourth season. The fictive story takes place in 1952, when one of the last traveling freak shows visited the town of Jupiter in Florida. The show depicts several familiar freaks, such as conjoined twins, pinheads, dwarves, strongmen and strongwomen, a bearded lady, and a lobster boy.\footnote{American Horror Story: Freak Show, 13 episodes. The season’s first episode aired on FX October 8, 2014, and the final episode aired on January 21, 2015.} The freak show theme fits in well with the style of nostalgia and horror used in the series, and the imagery of the old freak show made a part of American entertainment history visible for a new generation.

The most recent in this round is the musical film \textit{The Greatest Showman} (2017), in which the sideshow and freaks are used to tell the story of the legendary P.T. Barnum and his venture into the circus and entertainment industry.\footnote{The Greatest Showman, 20th Century Fox. December 8, 2017.}

Although the real freak and sideshows never completely disappeared, as some traveling carnivals and fairs have continued the tradition, the decline has been obvious.\footnote{Chemers, 2008, pp. 114-115. Nickell, pp. 345-352.} However, at the turn of the century, there was also a resurgence of the freak and sideshow tradition in a permanent location. Not sur-
prisingly, this revival starts at the classic entertainment grounds in Coney Island. In 1980, the “unofficial mayor of Coney Island” Dick Zigun, Jane Savitt-Tennen and Costa Mantis founded the not-for-profit art organization Coney Island USA, and began to bring back the shine of days past and reestablish Coney Island as a center for classic American popular entertainment.\footnote{Information on Coney Island, https://www.coneyisland.com/about-coney-island-usa, accessed August 1, 2018.}

In 1985, the organization established the Sideshows by the Seashores, which is the last permanently-housed venue where you can find the classic ten-in-one circus sideshow, where you pay one admission for a number of acts in one show. Since then, sideshows have been performed in the summer months, either as their own productions or as a venue for other performers.\footnote{Dennett, p. 138.}

Although the sideshow does not aspire to preserve the sideshow as “a carnival down south in the mid-1950s,”\footnote{Adams, 2001, p. 215.} the show plays on the nostalgia of the sideshow’s heyday, both in acts and aesthetics. However, what is almost completely absent are the ‘born freaks’, and most acts are working acts with sword swallowers, fire-eaters, snake charmers, and the like – acts that likely would have been rather humdrum in an old-time freak show. Besides the sideshow, Coney Island USA also produces events like the Mermaid Parade, and Burlesque at the Beach, and operates the Coney Island Museum.\footnote{Information on Coney Island, https://www.coneyisland.com/about-coney-island-usa, accessed August 1, 2018.}

On the opposite side of the USA, in the epicenter of modern mass entertainment, Los Angeles, the former music producer Todd Ray – a lifelong fan of freaks and curiosities – opened the Venice Beach Freakshow in 2006, right by the Venice Beach boardwalk, which is famous for its alternative culture, graffiti artists, bodybuilders, and street performers of various kinds. It was a seemingly suitable location for freak show entertainment. This is the freak show that appeared in the documentary series mentioned earlier. As the name implies, the freak show in Venice Beach ties to the tradition of human exhibition, and features what could be called ‘born freaks’ like Larry the Wolf Boy, Kanya the Amazing Half Girl, Amazing Ali, as well as made freaks such as the Creature, Jessa the Bearded Lady, and working acts with shock artist Morgue, and Todd’s daughter Asia Ray. In the spring of 2017, the freak show was forced to close when their lease was canceled due to the gentrification of the area.\footnote{Article on the Freakshow being forced to move, https://www.laweekly.com/news/the-venice-beach-freakshow-is-closing-thanks-gentrification-8177492, accessed July 27, 2018.}

\section{References}

\footnote{Information on Coney Island, https://www.coneyisland.com/about-coney-island-usa, accessed August 1, 2018.}
\footnote{Dennett, p. 138.}
\footnote{Adams, 2001, p. 215.}
\footnote{Information on Coney Island, https://www.coneyisland.com/about-coney-island-usa, accessed August 1, 2018.}
Freak Shows in Sweden

For a Swedish audience, encounters with onstage freaks have been rare. However, some entertainment has occasionally had a similar function as the freak show, and some visiting sideshows have performed at music festivals in Sweden.

At the amusement park Gröna Lund, which opened in Stockholm in 1883, there was some variety entertainment that presented freaks in early years. The giant lady Angelika was one; the sword swallower Ludvig Rosaschos, and “Nissen” who performed abnormalities and other curiosities, were others. When a ban on serving alcoholic beverages in connection to variety entertainment in 1896 was enacted, these shows soon lost their appeal.551

For the 1931 season, a colonial village was staged as an attraction outside Gröna Lund. The Senegal Village, as it was called, was a traveling show led by the French “Professor” Maurice Fontanay. As an ethnographic show, the people in the village were supposed to live and work as they would in a real Senegalese village. No performances were allowed that were not part of everyday life. Another exotic village was staged the following year. This time the inhabitants came from Congo, and the village was called Sara-Kaba. The women in the village had lip plates to extend their lower lips, which was probably even more fascinating than the previous year’s show had been. Both of the shows were criticized heavily, and articles in the newspapers clearly showed the racism thriving at the time.552

In 1923, the city of Gothenburg celebrated its 300-year jubilee, and the amusement park Liseberg was opened as a part of the celebration. In many ways, it was similar to other amusement parks in Sweden and Denmark at the time, gathering all kinds of amusement and entertainment at the same place. There were carousels, a rollercoaster, a fun house, shooting ranges, swings, dance pavilions, restaurants, and a theater. But one attraction was certainly a novelty by Swedish standards. Lillköping (the name would translate to something like ‘Smallville’) was a tiny city with a city council, a jail, a church, a variety stage and other miniature buildings inhabited by about 40 little people.553 One part of the attraction was that the little people put on shows. There was musical entertainment, circus tricks, boxing, and equestrian shows. An early review of the “dwarf” variety show stated that as art it was not very enjoyable, but as a curiosity, it was worth the price of the ticket.554

551 Hasselgren, pp. 42-43.
552 Ibid., pp. 44-51.
553 GP (Göteborgs Posten), May 11, 1923.
554 GP, June 11, 1923.
Although Lillköping made good revenue the first year, as the fifth best-selling attraction at the amusement park, its first season was also its last.\footnote{GP, September 5, 1923.} From the beginning, there had been concerns about the ethical aspect of displaying human oddity in this way. The manager of the amusement park Carl Jenzén defended the attraction, saying that the little people were to be considered as any other circus artists using their bodily peculiarities to entertain an audience. He also claimed that this was their only way to make a living, and that they would be fine as long as the audience treated them kindly.\footnote{GT (Göteborgs-Tidningen), ‘Från utställningen’, June 13, 1923.} Critique was also directed at the entertainment value of the attraction, claiming that the visitors coming out of Lillköping looked uneasy and questioned the whole thing, and everyone agreed that the entrance fee was too steep.\footnote{GT, June 10, 1923.} The next year, the area was changed to a play area for children, but the name remained until 1925 when the area was reconstructed.\footnote{Barnens paradis (1924), Information from Liseberg’s web page: http://www.lisesepedia.se/Barnens_Paradis_(1924), accessed October 2, 2018.}

Almost 10 years later, in 1935, a similar attraction opened at Gröna Lund. Fifty little people lived there in Liliput, “the smallest city in the world,” as it was marketed. They came from the German troupe Glauers Liliputaner, which traveled and worked at similar attractions across Europe. During their stay in Stockholm, two of the little people got married at the Catholic Church. If the wedding was real or a hoax is hard to say; staged weddings were not an uncommon stunt in the freak show business. The bride’s wedding gown and the groom’s tail coat were put on display at NK, the most fashionable department store in town, creating yet another spectacle.\footnote{Hasselgren, p. 59.}

Contemporary Freak Shows in Sweden

When I was growing up in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a circus – which was more like a sideshow – called Variété Vaudville used to tour during the summers. One year, they pitched their little red and white circus tent at the schoolyard just across the street from where I lived. The next day my big brother and I went to see the show. This was my first encounter with any type of sideshow act, and I still remember being mesmerized by the snake charmer, intrigued by the magician’s sleight of hand, and amazed by the sword swallow.
The Jim Rose Circus Sideshow mentioned earlier performed at the music festival Hultsfredsestivalen in the summer of 1993. The performance was a huge success. One of the leading Swedish newspapers ended its review of it with the words, “It was marvellous when I finally got to leave in the end” after witnessing a human pin cushion, a man eating live worms, and another man lifting weights from a hook attached to his nipples, tongue, and penis. Because of its huge success, the sideshow returned for a couple of club performances in Gothenburg and Stockholm in early 1994.

Another traveling sideshow that made appearances at music festivals in Sweden is The Hellzapoppin Circus Sideshow from Jacksonville, Florida. They played at Metaltown rock festival and the West Coast Riot punk festival, both in Gothenburg, in 2009. They came back and performed at the Peace and Love festival in Borlänge in 2011.

The Freak Show Offstage

Since the decline of freak shows, some scholars have been looking for the freaks outside the stage, trying to connect other cultural expressions as an alternative modern freak show.

In search of the new American freak show, Jessica Williams discusses where the freak identity could be found nowadays. In her discussion on “reality” documentary tv-series, showing the “real life” of little people, giants and conjoined twins, the connection to the classic freaks might seem obvious. However, Williams comes to the conclusion that “their place on the screen limits their ability to recreate the freak show because the relationship between the viewer and freak is still marked by separation, both onscreen and between viewer and object.” I agree with Williams, and would also add that the intent to show a reality in the shows makes them something other than freaks, although they might appeal to the same kind of curiosity. As I will get back to later, the freak could be understood as a social construction that appears as part of the experience, from the framing or staging of the body like a freak,

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561 My translation from Swedish: "Det var fantastiskt skönt att slutligen gå därifrån."
566 Ibid., p. 114.
through what can be called enfreakment. I would argue that what happens in these reality series is rather a de-freakment, as the body is explicitly normalized by the everyday framing, and as such the cultural “making” of the freak disappears.

Some scholars have tried to apply the freak identity to pop music acts. Williams suggests Marilyn Manson and Lady Gaga, who both embrace a sense of freakishness in their representations. While I understand the attempt to frame them as modern freaks, I would argue that the representations they display are rather of difference or of an otherness than that of the proper freak.

In the final pages of the last chapter of Weird and Wonderful (1997), Andrea Dennett argues that the most obvious form of modern freak show entertainment is to be found in the television talk shows that were everywhere in the 1990s. In the shows, we saw the bizarre everyday drama of dysfunctional families and relationships being broadcasted to the tv audience, shifting the physical freakiness into a psychological freakiness in which the voyeuristic curiosity about human spectacle was satisfied. There were more explicit references to the classic freak show in some of the shows. The most notorious example is probably an episode of The Jerry Springer Show where two ‘little people’ are fighting onstage to the cheers of the audience. There have been discussions about whether the guests on the show were authentic and whether the action was staged or not, which seems fitting in relation to the staging of the freaks and their acts. In a similar manner, John Springhall suggests that reality shows, like Big Brother, are the modern freak show, as they show people’s lives, like stereotypes, in a voyeuristic way. Again, the claim is made here that the interest in the physical freak has turned into a search for a psychological freak. As late as 2008, Michael Chemers also mentioned the television talk shows, reality shows, and telethons as contemporary entertainment with its roots in the freak show. Although I agree with them to some extent, such as on the voyeuristic curiosity at play for the spectators of the talk- and reality shows, the acts still seem far away from the performance aspects of freak show entertainment. I also oppose the argument that the contemporary audience is less interested in the freak body, and more interested in

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569 Dennett, pp. 141-143.
570 ‘Midgets Fight and Todd Dates a Tranny!’ Jerry Springer Show, Season 16, Episode 22, aired October 24, 2006.
571 Springhall, p. 54.
the psyche. The focus on bodies and the interest of body culture is as large as ever, with the visual social media literally in the palm of our hands.

I would argue that any attempt to find a contemporary freak show offstage has to be focused on bodily practices similar to that of the freak- and sideshow. In 2000, the MTV show *Jackass* brought daredevil stunts, disgusting acts, and pranks to the screen.\(^{573}\) The show, which had its roots in the skateboard culture of the 1990s, was more in line with the physical aspects of the classic freak show. Two of the members of the cast – the little person Jason Acuña, better known as Wee-Man, and the heavy-set Preston Lacy – often were combined in acts, using their difference of size to exaggerate their bodily features and actions. This was a common trick to use in the classic freak show to highlight the extraordinary of the bodies. *Jackass* soon became a huge success. It ran for three seasons and was followed by a number of movies and spin-off shows.

In 2003, the MTV show *Dirty Sanchez* followed in the wake of *Jackass*, presenting similar stunts but now with a British accent, as three Welshmen and one Englishman hurt themselves onscreen. The series ran for four seasons, with the last episode in January 2008.\(^{574}\) Between 2004 and 2007, *Dirty Sanchez* also did several live shows on stage at festivals in which they were dragged over sandpaper with naked buttocks, and smoked a bong filled with their own urine, among other things.

This resurgence of shock entertainment coincided with the dawn of a new era of entertainment. At the end of 2005, three young entrepreneurs changed our view forever when *YouTube* was established. The video-sharing website made the world suddenly grow bigger, allowing people around the globe to share recorded memories, watch the latest music videos, or just see cats playing a keyboard. The first video ever posted on *YouTube* is called *Me at the Zoo*, and is a 19-second clip of one of the founders, Jawed Karim, standing in front of the elephants at the San Diego Zoo. Not only does the video link to the entertainment industry of exhibitions, but also to the idea of curiosity as an attraction, as all that Jawed says is: “All right, so here we are in front of the, uh, elephants, and the cool thing about these guys is that, is that they have really, really, really long, um, trunks, and that’s, that’s cool, and that’s pretty much all there is to say.”\(^{575}\) *YouTube* soon became the go-to place for the

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\(^{575}\) *Me at the Zoo*. The video was posted on YouTube by user Jawed on April 23, 2005, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNQXAC9lVRw&frags=pl%2Cwn, accessed July 31, 2018.
weird and the wonderful, as a digital variety show of whatever tickled your curiosity.

I would argue that this is the usual venue for people seeking to satisfy their voyeuristic curiosity nowadays. However, I would also argue that there is a big difference in watching these videos on a television or a computer screen, and experiencing the live performance happening right in front of you, without a safety net, without the notion of it being an act that already has taken place.

**Research on Freak Show and Sideshow**

The number of studies on freaks and sideshows is surprisingly high considering how marginalized the genres are within the broader performance field. Just like the freaks and their acts have attracted curious audiences throughout times, curious researchers seem to find the freaks equally intriguing and attracting, and who am I to judge. I am guilty of the same fascination, and have obviously chosen to add more to this body of research.

However, none of the sources I have come across deals specifically with the spectators of the freak and sideshow. Most of the research on freak shows focuses on the history and on the performer and performing. These historical studies are directed towards different fields of research such as entertainment history, cultural history or American studies. In these studies, the curiosity of the scholar quite often shines through, and many of the resources dwell in images and descriptions of the bodies of the freaks and retell the story almost as if they are a part of the freak show themselves. The focus is mainly on the object of the phenomena and on documenting a part of a fascinating history.

In the book *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (1997), performance studies scholar Andrea Stulman Dennett writes a history of the American entertainment industry in the margins, starting with the origins of the dime museums and P. T. Barnum’s importance for the entertainment of curiosity. In the three chapters that follow, the freaks and platform performers, the lecture room entertainment, and the waxwork and the evolution of early cinema are discussed. In the final chapter, Dennett traces the evolution into modern times, and briefly hints at the rebirth of the freak show when Coney Island’s Sideshow by the Seashore was established at the end of the 1980s.576

In *The Genesis of Mass Culture: Show Business Live in America, 1840 to 1940* (2008), historian John Springhall surveys the evolution of American popular entertainment of the late 19th century and the early 20th century into the era of mass culture. One of the chapters deals specifically with freak shows, while other chapters discuss related entertainment phenomena such as

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dime museums, the Blackface Minstrels, Wild West shows, Vaudeville, and the American circus.\textsuperscript{577} Springhall’s book offers an accessible overview of the emerging field of the American entertainment industry slowly becoming a mass industry.

Joe Nickell, who is best known as a skeptic and investigator of different mysteries, has a background of working at carnivals and a lifelong interest in the odd and the curious. His book \textit{Secrets of the Sideshow} (2005) is a walkthrough of whatever was found at the sideshow during its heyday. The book is structured from the different types of acts, with chapters describing human oddities, anatomical wonders, working acts and illusions as well as animal shows and curiosities.\textsuperscript{578} Nickell not only presents the performers and their acts, but also describes the sideshow itself and explains the carny lingo, which is sometimes difficult to grasp. He provides an insider perspective to a vast body of source material.

With \textit{Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination: Constructing the Damaged Body from Willa Cather to Truman Capote} (2006), Thomas Fahy directs attention to the artistic use of freakishness in the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{579} Although the focus is on the freaks as a historical phenomenon, it engages in history in relation to a critical perspective. The main focus is actually not on the freak show per se, but rather, it gives a critical view on the image of the freak and how it relates to the sociopolitical struggles in America at the time, focusing on race, disability, and sexuality.

Another category of research on freak- and sideshows are critical studies that focus on some aspects of the genres, bodies or acts. Topics that are quite common are freaks in relation to disability and ethical concerns. Others deal with the creation of the freak, as a stage persona, or as an identity, or in the image of the collective mind. Robert Bogdan’s \textit{Freakshow: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit} (1988) is usually the starting point when it comes to critical freak show research, as he provides extensive source material as well as a new take on the research.\textsuperscript{580} Bogdan switches focus from the freak as only a deviant body to the freak as a complex social construction, “as a way of thinking about and presenting people.”\textsuperscript{581} With this approach, the

\textsuperscript{581} Ibid., p. 3.
freak show became accessible for study beyond the spectacular curiosity, connecting the freak show to society.

An example of a study that discusses freaks in relation to disability is Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), one chapter of which is dedicated to the American freak show from 1935 to 1940. Thomson approaches from disability, as well as the freak, as constructed from cultural representations that are understood in relation to society. Her aim is not only to situate but also to politicize the discussion by challenging the assumption of the deviance as tied to bodily ability, rather than to the discourse that constructs it. Thomson also draws parallels to the way western society has cast the woman in opposition of the norm, and adopts an intersectional perspective as she shows that deviance is not only one position in opposition to the norm, but rather a result of multiple overlapping hierarchies.

Rachel Adams’ *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (2001) is yet another example of taking the concept of freaks and primarily discussing it in relation to the use in other cultural settings such as literature, film, photography, and art. Adams follows in the track of Bogdan and several other scholars, and considers the freakiness a performative quality rather than tied to the body of the freak. The subject of the study is however more focused on fictive freaks in other genres than real performers, but she turns her attention to the contemporary sideshow in a short epilogue and briefly engages in her own experience of it.

Michael M. Chemers is one of few scholars from the field of theater who has engaged in research on freaks. In his book *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show* (2009), he connects aspects of theater to disability and the display of stigmatized bodies. Chemers dissects four specific events in the history of freak show and connects them to a discussion on disability and stigma. The first three of these events relates to the freak show in the early years, while the last is the controversy surrounding the firing of a performer in the revived sideshow in Coney Island in 1984. Beside the well-informed and incisive analysis of the specific events, Chemers offers a well-situated and balanced discussion on freak scholarship and the pitfalls and difficulties of writing about disability and stigma in the theater.

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In a more recent work, Jessica L. Williams in her *Media, Performative Identity, and the New American Freak Show* (2017) discusses the modern-day freak as a performative identity and how this freak is represented in media. The first chapter frames the freak in a critical sense, while the remaining chapters deal with specific examples of freak identities in horror movies, documentaries, porn, and popular music. Although concerned with contemporary mediated “freaks,” little is said about the contemporary freak show, and the focus is rather on the freak identity in a broader cultural sense.

Questions for the Chapter

In this chapter, I turn to an entertainment genre where the body yet again is central, but in this case, the body on stage has the potential to disrupt and challenge our conception of human bodies, of otherness and of ourselves, rather than being appealing or seductive, as my first examples have suggested. Still, the body onstage attracts our attention, arouses our curiosity and asks us to watch (or maybe stare).

- What experiential meaning appears in my subjective experience of the body on stage in circus?
- How do the experiential meanings appear to consciousness in the subjective experience, from a cognitive, embodied and relational approach?
- How are the subjective experiences, and the meaning that emerges from the bodies on stage in freak show, informed by the world outside the mind, as in the specific situation, and in a broader cultural context?

Material

The empirical material for this chapter was collected from two different venues in the USA a few weeks apart in the summer of 2016. Starting at the East Coast, the first place I visited was *The Coney Island Circus Sideshow* at the classic seaside resort and entertainment ground Coney Island in New York. As mentioned earlier, this show dates back to the late 1980s, when sideshow entertainment was brought back to the stage. The sideshow claims to be the last one running ten-in-one shows. In freak shows’ earlier days, the performers either stood on a platform or could be viewed in a pit, and the spectators paid for each performer they wanted to see. When competition grew, the four-in-one was introduced, giving four acts in the same place for the price of one admission. The concept caught on, and soon most of the shows offered several

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acts at the same place for a single admission. The ten-in-one doesn’t mean specifically ten acts, but the name has become synonymous with shows with multiple acts. At the sideshow, some artists and acts return each year, while others are changed each season, and sometimes visiting acts are presented for shorter periods. For the rest of my chapter, I will refer to the Coney Island Sideshow as the Sideshow, capitalized and in italics.

From the classic entertainment center of the east, I went west to Los Angeles – the birthplace of modern mass entertainment – and the Venice Beach Freakshow. The venue right by the beach attracted tourists and was open on Saturdays and Sundays from nine until dark. The show consisted of a number of performers and permanent acts, and others that changed each season. There was also an exhibition at the venue of curiosities and animals with extraordinary bodies, two-headed turtles and snakes and Rocky, the cute little five-legged dog. For the rest of this chapter, I will refer to the Venice Beach Freakshow as the Freakshow, capitalized and in italics.

The shows at both the venues are similar to those of burlesque, or traditional circus, with short individual acts that are presented one after the other, usually in a way that creates some dramaturgy and variation. Just as with the old sideshows, the acts are repeated frequently to give new audiences an opportunity to watch. I sat through several shows in a row at my visits, and the shows were basically the same every time. Sometimes an act or two was missing, which was not remarked on, and I would guess not noticed by the audience, as most people just watch one show. I will get back to the specific acts and performers as I discuss them in my analysis.

For the purpose of my thesis, I have taken the liberty of choosing acts that fit into my scope, and that hopefully add to the discussion in a constructive way. Trying to strictly stick to acts labeling themselves as freak acts would be difficult since they are few, and I would rather give you as a reader a broader field of view and a more comprehensive discussion on the experience of the spectator. As I have mentioned before, the intellectual understanding and the embodied and the relational aspects of each genre are not specific to that genre, or the acts and bodies being discussed, or even separable from each other. Being a spectator, experiencing the body on stage, is a complex experiential venture with a large volume of input shaping the conscious mind through perceptions, emotions, affect, relations, memories, and fantasies, creating a unique experience for each spectator. As for the discussion of the specific experiences in this chapter, the label of whether it is an act of freak show or sideshow is of little importance.

 Nickell, p. 52, 73.
Freak Show from a Cognitive Approach

The experience of freak show performances could be considered from a range of different themes and topics. The discussion from the first chapter on entertainment and the political could be equally interesting to apply on contemporary freak shows, and the notion of the popular and the acts as subversive is also relevant to freaks. The topics I have chosen in this chapter, liveness and the staging, also have merit in discussions on circus and burlesque, but I find them very suitable in this chapter, as they relate to the genre of freak- and sideshow in an intimate way.

Staged – Curious Experiences of Fakes, Fiction and Reality

I will start this section with some experiences of working acts, where humbug and fooling the audience play with aspects of reality, and I will then move on to a discussion on how the freaks become freaks, in relation to reality and fiction.

*Humbug and the Curious Experience of Being Duped*

Humbug is a concept that appears often in the world of freak and sideshow as a way to describe a hoax, or in sideshow terminology a “gaff,” or something intentionally arranged or created to deceive. In freak shows, the use of humbug goes back to P.T. Barnum, not only known as the World’s Greatest Showman but also as “the prince of humbug.” Since his display of the “Feejee” [sic!] mermaid at the *American Museum* in New York 1842, one of the most famous hoaxes in entertainment history, he would forever be remembered as making money on fooling people. The mermaid, which, it was claimed, had been found in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of the Fiji Islands, captured the public’s curiosity after a successful publicity stunt in which Barnum got attention from stories written under a false name reporting on this amazing find. The buzz created led to anecdotes of the mermaid being printed in newspapers in New York.\(^\text{587}\)

The mermaid, which was in fact a mummified creature constructed from the upper body of a monkey corpse and the tail half of a fish, had been brought to the USA by a sea captain, who had bought it from Japan where fishermen made this type of hybrid creatures, called Jenny Hanivers.\(^\text{588}\)

Barnum realized early on that whether something was real or fake was not the most important thing; what was important was if he could find a way to make money off of it. The uncertainty of the realness of an act or an exhibition could

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\(^{587}\) Dennett, pp. 27-28.

\(^{588}\) Nickell, p. 333.
attract spectators to come and try to figure it out by themselves. He also real-
ized that many people enjoyed being duped. In the true spirit of humbug, 
Barnum’s “real” fake mermaid has since been exhibited in several places. How-
ever, this is most clearly just more humbuggery, as the original one ex-
hibited by Barnum went up in smoke when the American Museum was de-
stroyed in a fire in 1868.

The Modern Sideshow Humbug

Elements of humbug live on in the contemporary freak- and sideshow, both in 
working acts and in the presentation of the freaks on stage. At the Sideshow, 
one act that was performed was a classic electric chair trick. I saw two differ-
tent versions of the act in the show at Coney Island. In the first, the inside 
talker\(^\text{591}\) Alejandro Dubois invites the performer Electra to sit in the large 
wooden chair on the right side of the stage. As Electra sits down, Alejandro 
keeps talking and making jokes. The stage lights are then switched off, and 
when Alejandro flips a switch on a gray electric box at the side of the chair, 
two red lights on the top of the chair light up. The chair is now electric. 
Alejandro pulls out a fluorescent tube from a bucket, and as he places it on 
different parts of Electra’s body the tube lights up, showing that the chair re-
ally is electric. During the act, the audience consisting of about 25 people, 
seemed to enjoy themselves, but there were no strong reactions to be seen. I 
guess that most people understood that we were watching a trick. The act con-
tinues with the lighting of a fire-eating wand by the touch of Electra’s finger-
tip. Now the reactions become stronger. Whenever I have watched a perfor-
mance that included fire, reactions have seemed to intensify. Maybe an in-
stinctive fear, or respect, of fire creates the focus. Alejandro puts the fire out 
and says, “And now finally on the pinkest part of her body.” As he speaks the 
words, Electra crosses her legs and gives a curious smile. With feigned dis-
dain, Alejandro admonishes, “Ah, come on people, this is a family show. Her 
tongue of course.” I hear some laughter in the audience. As the tongue meets 
the wand, the fire ignites, and then the light is switched back on.\(^\text{592}\) The electric 
chair act has a long tradition in sideshows, and the secret is in the construction 
of the chair. One could argue that it is not a trick at all, since it is all about 
science. Sideshow scholar Nickell explains that the metal plate in the seat of 
the chair really does conduct electricity, which runs through the body of, for 
example, Electra. What saves Electra is that a transformer changes the current

\(^{589}\) Ibid., p. 12.  
\(^{590}\) Ibid., pp. 333-336.  
\(^{591}\) The person leading the show onstage, also known as a lecturer. Nickell, p. 69.  
\(^{592}\) Coney Island Sideshow, June 30, 2016.  

194
into high voltage, but low amperage, which might tingle a bit, but is completely safe.\textsuperscript{593} The construction of a fluorescent tube makes it light up by high voltage even if the amperage is low, and as for the lightning wand, even the smallest spark could ignite the flammable liquid in which it was drenched. The old look of the chair, the lights, switches, and the talk of danger is just a way to raise the stakes and increases the sense of risk for the spectators.

The second day I watched the act, Electra was not part of it, and instead Alejandro asked a woman from the audience to come up on the stage. After a short chat, he asked her to look to the right. “Do you know what that is?” She seemed genuinely surprised. “It is an electric chair, a fine symbol of America.” The “volunteer” sat down, and the chair was switched on. Alejandro lit the fluorescent tube on her body. The implied danger of the Electra act, which obviously uses real electricity and fire, generates some amazement, but most people in the audience are aware that the danger of the act is staged, and the uncertainty seems too low to trigger a sense of risk. And in the land of the lawsuits, bringing an audience member up on the stage also lessens the sense of danger, as any risk would obviously not be the audience member’s, but rather the performer’s. I would argue that there is no conflict between fiction and reality in the way the action is staged in this act, as in my experience of being forced to move at the circus event, since this performance never pretended to be anything other than real.

Otherwise, the act followed the same dramaturgy, with one exception: when Alejandro lights the fluorescent tube on her hand, he slides the tube up and down as to show how the light moves depending on what part of the tube is in contact. However, after pulling back and forth a few times, the masturbatory motion becomes apparent, and I hear giggles from the audience. With an expression of mock insult, Alejandro immediately switches off the chair, the stage light comes back on, and he says, “Come on, this is science!”\textsuperscript{594}

Another act that plays on perceived danger is a torture box act. In this act, Madame Twister, in this case the performer Zoe Ziegfeld, lies down in a wooden box that has been brought out onto the stage. The box is about the same length as Zoe. The lid, which has slots for blades and cutouts, is being closed. Zoe waves her hands through one of the holes to show that she still is in the box. Large steel plates are then placed in the slots from the top down. Some go down easily, making a banging sound, while others are forced down as if they were cutting through bone. When Zoe is asked if she is still in there, a small flag that reads “help” is raised through one of the holes in the lid. When all of the metal plates have been inserted, the act takes a surprising turn.

\textsuperscript{593} Nickell, pp. 247-250.
\textsuperscript{594} Coney Island Sideshow, July 2, 2016.
The audience is invited up to experience the secret behind the trick. It would cost at least a dollar, to be put in a jar when coming onstage. I was instantly energized, my curiosity was triggered, and right away I pulled some dollars from my pocket and got in line. In the sideshow world, this is called a *ding*, which is a way to make extra money from an act, and it has historically been common with the torture box act.\(^5\) “At least a dollar, a five, thank you, a twenty!” Alejandro comments as people put money into the jar, “A hundred and I will come home with you.” When I watched the show, most of the spectators paid extra to find out the secret. As I looked down into the torture box, I saw Zoe’s body intricately twisted around the metal plates. As I passed her face, I got a short wave and a smile, as if to say ‘this is our little secret.’\(^6\)

As long as freak shows have been around, a central aspect of the operation has been to make money. At *the Sideshow*, the only nonprofit sideshow in history, according to Dick Zigun,\(^7\) there is a nostalgic play on the eagerness to get people to part with their money. The ding is one, and another is what is called a *blow-off* or an *annex*, which is an extra attraction presented where the spectators leave the show.\(^8\) For the audience at *the Sideshow*, the blow-off is a mystery box with “The Strange Thing,” which you are allowed to peek into if you pay an extra dollar. Spoiler alert! In the box is the cadaver of a weird little creature that looks like a small monkey with a beak. It was allegedly found in some American dessert in the mid-20th century if I remember correctly. I leave one dollar poorer but one experience richer. This is at the core of the sideshow. The importance of a quick turnover, getting people inside, getting their money, then some more if possible, and then getting them out, happy or not, to make room for a new crowd. “If you liked the show tell your family and friends, if not, we got your money anyway,” are the parting words at the show at Coney Island.\(^9\)

Even though I admit to recognizing in myself some of the enjoyment in being duped that Barnum recognized early on,\(^\text{600}\) I would argue that it is not so much about being duped as it is about being left in uncertainty, about getting our curiosity tickled and by being kept in suspense. Dennett suggests that some of the pleasure of the modern-day sideshow might be trying to figure out if it is a hoax or not.\(^\text{601}\) I would argue that curiosity is the main reason that freaks and human oddities ever could be turned into entertainment. Adams

\(^{5}\) Nickell, pp. 271-275.
\(^{6}\) Coney Island Sideshow, July 2, 2016.
\(^{8}\) Nickell, pp. 76-79.
\(^{9}\) Coney Island Sideshow, July 2, 2016.
\(^{600}\) Adams, 2001, pp. 171-172.
\(^{601}\) Dennett, p. 138.
writes, “The desire to stare…is the primary impulse behind the freak show.” This desire is closely connected to curiosity. In her book *Staring: How We Look* (2009), Thomson argues that when our senses are triggered by some novelty, in this case from a visual thrill, dopamine stimulates our brain in order to make sense of what we experience; we get curious. Staring is in this way a means of collecting information, of getting comfortable in the situation.

Due to the uncertainty in curiosity, dealing as it does with an unknown experience, it has often been met with suspicion, and curiosity or novelty as the main attraction has often been looked down upon when it comes to theater or aesthetic experience in general. Gadamer writes that “there is an essential difference between a spectator who gives himself entirely to the play of art and someone who merely gapes at something out of curiosity.” He continues by arguing that the object of curiosity has no significance for the spectator, and that it differs from art as there is nothing to come back to, no permanence.

Although I agree with Gadamer on the temporary quality of the novelty that triggers curiosity, I object to the claim that it does not have any significance for the spectator. I would argue that it has significance in the meaning it gets as an experience, as it engages the mind in a complicated venture of sense-making, re-contextualizes the objects of attention, educating the mind and exploring new perceptual terrain. Foucault sees this critical dimension of curiosity as it opens up for a questioning of both the object of novelty and the self. Heidegger turns against curiosity for what it might do to the self-awareness, as it is caught up with instant gratification, and only craves attention for the sake of the attention, and therefore can pacify the spectator. Although I do see a meaning in the “attention for the sake of attention,” I believe that I have shown throughout this book how the experience of curiosity, novelty and the spectacular are intertwined with the meaning we give to the world and ourselves, and how we both shape and are shaped in a cultural context and social situations.

When a body or an action are experienced as unexpected and extraordinary, it triggers our curiosity; the mind looks for references to make sense of the

602 Adams, 2001, p. 68.
605 McCall, pp. 185-188.
new information, and as soon as the track seems familiar, the novelty and triggering effect wears off. This is the reason why spectacular acts soon get old and lose their appeal if nothing new is introduced. The spectacular and the sensational are important in circus and burlesque as well, and in entertainment in general, but for the freak show, I would argue that it is the main attraction. When the sense of sensation is gone, so is the appeal. Researchers and spectators alike acknowledge that the ephemeral quality of curiosity and the amazement of freak and sideshow entertainment wear off. You cannot revisit the first impression of the acts.

The Real Danger
Despite understanding the freak as real or not, and knowing that some acts are humbug and consist of some sort of trick, it is important to keep in mind that most acts that take place on the sideshow stage are real. In a sword-swallowing act by Betty Bloomers at the Sideshow, she swallows a sword in the intense finale, and then when it is completely inserted, she twists the blade inside her body with an apparent increased risk of hurting herself. Sword swallowing has long been common in freak- and sideshows, and the acts are as real as they look. The blades are made of steel, and they do not collapse or fold; sometimes the edge is dulled as to lessen the risk of cutting oneself, but not always. The skill involved in sword swallowing is overcoming of the sense of nausea that makes the body convulse as the throat is being irritated. Despite it being a skill it is still dangerous, and accidents and deaths do happen, especially when the limits of the possible are stretched and multiple swords are swallowed at once, or the blade is oddly shaped, or strange objects such as neon tubes are swallowed. In the same way that the fire is real and is being put out by the mouth in fire-eating, the nails on the bed of nails are real. The working acts of human skill come down to hours, sometimes years, of training, and aspects of biology and physics. In a video on YouTube where Trick the Bastard, a pain artist at the Sideshow, is being interviewed, he says that when people ask him “does that hurt?” his answer always is “not anymore.”

Presenting the Freak
In all of the places where I have seen freak shows and sideshows, there has always been an outside talker, or a bally talker, whose purpose is to sell the

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608 Coney Island Sideshow, July 2, 2016.
609 Nickell, p. 220, 224.
attraction inside. As my short intro to this chapter describes, Todd Ray is the one usually standing outside the Freakshow, attracting people with a sneak peek of a two-headed turtle and further promises of amazing wonders inside. When I arrived, Todd was wearing a pair of blue jeans, a black Venice Beach Freakshow t-shirt, and black sunglasses. The clothes were in stark contrast to the red and yellow classic sideshow banners promoting the performers. At the Sideshow, the outside talker was Mr. Strange, who greeted me with a great smile and a fun pitch. His neat outfit with dark dress pants, a pinstripe vest over a dress shirt, a bowtie, a straw hat, and a cane created entirely different expectations with their clear reference to the sideshows of the past.

At both venues, the performers are presented as their stage personae, usually constructed from their act or oddity, and often combined with a catchphrase. At the Freakshow, the presentation and framing of the performer is related to his oddity, at least when it comes to the born freaks, by using exaggerations and visual imagery to entice the potential spectators. Kanya, “the amazing living half girl,” relates to a long tradition of armless and legless wonders at sideshows; Amazing Ali, “the littlest lady in LA,” and Gabriel, “the shortest man in America” might both be exaggerations, but link to the tradition of humans of different sizes. Bob “the Bubble Boy” has small bumps over his body, and his name refers to the appearance of his body. Larry “the Wolf Boy” is, of course, a reference to his hair-covered body, but also ties the appearance to that of the wild by referring to an animal. Bogdan uses the term exotic as a presentation for this type of moniker, as to the way some acts and performers are tied to “the culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial, the exotic” to create curiosity in the audience. This mode of presentation was common in the classic freak show as wild people allegedly came from different “exotic” places around the world, or as “missing links,” or “half-man half-beast,” most often displayed as inferior to the audience. In the old days, the people onstage were really considered freaks, and their oddity was blatantly exploited.

Besides the acts that focus on a display of human oddity, I experienced a few working acts performed by Todd’s daughter Asia Ray and the shock artist Morgue. These acts are often presented as the name of the act rather than the person performing them. Examples are descriptive names such as “the fire-eater”, “the human blockhead”, “the snake lady,” but also imaginative names such as “Electra” or “Madame Twister.”

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611 Bogdan, pp. 94-95.
612 Nickell, pp. 133-140.
613 Ibid., pp. 80-119.
614 Bogdan, p. 105.
All of the acts I saw at the Sideshow were working acts, which are also the most common in the contemporary sideshow. However, since the reopening in the 80s, there have also been self-made freaks like Jennifer Miller as a “lady with a beard” and the heavily tattooed “Lizardman,” and born freaks such as Mat Fraser, “the Sealboy”, known for his appearance in American Horror Stories, and Otis Jordan, “The Frog Boy.” Most performers at the Sideshow do several types of acts. The inside talker Alejandro Dubois is also known as the “Pain Proof Puerto Rican” when he does fire-eating or sword swallowing. Zoe Ziegfeld, a snake charmer, performing with the albino python Dionysus, also does various acts as Madame Twister. Betty Bloomers is a sword swallower and fire-eater. Princess Pat works as a snake charmer and also does Madame Twister and the bed of nails. The names used for the performers have the same touch as the name of the Burlesque performers I discussed in the second chapter, with the purpose of giving some expectation of the acts or relating to popular references. There is also somewhat of an overlap of genres, as burlesque artists perform at sideshows and vice versa.

At the Sideshow, the show is about entertainment and comedy, and even though there are some moments of disgust – one of which I will get back to later – the show is family-friendly with jokes and acts giving different associations depending on the audience. At the Sideshow, there is a play with the traditional presentations of the sideshow, but often with a modern twist. When Princess Pat is presented, she is referred to as “a Nigerian Princess, at least that is what it said in the emails.” Besides the exotic mode of presentation, which is actually also present in this case, Bogdan argues for an aggrandized mode that is used to heighten the status of the freak. The best known example of this is probably the earlier mentioned “General” Tom Thumb, who was most definitely not a general. In this case, the aggrandized title of Princess Pat is being mirrored to the modern concept of Nigerian email scams, and the audience is quick to catch the reference.

Experiencing the “Real”

In an essay by Carrie Sandahl on the experience of a sideshow, a theme to which she keeps returning is the audience’s fascination with the “real,” especially in relation to experiencing pain artists physically hurting themselves. The real is a catchphrase constantly repeated at the freak- and sideshow, both by the performers and by the audience. As the marvel of the acts in many ways

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616 Coney Island Sideshow, July 2, 2016.
617 Bogdan, pp. 108-111.
618 Sandahl, pp. 269-276.
relies on the curiosity and spectacular of human bodies, authenticity is essential. This might also be a reason why performers so willingly admit that some acts are tricks, fake or humbug, as to assure that the most extraordinary is in fact real.

Historian Elizabeth Stephens argues that a new understanding is emerging in the growing scholarship of freaks as the essence of the freak is denied and the freak is a construction that only resides inside the freak- or sideshow, always in relation to a cultural norm of bodies. As such, the freak bears resemblance to a performative category, rather than being a fixed position or identity.619 Bogdan argues that the freak is something else offstage; that freak is a specific way of approaching the bodies, a “frame of mind” and “a set of practices.”620 However, is it so easy? What if the body is experienced as a freak onstage, regardless of the experience of the very same body offstage; what does the experience mean? The staging of freaks prompts some interesting questions on how bodies onstage are experienced, potentially oscillating between the “real” body of the performer, and the freak body on stage.

The relation between reality and fiction is a returning question in theater studies. Fischer-Lichte discusses the intricate relation between the real actor and the character in *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), in which the difference between the *materiality* and *semioticity* are a central argument. As I understand her, the materiality is what relates to the experience as the signifier, and semioticity to the interpretation or focusing on the representational, the signified.621 This division has been used to discuss the meaning of play in performance analysis of dramatic theater. Confronted with an example of performance art, Fischer-Lichte finds the need to realign the use and highlight the focus on the materiality and how it creates the experience. Tied to the materiality, she goes on to discuss some aspects of the performance such as the spatiality and atmosphere, the tonality and voices, temporality and rhythm, and the corporality and embodiment. I do, however, have some problem with Fischer-Lichte’s use of embodiment and bodies related to the materiality and semioticity.

It seems like Fischer-Lichte attempts to tie the discussion of materiality and semioticity to the difference of “being a body” and “having a body,” as a “co-existence of the phenomenal and the semiotic body,” and turns the attention to the “actors’ bodily being-in-the-world.”622 I do find her reasoning and use

620 Bogdan, p. 3.
621 Fischer-Lichte, p.17.
622 Ibid., p. 82.
of words a bit confusing however, and I am not sure how her definitions correspond with the terms as they are commonly used in embodied phenomenology, as the body as object and the body as lived. The reason for my concern is that she talks about the phenomenal body, that she has framed “the bodily being-in-the-world,” as relating both to spectators and actors.623 For me, her definition of “being-in-the-world” seems to correspond to the notion of the lived body, in the terminology in phenomenological embodiment. Fischer-Lichte then sets the phenomenal body in opposition to the semiotic body. As she turns her attention to how the actor’s phenomenal body, as being-in-the-world, at times emerges in the experience of a performance, as self-referential, in that it refers back to an understanding of itself, as itself.624 The phenomenal being of what is being perceived brings the first order of meaning in the experience, while a semiotic understanding is produced in a second order, and she argues that the spectator oscillates between these understandings, that is, between the actors’ phenomenal body and the characters’ semiotic body.625 As said, I find this use of terminology a bit confusing, as she mixes related, but not synonymous definitions in her discussions, and I would argue that she misses some aspects of the experience.

If one agrees with the potential of both a ‘real’ presence of a performer, which is primarily understood as non-representational and self-referential, and a ‘fictional’ presence of the character, which is representational, two separate yet intertwined horizons of understanding can be experienced, just as I argue that the feedback loop can operate both in relation to the performer and the character.

If we turn to the discussion of embodiment and how the body can be understood both as an object and as a lived body, I would argue that this is true for both horizons of understanding. In the performer, as ‘real’, this duality is apparent, as we perceive them as people with the same bodily properties as our own. However, when we are experiencing a fictional body in the shape of a character, we can make the same distinction. If I consider the burlesque persona on stage, I can oscillate in my experience between their body either as an

623 Erika Fischer-Lichte, ‘Sense and Sensation: Exploring the Interplay Between the Semiotic and Performative Dimensions of Theatre,’ *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, vol. XXII, No. 2, 2008, p. 76. (note that this reference and the direct coupling of the phenomenal body as being-in-the-world, for both actors and spectators, is from an article that can be seen as a summary of the book, *The Transformative Power of Performative*. This coupling to the spectator’s experience is not crucial for my argumentation, but it is influential on how I interpret Fischer-Lichte’s understanding of the phenomenal body.)

624 It is, however, worth noting that Fischer-Lichte does not mean that no meaning can come from the experience of the self-referential, but rather that it does not work as a sign of something else, Fischer-Lichte, pp. 140-147.

625 Ibid., p. 148.
object or as a lived body. I would argue that the discussion of materiality and semioticity are related, yet, this leads to another discussion. If I approach the materiality in the experience of the event, I do not have to recognize the body as lived; as I also can approach it as an object. Likewise, if I approach the body from a semiotic understanding, the interpretation I make is not dependent on the difference of the body as lived or as an object. If this is the use Fischer-Lichte intends, she does not need to make a distinction between being a body and having a body. By connecting the phenomenal body, that I read as the lived body, and the semioticity, Fischer-Lichte is relating terms that do not correspond, as they discuss two different aspects of the experience. I do, however, argue that the difference between the body as an object and the body as lived, makes an essential difference in the experience of bodies onstage, as it defines our very access to the other, as I have shown in earlier examples and discuss in relation to the empathic experience of the body on stage.

The genres in my study have a special relation to reality, as the representation in the acts is often downplayed in favor of the spectacle based on the bodies of the performer. In both burlesque and the freak show, the performers address the audience as being present, and as such the setting is recognized as real. There is no attempt to deny the reality of the theatrical situation as the performer steps onto the stage as the performer. However, this does not mean that the acts do not make use of representational qualities or that characters are being performed.

Although there are similarities between the performing bodies in burlesque and freak show, there are also differences in how they are staged. I would argue that although sharing bodies, burlesque personae are staged in a way that separates them from their personal bodies, as the staging highlights the burlesque as play at a specific act and event. Freaks, on the other hand, are repeatedly referred to as real and alive in their staging, and staged in a way that refers to the personal body offstage. In their acts, they are telling stories, seemingly from their real lives, and as such continually realigning the reading of their bodies with reality. The staging of freaks as real is essential to their spectacularity, and in their ability to trigger curiosity in the odd and amazing. If the freak identity appears as a hoax, or humbug, or even constructed, the curious interest in the human wonder would dissolve, as is the case with acts that no longer trigger curiosity, such as obese people, “exotic” people, or people with tattoos.

So even though the body of the performer and the character is unavoidably shared, and in materiality the same, they produce meaning differently in the experience, regardless of whether they are regarded as semiotic or not. On
stage, the bodies are enfreaked by the framing, and aligned as opposed to cultural and societal norms, and experienced in relation to the spectators' impressions.

Liveness – The Experience of Presence

We will now move from the complex understanding of reality and fiction of staged bodies to another contested and central concept often discussed in relation to theater, and possibly the defining factor of the art form in itself: liveness. There is an old truth among theater scholars that one of the specifics of the theater is that it only exists in the moment it appears, and as soon it is experienced, it is gone. Liveness is what sets it apart from other genres, as the form requires spatiotemporal presence, a simultaneity in both place and time. Feminist scholar Peggy Phelan’s famous expression of performances as a “representation without reproduction”\(^{626}\) has been the epitome of theatre.

In the freak- and sideshow, the tagline Alive! has long been common as a way of marketing the freaks inside, indicating that something is not just an exhibition of an object, but rather something living and experienced in the flesh.\(^{527}\) The phrase “IT IS ALIVE!” goes back to one of Barnum’s posters for a marvelous freak at the beginning of the 1860s.\(^{628}\) For the audience, seeing was believing, and as I have shown earlier, Barnum had perfected the ability to sell an act. Both at the Sideshow and the Freakshow, the word “Alive!” was used as bullets – which is a circular mark almost like a stamp\(^{629}\) – printed on banners to present the acts. Likewise, the outside talkers used the word as a catchphrase to “turn the tip.”\(^{630}\)

For the freak show, the sense of live is crucial, as the act is often based entirely on the amazement of the experience of the spectacle. The attraction is that of the rarely seen, the odd and the unbelievable. Even though the freak show takes the live to extremes, I would argue that liveness is of as great importance in circus and burlesque as well. These genres are all about the live experience. Despite my earlier claim that YouTube is the place to find freaks today, watching freaks on screen soon gets old, and the same goes for circus and burlesque. In relation to the revival of sideshows, Adams questions whether our love of the moving image is starting to fade, and if a renewed


\(^{627}\) Nickell, p. 74.

\(^{628}\) What the poster was selling was an exhibit of what was called a “What is it?” – a suggestion of the missing link between man and beast. Springhall, p. 44.

\(^{629}\) Nickell, p. 57.

\(^{630}\) To get people inside the show.
interest in live performances awaits. If we are to be truly amazed and amused by sensational bodies, to have these bodies right in front of us, alive is essential.

The notion of liveness as something unique for theater, often described in terms of something magical, is questioned by several scholars. Theater- and film scholar Philip Auslander argues that “liveness is not an ontologically defined condition but a historically variable effect of mediatization.” Basing his argument on the liveness of rock music, sport, and courtroom testimonies, he argues that the idea of the live only came about when the possibility to experience something as not live, as recorded, became a reality, and that the un-reflected notion of liveness as a property unique to the theater is naïve. According to Auslander, the live and the mediatized are not as oppositional as it may appear, and the separation rather has ideological reasons, such as to increase the value of live performances. He argues that liveness is historically situated, and as the mediatized landscape changes, so does the liveness. Regardless of the theoretical labeling of liveness, where I tend to agree with Auslander, as the contextual aspects cannot be ignored, I would argue that a proper live experience, as I will call it from now on, is something different than the experience of a live event through other forms of media.

There are some aspects of proper liveness that clearly differentiate it from other forms of liveness, and these differences have the potential to change the experience for the spectator. The most fundamental and distinct aspect of proper liveness is the co-presence of the performer and the spectator, ultimately joined in space and time, often considered a constituting aspect of performance.

The potential in proper live performance to alter the course of direction, to witness something unique, is crucial for the appreciation of freaks and sideshow. One of the most prominent ways that this influences the experience is through risk, as was discussed in the first chapter. For the genres in my study, uncertainty is something ever-present. When someone is hanging on a rope high above the stage floor, getting ready for the big reveal in burlesque, or sliding a sword down her throat, the notion of the uncertainty is a big thrill.

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635 Adams, 2001, p. 171.
Being in the same room, you are not only getting the experience from the front row, so to speak; you are also a part of it with the possibility to affect the course of events, and likewise being affected by what is happening. You are present. When watching the act on screen, you know that whatever is going to happen, it has already happened, and nothing can change the chain of events.

Another experience that is hard to deny from the proper live is the potential for a sense of the atmosphere, which has a substantial impact on the experience. This atmospheric energy appears from the continuous feedback loop in which the performers and the audience, in their co-presence, constantly affect each other.\(^{636}\) This shared sense of atmosphere and energy in the room is important for the experience of community within the audience, often considered to be a specific aspect of the proper live. Dolan relates the “magic of the theatre” to the temporary community formed, and how the sharing of the “liveness promotes a necessary and moving confrontation with mortality”.\(^{637}\) Sandahl writes about the experience of sideshow, that “[a] spectator not only encounters the performers’ corporality, but the materiality of the other audience member as well.”\(^{638}\) Going back to my discussion in the previous chapter, the shared experience is an integral part of being in an audience and of the experience of community, although Auslander rightfully argues that the community is not intrinsic to the theater in itself, as communities are created by the gathering of people in the “audience situation” and not by the performance as such. I would claim that the community of proper liveness still has qualities that are not experienced elsewhere, as the community is not only shared between members of the audience but also potentially with and through the performers and their bodies, through the feedback loop.

Turning back to Auslander and liveness as dependent on the historical context, recent developments, with theater and performances being broadcast live to big screens, the interactive digitalized performatve experiences and the use of mediatized material in performances, challenge the definition of live as an experiencing of something at the same place, in the same time.\(^{639}\) There is a need to rethink the concept of liveness, as the landscape of performance is changing. Auslander suggests that the “emerging definition of liveness” should be based on the “audience’s affective experience” rather than the properties of the performance.\(^{640}\) I agree with Auslander that the spectator and the experience should have a more prominent place in discussions on liveness. In

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636 Fischer-Lichte, p. 38.  
638 Sandahl, p. 274.  
639 Auslander, 2012.  
640 Ibid., p. 6.
the introduction to the book *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance* (2016), Matthew Reason and Anja Mølle Lindelof refer to a study of how young audiences experience theater. One young girl posed a crucial question that pointed to the overlooked: why? If the performance does not take notice of the audience, why do they stress the liveness so much? The liveness is often used as a labeling of the event as something that it is, rather than something it does. This essentialist view of liveness as something tied to the form could be challenged by instead focusing on the experiential qualities of the live, focusing on the liveness that matters for the audience and the experience of live. In the freak show, as well as in circus and burlesque, the experience of live is central as the bodies are approaching the audience through the spectacular, feeding on the sensational, as it turns to the affective experience, using uncertainty and risk, engaging in the community and continuously feeding the feedback loop.

In the introduction, I briefly mentioned an example that Merleau-Ponty’s used of a blind man using his cane to feel his way through the world, and how the cane becomes an extension of his body and consciousness. The way we consider the limits of our bodies and consciousness is continuously being re-framed to the experiences and the challenges we encounter. It is impossible to say what the future holds, but an experience fully comparable to that of a live event using digital technology is no longer science fiction. If this experientially mirrors a proper live event, what is then the difference from a phenomenological point of view? As Auslander argues the live need to be considered in relation to the context and as technology evolves and becomes intertwined with our consciousness there is a need to re-think concepts.

*Watching Freaks Live – Through the Screen*

The experience of the live in a digital era has yet other consequences for the experience of the show. When I was at *the Freakshow*, I would estimate that at least half of the people watched it, more or less, on the screens of their smartphone, as they were recording it. This sorry sight, which is spreading like the plague at events all around the world, steals the sense of liveness, not only from those doing the recording, but it also disturbs the atmosphere and opportunity for community and shared experiences.

I would argue that the recordings and photographs serve little purpose, as we have become hoarders of digital information that rarely is viewed or reviewed. The images just sit there, stored on the computer, and once in a while, we are reminded of them when the hard drive is getting full. The experience

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642 Ibid.
of watching a show recorded with a shaky hand on a cellphone camera in a poorly lit room brings a new meaning to, “you had to be there!”

In one sense, the photographing actually does serve a purpose, and that is as bragging rights, or proof of having been there. Going to the theater not only lets one see, but also be seen, to be the one going to those events. It is said that the number of people who claim to have been at the Woodstock Festival greatly exceeds the number of people who were actually there. People might not even be lying, but just remembering wrong, eager to feel special, being one of the ones who experienced the spectacle live. Proving that one was at Woodstock might be hard, and calling out the lie is difficult, since there can be no expectations of hard proof like photographs from that time. However, that has drastically changed. Sharing, or rather distributing, images and videos on social media has become a way to substantiate claims of presence and attendance. In a society much deprived of the attention of the now, the images substantiating the actual being there, such as through selfies or live streaming of events, have become a commodity, or a market, as our value seems to be related to our visibility, and of us being there. Selfies with famous people, or of famous places, are used to self-promote an exciting life. Not unlike the way
freaks in their heyday sold pictures of themselves, *cartes de visites*, as a souvenir and to promote their acts.⁶⁴³ These cards soon became collectibles and can be quite expensive if found nowadays. At the *Freakshow*, images of visitors with the performers are a part of the business – it costs money to take selfies with the freaks. The images that later end up on social media become free advertisements for the show, but at the same time give away the novelty that had always been so precious for the freak- and sideshow business. In the instant gratification era of social media, it is getting more difficult to attract audiences, as people nowadays seem less amazed.⁶⁴⁴

In recent years, the hunt for the perfect selfie has led to numerous people getting injured or killed, as they fall off cliffs, accidentally shoot themselves, or get too close to animals that are less interested in the selfie hype.⁶⁴⁵ In 2017 I spent a couple of weeks in Rio de Janeiro after a conference. It was my first time there, and I went to *Christo Redentor* to experience this famous statue and the stunning view. Up at the platform, it was madness. There were thousands of tourists, all standing facing either the statue or the view, looking at the wonders of the world through a 5-inch screen on the cellphone. Because of the massive amount of people, and everybody’s hunt for the perfect picture, there were security guards to stop people from climbing up on the wall surrounding the platform. In the hour I spent there, I heard the shriek of the guard’s whistle to get people off the wall at least three times. Luckily no one fell, but it shows the risk people are willing to take to stand out and create the image of themselves.

The irony of it all is that the recording and photographing of being there makes us less there, as the focus is directed elsewhere. In the tradeoff between the experience and the proof of the experience, many seem prepared to settle for the latter. At the *Sideshow*, cellphones and cameras are banned during the shows. This strategy is more in line with the preservation of the novelty and wonder of the acts from the sideshow of the past, where freaks were sometimes only seen when they were on stage, and covered carriages were used to transport them unseen when they came and went.⁶⁴⁶ In most theaters, it is prohibited to take pictures or to record the show. At circuses, the use of camera flash has been banned for a long time due to the risk of stealing the attention and compromising the sight of a performer doing a dangerous stunt.

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⁶⁴³ Dennett, p. 78.
⁶⁴⁶ Bogdan, p. 104.
As for my experience, I felt noticeably more engaged at the Sideshow, as the sharing of the live moment created a sense of being in it together, and the feedback loop created a vibrant energy between the audience and the performers. The cellphone situation at the Freakshow was annoying and a huge distraction, even if I was not the one watching the show through a screen; the energy in the room was low and uninspired. The experience of the proper live is rare in today’s recorded entertainment, where even the actors are being replaced by digital animations. This makes the live experiences at theaters extraordinary, and in the experience of circus, burlesque, and freak show, the spectacular in the proper liveness is a major attraction.

Freak Show from an Embodied Approach

The embodied experience of freak show can be fairly visceral at times. In my earlier excursions into the embodied experience of circus and burlesque, the experiences have mostly been framed as positive, as thrilling or in the sense of pleasure. Now it is time to broaden the horizon and discuss experiences of discomfort as a means of entertainment and pleasure.

Disgust – Experiences too Close for Comfort

My first live sideshow experience and one that inspired my study was at a traveling sideshow at the London Wonderground festival in 2014. In one of the acts, I got to see the Australian sideshow performer Space Cowboy, who is known for pushing his acts to the extreme. He came on to the stage with two heavy barbells hanging from two chains with hooks at the end. He introduced himself and told us that he was going to put the hooks in his eye sockets and then lift the barbells. I immediately saw people in front of me squirm and let out sounds of disgust—even before the stunt had started. As soon as the hooks had even come remotely close to the eyes, some of the spectators were covering their eyes. When the hooks were put in place, and the weights were swung back and forth, hanging from the eye sockets, exposing the full white of the eye, sounds of disgust were heard around me, and the squirming became even more intense. The act really hit a nerve in me; I was enjoying myself and at the same time I was utterly repulsed. Acts like this are quite common at freak-and sideshows, and they usually hit the audience right in the guts.

Xander Lovecraft, a sideshow- and burlesque performer of short stature, steps onto the stage at the Sideshow. He is wearing a pair of jeans, a t-shirt,
and a blue denim vest that says “Sideshow Hustle” on the back. The microphone stand in the middle of the stage was not adjusted before he came on-stage, and it is set way too high for him. Turning the lock on the stand, Xander says, “Really? I’ve been here for months now,” and the microphone drops down to the bottom with a thump. I hear some giggles at this obviously staged joke. He goes on to tell a joke about Tyrion Lannister, the little person in Game of Thrones that no one really gets; he is quick to call that out and as such makes the joke to be about us in the audience not getting it. Xander then introduces the stunt we are about to see, the human blockhead, a classic sideshow act with a long history. “I am going to hit this three-inch solid steel nail into my head using this 13-ounce Stanley hammer,” Xander explains. He follows up with a joke about wanting to say that the act is sponsored by Stanley, which is a well-known American tool brand, but is not allowed since he apparently is not a good representative of their brand, “at least, that’s what the lawsuit says.” His banter creates a friendly atmosphere. Xander licks the nail to get it ready for the stunt and tells us not to try this at home, it is dangerous, and that he, in fact, is “a professional [short pause] idiot.” Around me, I hear laughter, and I am getting caught in it. It is as if the anticipation of what is to come is causing a closeness to the laughter, as if the laughter is an opportunity to steer away from what is to come, a way to distance oneself from the action.

As Xander is about to put the nail into his nose, some people in the audience look away and cover their eyes. He stops and commands the audience to look at him. “You paid for this! Don’t take the moral high ground now!” The interaction and Xander’s recognition of our presence is creating a sense of connection and closeness. He puts the nail into the nose and starts tapping on it with the hammer. This produces a distinct clinking metal sound that is amplified by the sound system. I hear people in the audience letting out sounds of disgust as they squirm and look away. At the same time, I feel the sense of disgust, my stomach is turning, murmuring as if it was empty, and instantly my body becomes the intentional object in full focus of my attention.

Disgust is a feeling that is notoriously sensed throughout the body. The immediate reaction, the sickening, is experienced in contact with an object to which the emotion is intentionally oriented. We do not go around and feel disgusted in general; the feeling is always directed at the object, and a close connection emerges between the disgust and the object. Feeling disgusted is about proximity and contact, coming close to something that we find contaminated as already disgusting. Ahmed writes that “[i]t is not that an object we might encounter is inherently disgusting; rather, an object becomes disgusting
through its contact with other objects that have already, as it were, been designated as disgusting before the encounter has taken place. Therefore, what we consider disgusting depends on the object and where it has been. In this case, the disgust is about the inside of the nose and the nasal mucus – just taste the word mucus – the word is causing reactions in me as I write this.

Returning to the notion of kinesthetic empathy from the first chapter, the experience of Xander putting a nail into his nose created a corresponding reaction, as the nearness of the nail in the nose created a sense of unwanted intrusion in me. Not an experience of the nail into my nose, but as a visceral discomfort of closeness. Philosopher Winifred Menninghaus describes disgust as an experience of “a nearness that is not wanted.” The feeling of disgust is sensed when the object, already considered disgusting, is coming too close for comfort.

Feeling disgusted also does something in terms of my orientation towards the object; it pulls me away. It feels involuntary, and the action is initiated by the body. However, this does not mean that I let go of the attention of the object; in the pulling away the feeling of disgust and the object is rather strengthened as I stick the disgust to the object, and as such reconfirm it as disgusting.

When the nail is fully inserted, Xander starts to talk about the difficulties of having a nail in the nose and how the body wants to get rid of stuff that is in the nose. He says that just some shows ago he sneezed, and the nail came shooting out, hitting the wall on the back of the stage. He estimates the distance, letting a specific person in the audience know that it would probably hit right about where she is sitting, and that she then would have a souvenir from the act to bring home. I genuinely enjoy his funny banter and the way his voice sounds a bit nasal with the nail stuck in his nose. Using the claw on the back of the hammer, he pulls the nail out. Again, the manipulation of the nail causes an intense discomfort in the audience. As he gets the nail out, he says, “Oh, it came with some friends”, and then licks the nail and says, “Salty!”

As he licks the nail, the feeling of disgust rises up again, and I hear loud “Ewww” sounds from the audience, even more than when the nail first was inserted. This short action shows how the object assigned with the disgust, the sticky mucus of the nose, is coming even closer as it is in fact ingested, which is the most common way of getting the feeling of disgust. Ahmed uses the term stickiness to describe how impressions can stick to the surface of objects.

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648 Ahmed, 2014, p. 87
and as such inscribe meaning on it. This happens through previous encounters in which we reaffirm the meaning through repetition. As such, the stickiness is not about the object itself, but rather on where it has been, and what meaning has stuck to it. In this experience, the “salty friends” are not only sticky as such, but they also have a history of being labeled as disgusting, and this label is constantly repeated from childhood. We have constructed the nasal mucus as disgusting, and this also relates to the social norm that tells us not to put the “salty friends” in our mouths. As such, the act of looking away and loudly expressing disgust is a social signal informing that we know the norm, and through the expression, we also further reinforce the norm.

In the next part of the act, Xander brings out an icepick and tells us that he will now do the same with that. Someone in the audience is letting out a spontaneous “Nooo!” which causes instant laughter. “Don’t have a conscience now!” is his quick response. The icepick is sharper, thinner and longer than the nail, and will go further into the head, he explains. He calls the act a failed lobotomy. “Why failed?” he rhetorically asks and answers immediately “because if it were a successful lobotomy, this would be the only act.” The insertion of the icepick is causing more “eww,” but less so than the first act with the nail. I would have expected that the increased risk, due to the longer

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19, Xander Lovecraft as the human blockhead. (Photo from same act performed at Cabaret of Hearts). Photo and © 2016 Cara Walton.

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651 Ibid., pp. 89-92.
icepick, should heighten the experience of disgust, but in this part of the act the discomfort was almost completely gone. It is as if my mind has accepted the action and the effect has worn off, and the anticipation of the act dampens the experience. The novelty of the act so crucial for maintaining the entertaining quality is gone.

When the icepick is fully inserted, people applaud and cheer. Xander starts pulling it out, but when it is almost all the way out, he goes “it’s slipping!” and then the icepick is inserted fully again rather quickly, and people begin making sounds of discomfort, seemingly from the sudden change of action. He then starts pulling the icepick in and out. In the audience, some people are laughing while others look away, disturbed.  

While the sense of disgust was upsetting for me, I simultaneously enjoyed the visceral thrill of the experience, which is not uncommon in relation to disgust, as it has a complicated relation to pleasure, both in that the overly pleasurable turns into something disgusting, and that there is a pleasure in the strong sensation of disgust, as it challenges everyday life, and is an experience that acts as a reminder of being alive.

The human blockhead act is, just like sword swallowing, a skill that depends on controlling the bodily reaction that usually makes it difficult to stick something up the nose. In preparation for the acts, sometimes the sharp point of the object is filed smooth, but the rest is just resisting the sneeze. Using the hammer, as Xander did, is just a trick to make it look nastier; in fact, the nail is held firmly between the fingers to make sure that the hammer does not push the nail too far.

The shock artist Morgue performs a couple of versions of the human blockhead at the Freakshow. In the final act of the show, Morgue urges people to take out their cameras and make room for him, as he is going to walk past the entire audience to give people a close view of the next act. He then pulls out a meat hook and licks the shiny steel, explaining that it took him three years to modify the cartilage in the nose to accept the hook. He then sticks the point of the meat hook into his nose, turning it in a circle as he pushes it further, and finally it comes out through his palate and out through the mouth. The handle of the hook is pushed towards his nose and face, disfiguring his face. From the audience, I hear some scattered sounds of disgust, and a few people are looking away or hiding their faces in their hands. As for me, I had almost no reaction, and I did not experience the act as disturbing. I have thought about why, and one reason might be that by that time, I had seen several human blockhead

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652 Coney Island Sideshow, June 30, 2016.
653 Menninghaus, pp. 6-9.
654 Nickell, pp. 238-240.
acts and had become quite desensitized to them. That does not explain the meager reactions from the rest of the audience, however. As Morgue slowly passes the audience, people take pictures with their phones. Morgue walks back onto the stage and pulls the hook out of his nose.\textsuperscript{655}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
\caption{Morgue in a blockhead act with a meat hook at Venice Beach Freakshow. Photo and © 2016 Jonas Eklund.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{655} Venice Beach Freakshow, July 15, 2016.
As I have discussed earlier, I maintain that cellphones are a huge distraction to the experience of the live act, and I believe that the reactions, both of disgust and pleasure, would be much greater if people at this act put away their phones, as they impose a distance that lessens the connection to the object of the experience. The experience of the act through the body is turned into an experience through the phone.

The atmosphere at the Freakshow had no intensity, and in general, the energy was low. As the venue was right by the Venice Beach Boardwalk, I would assume that most of the visitors were tourists who just happened to stop by, and as such their engagement was also rather low, while at the Sideshow, most of the people in the audience came there on purpose, as it is quite a way from the city center, and therefore the engagement and anticipation is higher.

Another difference from the act at the Sideshow is that the Freakshow is not framed as comedy, but instead performed “straight.” Performing the act straight demands that the feat is extraordinary, as there is nothing to fall back on. There is no relief of laughter, no framing of the odd as being a play. This quite frankly makes the experience odd, but not in a good way. I will return to this later, in the final part of this chapter.

The last act I will discuss in relation to disgust is a gaff and, in this case, an obvious fake. Xander is back on stage, holding a yellow balloon in his hand, the kind used for making balloon animals. As he blows up the balloon, he is asking for a “Wow” using his hand to trigger the audience. Although a seemingly cheap trick, it works to direct the audience’s attention and to connect to the act. When the balloon is inflated, he points out the fact that the balloon is longer than he is tall, which is true. He then engages in a classic sword-swallowing act and starts to swallow the balloon as if he was swallowing a sword. When he is halfway done, he stretches his body backward, as to fit more of it into his body. When there is a tiny bit of the balloon left, he hits his chest to make it go even further. Finally, the balloon has been inserted all the way, and it disappears into his body. To finish, he opens his mouth and sticks out his tongue to show that the balloon is completely gone. From the audience, I hear some sounds of disgust combined with laughter.

Alejandro comes back onto stage and says that he is equally disturbed and that he has no idea where that balloon has gone, and that he probably does not want to know. This act is more of a comedy act than a real working act, as everyone understands that the air just is let out of the balloon as it is being “swallowed.” This time, the object in itself is not disgusting for me, although I imagine that the air from the balloon is humid, warm, and stale, and that the

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656 Coney Island Sideshow, June 30, 2016.
rubbery smell and taste of the balloon is somewhat icky, but I have no problem with balloons in general. Again however, there is this sense of unwanted proximity, of one object being inserted into another, which is known to cause a feeling of disgust as it temporarily affects a border that should not be broken.657

The fact that Xander is of short stature might also play a part in the sense of unease as the imagery of exploitation of little people in the entertainment industry sits close in my memory and my mind is thrown into associations. For me as a spectator, watching a performer and laughing not only with him but most certainly also at him is an experience filled with mixed emotions. I will get back to this at the end of this chapter, but first I will discuss an example of an even more disturbing experience.

The Uncanny – Experiencing the Familiar Estranged

As my experience from the following act is not merely one of disgust, but rather sends shivers down my spine and concerns a more fundamental sense of eeriness, I turn to the notion of the uncanny as a way to discuss it.

A group of about 40 people has gathered in front of the small stage at the Freakshow. A dark-haired man wearing red shorts and a white t-shirt with the crossed-out word “Normal” steps up on the stage. The first thing that strikes me is that there is a big bump on his upper lip that makes it look like his moustache has been cut off. As my eyes are scanning his face, I see that his entire face is covered in small bumps. I feel myself shudder. He welcomes us to the freak show and introduces himself as Bob the Bubble Boy, then starts to tell his story of being different. Bob has a rare health condition called Neurofibromatosis Type 1, which causes changes in skin coloration and later, neurofibromas, which are small tumors under the skin that look like bubbles. I look at the bubbles on his arms and hands, thinking how difficult it must be to hide the bumps. Bob is telling us how the problem started in his teens and that he had to deal with this condition parallel to puberty. He gets some strained laughs. People are looking at his face, legs, and arms, staring even, and it seems like people in the audience have a hard time figuring out what a proper response to the act might be. Bob’s story seems genuine, and I can imagine the struggle of growing up feeling different and of meeting people’s reactions to his bodily features. At the end of his short act, he says that the freak show

makes him feel at home, as one among others, and that he now has the confidence to show who he really is. He then pulls off his t-shirt and reveals his bubbly upper body.  

During the act, I feel a sense of discomfort, of unease, and I would argue a sense of the uncanny. It is as if the experience not only disturbs me, but also catches me off guard, teasing a sense of uncertainty of my own experience, and maybe even my sense of self. Then, just as quickly as the sense came it is gone, overshadowed by a feeling of shame and sympathy. During the time I visited the Freakshow, I saw the act several times, and the audience reactions to the act differed slightly, ranging from applause and cheers to people making sounds of discomfort and disgust. Of all the acts I have seen in freak- and sideshow, this was by far the one that perplexed the audience most when it came to how to react and respond.

The uncanny is not just any feeling of fear, fright or anxiety. It is a very distinct sense of the strange and eerie, as it not only causes shivers and unease, but also a sense of losing one’s foothold, challenging what we think of as certain. The uncanny is related to the familiar in a profound way; it feeds on the familiar, as it is the sense of the familiar, the safe, the certain, being disrupted, becoming unfamiliar. The hidden shows itself, as if giving away a secret that cannot be untold, showing something that cannot be unseen. The experience of the uncanny brings an uncertainty into what should have been familiar and safe, causing a simultaneous experience of home and not home, of the familiar and unfamiliar, that challenges our way of understanding the world.

The sense of the uncanny has probably been around, puzzling and scaring people, as long as humans have walked the earth. However, as a concept and a theory it is quite recent, first emerging in the early 20th century. Although Freud is the one most associated with the concept, he was not the first to address the specific experience. In its original version, the theory is rooted in the German word unheimlich, which consists of two parts, the prefix un, which is a negation of what follows, just as un in the English uncanny. The second part is the central, meaning-bearing heimlich, which has a double meaning here. Freud writes that “the word Heimlich is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory are yet very different: on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and one the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight.”

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658 Venice Beach Freakshow, July 15, 2016.
negate the meaning of the two, something happens as the new word not only makes the familiar unfamiliar and opens up the hidden secret, but rather points to the specific experience of the unheimlich. In my use, I consider uncanny as the word for the full meaning of the unheimlich with the inherent double meaning of the German word.

Although the discussion of the uncanny usually starts from Freud’s notion, I prefer Jentsch’s take on the uncanny as a sense of disorientation that appears when one realizes that what is “known” and what is “self-evident” about the familiar doesn’t match up, or as I read Jentsch, that the idea, or memory, of what is experienced (the known), and the perception of the experience (the self-evident) are confused and the mind is disorientated. For Jentsch, the sense of the uncanny is not that the disruptive experience challenges the previous understanding per se, but rather the awareness of the uncertainty in everything we find familiar. The experience of the uncanny could be understood as the sense of an uncertain mind, struggling to fully grasp the perceived due to a lack of a previous “schema” to guide the experience, creating an experiential mismatch of the expected perception (shaped by memory) and the momentary perception (reality) actually being experienced. When I experienced Bob’s bubbly body, it was as if my mind was expecting a human appearance in line with what I usually experience, and it was as if I became disorientated. I have seen so many bodies of all shapes and forms in my life, not at least on the stage whilst doing this research, and it is as if they are collected in my memory as a catalog of references to make my everyday life easier. By making experiences habitual, our impressions change, and we make ourselves familiar and get a sense of home in the world. The mind wants to make sense of its perceptual experience, as a way to prepare for potential threats coming at us. In the experience of Bob’s body, the perceptual experience opened the source of reference and immediately, and unconsciously, I saw the similarities and as such labeled the experience safe. Meanwhile, my perception was gathering new information on what I had actually perceived, and there was no previous “schema” or impression to guide the bumps on the body, causing a simultaneous experience of the familiar safe, and the unfamiliar threat. This sense of a

662 In Swedish we use a similar word hemlig in the meaning of secret, but we do not use hemlig in the sense of familiar. The common translation of the uncanny therefore is kuslig, which translates as eerie and misses the double of the unheimlich, as well as the critical negation in the concept.

663 I will not go into a discussion of the etymological roots of the English word canny and uncanny, as I use it as a translation of the German unheimlich.


double understanding is not just about those double experiences, but they also create an experience of not trusting myself, an experience of not agreeing with my own mind, an experience of an uncertainty that is intellectual, as in Jentsch’s notion, but also embodied and affective. A sense of losing foothold in the situation. As Jentsch writes in the conclusion to his article, “The human desire for the intellectual mastery of one’s environment is a strong one.”

And the uncanny is about challenging this sense of certainty, creating ambivalence and a sense of being lost where one should know one’s way. To relate to my earlier discussion on curiosity, the uncanny is in a way triggered by the novelty, just like curiosity, but in an expected place, since the mind believes that it already has the information to handle it.

As I discussed in the section on laughter, one of the main theories is that of incongruity; that is, that laughter appears when the mind is being led into a train of thought, a track with an anticipation of what to come, and then suddenly the track ends, something disrupts the anticipated and throws you off track, or makes you realize that you have been following the wrong track all along. This surprising cognitive shift works in a similar way in this case, but without the framing of play that causes a mood of laughter, the setting creates a sense of unease and doubt.

Trying to analyze my experience, I watch a recording of the act over and over, but I cannot bring back the uncanny sense from the first experience. I cannot revisit the uncanny. It is as if the experience of the unfamiliar, familiar, has lost it unfamiliarity and is now accepted by my consciousness as familiar and manageable. Following this train of thought, experiences of the uncanny are becoming increasingly rare as the memory is filled with experiences increasing the “known” and preparing for perceptual situations.

**Real Uncanny or the Uncanny of Fiction**

Freud suggests that it is easier to experience the uncanny from fiction, as the setting is rigged to create the situation that evokes it. The fiction creates an arena for the possibility of the uncanny. Jentsch argues: “In life we do not like to expose ourselves to severe emotional blows, but in the theatre or while reading we gladly let ourselves be influenced in this way: we hereby experience certain powerful excitements which awake in us a strong feeling for life, without having to accept the consequences of the causes of the unpleasant moods if they were to have the opportunity to appear in corresponding form

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666 Jentsch, p. 15.
667 Morreall, pp. 3-8.
668 Freud, p. 638.

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on their own account, so to speak." Even though Jentsch mentions the theater, I do not agree that the experience of the fiction is the same at the theater as in a book or in films, as the action, and the reaction are yet to come at the theater, while the story is already over when it starts in a book or film. I would argue that the experience of a sense of uncanny from theater is quite rare, as the live performance, where real bodies on stage tell the story, creates a rather special relation between the fictive and the real, as the body on stage is present both as performer and as character and as such already the experience has a sense of uncertainty.

It is impossible to create some of the effects present in films, to guide the viewer, or to engage in the intensity of literature where only the imagination creates the boundaries of the experience. At the theater, one engages with reality. One cannot simply discard it as fake, or fiction. What you experience is real, and it is happening right there in front of you. At the live performance, there is no pause button to stop the action, no place to put the book down, no sense that the path has already been trodden. If you reach out, you can touch the person in front of you. In the experience, you are stuck with reality and your mind dealing with it, and this is where the fiction appears, as your imagination takes you for a spin and creates loops of associations. For the uncanny to be experienced, one must engage fully in the fiction, just as when watching cinema or reading, and in that way block out the reality present. The alternative is that the reality as such must have some quality to cause the sense of the uncanny, more similar to an uncanny experience in everyday life.

So where does the attraction of the uncanny lie? Jentsch writes that "[h]owever strange it may sound, there are perhaps only very few affects which in themselves must always be unpleasurable under all circumstances, without exception. Art at least manages to make most emotions enjoyable for us in some sense." My experience of the uncanny was a thrill of the senses, a visceral and emotional sense of being un-home in my own body, a fearful and utterly enjoyable experience.

Going back to the *Freakshow* and my experience of Bob the Bubble Boy, the situation is even more peculiar as, although the act is staged and his words follow a script, I recognize Bob Heslip as a real person, that is, someone telling the story of his real life. As such, my experience is of him as a lived body, with an own self-consciousness, filled with emotions, thoughts, dreams, and

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669 Jentsch, p. 12.
670 In his article, Jentsch is writing about the experience of acts similar to sideshow, of “huge stones crushed on his head, swallowing bricks and petrol, or a fakir” and how the artists are not getting genuine admiration but rather “a different impression,” which is a sense of the uncanny. Jentsch, pp. 10-11.
hopes. This has a radical impact on my experience, as the sense of uncanny is not the only experience I have of the act, which I will return to in my discussion that follows.

Freak Show from a Relational Approach

A returning argument in the literature on freak- and sideshows is the way that the freakery is not so much in the body, but rather in the staging of that body. Using a variety of techniques, references, and approaches, the intention is to make the acts stand out, to play on the audience’s curiosity, and to show the marvel of human bodies and their ability. This highlights the difference from the audience and the societal norms, and as such, They create themselves as Others.

Even though I see that the staging is made to make the performers different, to create them as others, the othering is done by me, in the experience through my interpersonal relation with the body on stage. In this final chapter, to conclude my analogy of personal pronouns, the focus is on the phenomenal experience of They and the sense of othering in the experience of entertainment. I touched on the sense of the other earlier, in the circus chapter, and although there are connections, the situation is also different since the other in that case was in relation to the characters, and was an unintentional, and unfortunate, consequence of aesthetic choices, while the other in freak- and sideshows is deliberate; the other is the attraction.

In previous chapters, my focus has been on the connected experience of You, or the shared experience of We. In this chapter, the turn to They might seem like a further disconnection, but I would argue the opposite, as the experience might, in fact, be more about I than They, as it involves an othering, not only to distinguish Them from Me, but to distinguish the self in Me.

I will start with a brief discussion on how the staging of the bodies on stage at the Sideshow and the Freakshow differed. Then I will frame the idea of self in contemporary phenomenology and discuss freaks as entertainment. I will then discuss a specific encounter with the other, where the experience turned the attention to my sense of self. Finally, I will briefly discuss the other as an object of research.

Staging the Other

For me, the experience of the acts at the Sideshow and the Freakshow differed quite a lot. At the Sideshow, the play of the historical ten-in-one sideshow, clearly framed as comedy and mostly consisting of working acts, nostalgically framed or with an edge, was really amusing. The founder of the Coney Island
Sideshow Dick Zigun has said that he did not want *the Sideshow* to be a preservation of a carnival sideshow of the mid-1950s, but rather that it should be in line with modern values. This approach to the show affects how it is experienced. I had a great time at *the Sideshow*, as I enjoyed being tricked, tempted into curiosity, and disgusted by acts that came too close for comfort, all in the good spirit of a theatrical setting. The place felt alive and there was a vibe of keeping a cultural institution remembered. Phrases that the inside talker Alejandro repeated was, “for your deranged and demented pleasure,” and “if anyone were to be hurt or killed, remember it is all for your entertainment.” Xander questioned the audience’s reactions with the phrase “don’t take the moral high ground now,” and reminded us that we “paid for it.” The talkback reminds us in the audience that we are a part of it, but at the same time reclaims the power of the object being watched. Thomson argues that the stare is not only a physical response initiated by something engaging our curiosity, it can also be a form of communication that establishes a social relationship between the one staring and the one being stared at. The staring can result in an empathic experience where mutual respect guides the interaction, or the one being stared at can stare back, and in doing so reclaim power and take charge of the situation. The curiosity that triggers stares at a person with a visible disability gets in the way of a ‘normal’ interaction, as a great deal of information is to be processed, and this situation creates discomfort. To alleviate the situation, many disabled people use strategies of humor, charm or entertainment to relieve the non-disabled person. Comedy is used in a similar way at *the Sideshow*, to relieve the insecurity of being a curious voyeur of the sensational, and in this the framing of entertainment is made clear, and the experience is quite similar to any circus show, or comical theatre, though perhaps with a twist of disgust and curiosity. My experience of *the Sideshow* was pure fun and amusement.

However, the experience at *the Freakshow* was something else. The vibe was different, and the use of performers and the stance taken towards the audience were experienced in another way. The other became apparent, as the framing lacked the nostalgic reference to freak- and sideshows of the past. Instead of playing with the genre and its history, they staged a freak show, possibly truer to the original than at *the Sideshow*, as it puts freaks and freakery on display, with the inclusion of born freaks. As I mentioned earlier, the

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673 Coney Island Sideshow, June 30, July 1, and July 2, 2016.
675 Ibid., pp. 84-94.
show is mainly played straight, with performers telling their own stories on stage, just being at the place or performing their acts, without a filter of comedy. The show makes no effort to alleviate the anxiety put on the audience from the interaction with the unusual bodies.\textsuperscript{677} In all fairness, I have no claim to comfort as the one who stares, having chosen to pay for the thrill of curiosity. Chemers argues that many strategies put in place to help disabled people have worked to help the person meeting the disabled to cope with the situation rather than to relieve the stigma of the disabled.\textsuperscript{678} Perhaps the same is true for the sideshow, and for other performances dealing with difficult subjects – that the relief of comedy in the framing and the play-pretend alleviates the audience’s anxiety, but at the same time steers away from the most critical questions. To really engage or challenge our perceptions, maybe we need to be uncomfortable and take the hit of a true experience, not only to encounter the other, but to encounter ourselves.

\textit{The Phenomenal Self}

In philosophy, the notion of self is discussed in different ways, ranging from essentialist views on a true inner being, to radical notions of self as entirely a social construct. In phenomenology, the self is central as it is the origin of the experience and therefore intimately tied to our self-consciousness. The self is not like any other thing, as it is not something that \textit{is}, or something we have in the same way we have a heart; the self is rather something that becomes as it is experienced.

We are constantly aware that our first-person experience is ours, and as such there is an experiential self of which we are pre-reflectively aware in, and through, our experiences. Our self-consciousness is a pre-reflective awareness of our consciousness as ours.\textsuperscript{679} As such, self-consciousness is not something added to the experience, as a layer of understanding, but a prerequisite for the experience in the first place.\textsuperscript{680}

The experience of self, as from a first-person perspective, is not a turn inwards, but rather an embodied experience of the self, being in the world, along with others.\textsuperscript{681} As such, there is no self that is not in relations to others that influence and affect it. A corresponding interdependency is found in Ahmed’s approach to the experience of emotions, as Ahmed argues that the emotion is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{677} Chemers, 2009, p. 5.
\item \textsuperscript{678} Ibid., pp. 20-12.
\item \textsuperscript{679} Gallagher & Zahavi, pp. 225-226.
\item \textsuperscript{680} Dan Zahavi, \textit{Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame}, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 11-12.
\item \textsuperscript{681} Gallagher & Zahavi, pp. 227-228.
\end{itemize}
not internal, nor external, but rather appears in contact with others.\textsuperscript{682} It is in the contact between the sensing subject and the intentional object that the emotion emerges. Not as a feeling coming from within, nor as inherent to the object itself, as a sign embedded with a certain meaning, but in the memories and ideologies shaped by repeated encounters with the object – contacts that make meaning stick to it.

This dependency of the contact between subject and object takes on a special quality in relation to other people, as the subject-object relation becomes a subject-subject relation in which the subjects continuously negotiate the position against the other. To define the other, and to define the self. At the theater, this realignment and positioning are found in what Fischer-Lichte calls the feedback loop, as the self and the other react and respond, and as such continuously affect each other.\textsuperscript{683} As my previous examples have shown, this negotiation of self is of importance in the experience, as it allows us to experiment and recalibrate our ideas as we encounter stereotypes of the other, the strict beauty ideals or norms on sexuality, and normality.

This brings the attention to another sense of self, the selfhood, which is related to our idea of identity and personal understanding of ourselves, rather than a structural aspect of consciousness, although this structure is still relevant for the experience. The phenomenological approach to the sense of selfhood can be seen as a middle way between the essentialist claim that there is a true inner self, independent from the outer world, and the radical theory that the self is merely a series of experiences without any core.\textsuperscript{684} We do have a sense of self – our consciousness from which we experience – and this consciousness is constantly being reshaped by our experiences of the social and cultural. According to this view, the idea of the self is constructed through a narrative where we interpret ourselves in relation to the world we live in, and the people who inhabit it.\textsuperscript{685} If we are asked who we are, we do not give an account of a preexisting inner self, but rather create a story of our self and who we are, through our previous encounters and experiences. In the discussion on experiencing emotions, Ahmed uses the term impressions to discuss how our encounters with others change our surface as it comes in contact with the world.\textsuperscript{686} Our self can be seen as this accumulation of experiences that makes impressions, on us and in us.

\textsuperscript{682} Ahmed, 2014, pp. 8-12.  
\textsuperscript{683} Fischer-Lichte, pp. 38-39.  
\textsuperscript{684} Zahavi, 2015, p. 18.  
\textsuperscript{685} Ibid., pp. 222-223.  
\textsuperscript{686} Ahmed, 2014, pp. 6-8.
Our idea of self, the *I*, is therefore constructed in relation to something else and is dependent on the other to identify with or against. This affects how the otherness of the freak has been approached.

When *I* encounter *They* – Experiencing Self in the ‘Other’

Opinions on freak shows are many and diverse. Chemers states that “the freak show is certainly a highly contestable event, capable of generating many and contradictory meanings, this solemnity, marked by both knee-jerk moralizing and inappropriate sentimentality.” This diversity is also found among scholars with differing opinions on and approaches to the ethics of freak shows, as well as the consequences of freaks on stage for the audience. I will now briefly map out some of the main arguments of these discussions.

*Exploitation - Construction of the Self from the Other*

A common argument in research on freaks is that the odd body of the freak show strengthens the sense of normality in the audience, helping the audience define themselves by giving a reference of the ‘Other’. As such, freaks were used to define the normal, in line with democratization, or to strengthen the white, middle-class values of the time. When ‘people’ were given the power to vote, a need to define the ‘people’ emerged. The connection between freak shows and eugenics has been a common theme in literature on the history of the freak show.

Thomson relates freaks to the expanding market economy in the late 19th century, as she argues that the figure of the freak is used to define “the ‘normative’ position of masculine, white, nondisabled, sexually unambiguous, and middle class;” in short, as a capable American. This view of the freak and the audience relates to my earlier discussion on stereotypes, and how the other becomes not only an orientation on which we look, a turning towards, but it also highlights the position from which the other is experienced, what the norm is oriented around, and as such strengthens the identity of the self, and the belonging to a group. Similar arguments are found in Shildrick, who argues that the display of freaks encouraged the audience to a binary view of “them and us,” which not only had the purpose of normalizing the viewer, but

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687 Zahavi, 2015, p. 224.
688 Chemers, 2009, pp. 138-139.
690 Thomson, 1997, p. 64. See also, p. 59, 61-66.
691 Ahmed, 2006. p. 120.
also marked the freak as inferior. Dennett’s words are even harsher; she writes: “The freak show is about relationships, us versus them, the normal versus the freaks.”

The staging of the other as monstrous is not only found in the freak show. Fahy discusses how the image of the Jew was presented in Nazi propaganda in the third reich, and how the bodily othering was used in order to strengthen the support for the Nazi agenda. The image of the Jew as the other is also discussed by historian George L. Mosse in *The Image of Man* (1996). He introduces the concept of the countertype in a discussion on how masculinity is created in relation to the opposite, the countertype whose purpose is to strengthen the norm. In a similar fashion, one could argue that the freak holds the position of the countertype to strengthen the norm of the audience.

*Identification - Experiencing the Other in Oneself*

Although the argument for the use of freaks as a countertype has its merit, the opposite is equally possible – i.e., the appeal of the freak because it offered an identification with the ‘Other’. Some of the scholars that express the appeal of the freak as a countertype also admit the potential of identification with the freak, and I would argue that the seemingly opposing perspectives could exist at the same time. One obvious reason is that the audience is not just one person, but rather numerous people with their individual experiences and motivations for their engagement. It is also possible to recognize the Otherness in oneself, as an identification of the Otherness of all people, while simultaneously recognizing the freak as a countertype.

As for the history of the freak show, Thomson has argued for both the countertype approach and identification, as a voyeuristic identification of nonconformity and as a safe longing for difference. This was a result of the conflicting state in which freedom and cultivating differences were encouraged and idealized, while the equality movement, democratization and standardization of institutions shaped a conform society. The norms that are produced by conformity impose ways of life, as they direct us to stay in line. In the continuous encounters with the norms, some will fit while others will not, and therefore a sense of being out of line will occur and as such one can identify with that which is not within the lines, as in my example of queer desire.

693 Dennett, p. 134.
694 Fahy, p. 56.
Adams also recognizes the possibility of identification with the freaks, and in bringing the sideshow into the present, she argues that often when people go to see the freakish other on stage, they instead find their stranger within. An aspect related to identification is recognition, and a reminder of injustice potentially associated with the act. As such, the question of freaks in relation to disability is brought to the table.

Subversion - Postmodern Views on Identity and Disability

The first to bring attention to the connection between freak show and disability was Bogdan, who shifted focus from the freaks themselves to the freak as a social construction and a practice. Thomson brought modern disability studies into the discussion, as well as important notions of power relations between the disabled and the “normate,” which is the social figure associated with the authority and position of the norm. She argues that disabilities are a social construction, appearing only in relation to a society that cannot cope with human variation. Following this notion, freaks only become freaks as they interact with a society that has a narrow idea of the norm. Adams discusses how the little people in the movie *Freaks* are staged in a miniature setting in one scene, to show the audience how the normal is a matter of perspective. In this setting, a person of average height would be much more disabled. Another question that Thomson raises concerns the fact that most of the freaks did not have disabilities that entailed physical hindrance, but rather had looks or bodies that made them socially disabled. This also shows the fluidity of disability and how it is always in relation to something else. Chemers slightly provocatively writes about freaks in relation to people with disabilities through history, and points out that freaks made money while “many people with disabilities suffer[ed] extreme poverty.” While many disabled people have remained isolated, freaks have built communities, and while freaks have been put on display, many disabled people have been hidden away in “attics and asylums.”

Elizabeth Stephens takes a more postmodern approach and sees the potential for the freak show to be subversive, as it can challenge the audience’s

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701 Ibid., pp. 6-9.
704 Chemers, 2009, p. 17.
conception of rigid identities, much like my earlier argument on burlesque. In contrast to many scholars, she does not see the freak show as on “the brink of disappearance,” but argues that it is the “uncertainty about the significance and function of the sideshow, its un/fixing of cultural norms, that has ensured its ongoing relevance as a cultural form and constant reinvention as a theatrical practice.” Chemers puts it similarly: “We are attracted to freak shows because they are discourses not only of deviance but also of getting away with deviance.”

Colette Conroy brings the discussion of freaks and Crip Theory into a discussion of theater that uses freaks as a theme, and comes to the conclusion that the theatrical freak can be used to challenge assumptions of disabled identities. This approach of the potential of a subversion of the norm is probably what the freak and sideshows of today want to achieve. The Freakshow sells t-shirts with the crossed-out word “Normal,” as well as shirts that read, “Normal is dead.” The final words at the Sideshow were “If you think your family and friends are strange, remember that time at Coney Island watching my sideshow family.” Although stating that the sideshow family is stranger, the experience of people being strange in everyday life is also recognized.

Chemers takes another stance, trying to see beyond the question of disability and focus on freaks as performers in a theatrical context. He argues that each show and performance needs to be regarded in relation to the potential exploitation, just as any other performance. Denying the performers of their own voice, their agency, and their right to choose a carrier – be it as an actor or performer – is a way to label them as different, as others, and is ultimately discriminatory.

A story that returns in a number of books concerns the controversy about a sideshow act performed at the New York State Fair in Syracuse in 1984. Otis Jordan, a performer known as “the Frog Boy,” did an act that involved rolling and smoking a cigarette using only his lips, due to his physical restrictions. A professor of special education, Barbara Baskins, initiated a campaign to ban the freak act from the fair, which eventually forced the Incredible Wonders of the World of Sideshow, where Jordan performed, to close. After years of battling the ruling that stopped Jordan from performing, he was finally allowed to perform again, which he did at the Coney Island Sideshow until his

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705 Stephens, p. 495.
706 Chemers, 2009, p. 137.
708 Coney Island Sideshow, July 2, 2016.
death in 1990. What is interesting in this conflict is that both sides fought for the rights of disabled people – Baskins fought to ban entertainment that she considered exploitative and damaging to the disabled community, while Jordan fought for his right to be like anybody else – he never considered himself disabled; he was a showman. In this conflict lies the complexity of considering disability in relation to freak entertainment, as either argument is valid.

Experiencing the Shame of Sympathy

As I hinted at in the section of the uncanny, the experience brought on a sense of shame in almost the same moment as the uncanny. As an emotion, shame is not as easily described as anger, fear, joy or even disgust, as these emotions manifest themselves quite straightforwardly as they connect a source of the emotion with the response. However, shame is a more complex emotion, similar to envy, pride, jealousy or guilt, as it is not only a response related to a specific source, but rather connected to the experience of self, in relation to others, and our social and moral values, and how we cope with them.

Shame has often been defined as an infraction of moral values, however, Zahavi argues that as a criterion that is not enough, as shame relates to the sense of self by a “decrease of self-esteem or self-respect” by the “awareness of personal flaws and deficiencies,” an experience of self to oneself, always in relation to the other. Shame presupposes a direction towards the other, as it is constituted by and through the other. However, the other does not need to be present for the experience of shame. The other might only be present in the mind, as when feeling ashamed of something one did, even if no one knows, or ever would find out.

At the Freakshow, a sense of shame came over me. The experience brought the attention to myself, and a sense of internal blushing strangely filled me with emptiness. The shame hit me with almost the same power as the disgust did earlier, but it was less visceral and more in the realms of consciousness and conscience.

In my moral values, every human is of equal worth. By engaging in of looking at the body in front of me, I realize that I am complicit in the objectification of a person. I know that I have been taught better, to treat people as equals and to respect people and their differences, no matter what. “The feeling of shame occurs precisely because of the discrepancy between the values

712 Bogdan, pp. 280-281.
714 Ibid., pp. 210-212.
one continues to endorse and the actual situation."\textsuperscript{715} There is no actual act of not recognizing the worth of the person in front of me inherent in the act of looking, but it comes close, and it interferes with another of my moral values: not staring. A non-practice that has been around for the last centuries, brought on by the curiosity created when people started to interact more broadly due to industrialization and urbanization.\textsuperscript{716} In older village society, few interactions invited stares, since you probably already had seen it all – this was something exploited by traveling freak shows, which gave the people in the village something to stare at.

In my experience of shame, I am also reminded of how our differences shape our lives. It makes me question my own privileges. Adams describes a similar experience at the Coney Island Sideshow, in an act with Koko the Killer Clown, where “shame and distaste radiates through the crowd.” She argues that it recalls aspects of the freak shows of the past, and in her becoming complicit as she pays for looking.\textsuperscript{717} Although she misread the act, which I will return to later, she does see the use of connecting the action onstage to the history of freaks as a framing for a critical view.\textsuperscript{718} I agree with her, as I would argue that in some ways, shame is a correcting device to align us with our sense of norms, which we seemingly fail to live up to. In this sense, the experience of shame has an opening to the world, a connection and a will to improve. Shame can thus be a critical tool for understanding ourselves in the world.

There are problems in the staging of some of the acts at the Freakshow, however. It not only calls on our sense of shame, but rather our sense of pity. Bogdan writes that there are a few examples of acts whose presentation aimed at the audience’s sympathies and compassion, a strategy that was destined to backfire since it used pity, and pity had no place “in the world of amusement.”\textsuperscript{719} Thomson also refers to pity as “an emotional cul-de-sac” that disconnects the viewer from the one being pitied.\textsuperscript{720} Some of the acts of oddity present the struggle of being different. As insensitive as it may seem, I do not know how to respond to that in the setting of the freak show. For me, this is when it stops being theater; when it stops having an entertainment value. My feeling of being ashamed is not the problem; I have felt shame before and I can handle it, as the shame is created by a shortcoming of the equality sought

\textsuperscript{715} Ibid., p. 215.
\textsuperscript{716} Thomson, 2009, pp. 66-67.
\textsuperscript{717} Adams, 2001, p. 216.
\textsuperscript{718} Ibid., p. 217.
\textsuperscript{719} Bogdan, pp. 277-278.
\textsuperscript{720} Thomson, 2009, p. 93.
after in my norms. Pity, on the other hand, is created as an expression of sorrow on behalf of the other from a position of power, and often with a slight contempt. As such pity is a display of inequality. The big problem is that pity makes me disconnect. Through pity, the other’s suffering is experienced as a separation of self and other, as the “enjoyment of the I is interrupted,” which highlights the subjectivity in the experience. Pity leads nowhere. What is even worse than staring is looking away. Staring is connected and has a communication potential, while looking away is a non-communication, a non-communication from a position of power. An activity that begets feelings of shame and guilt, not only in the one looking away, but also in the one not being stared at.

Bogdan goes so far as to say that it is the use of pity in relation to human difference, through charity organizations and fund-raising, as a modern way of looking at human difference, that has framed the experience of freaks as repulsive. I would not go that far, but I agree that there is a problem in who is actually creating the freakery – the one enjoying the acts of human marvel, or the one looking away due to the display of their otherness.

Exploiting the Other
Writing on a topic like freaks is a constant balancing act. One must be sure not to become a voyeur, stuck in amazement or sentimental nostalgia, and nor should one be overly moralistic, judging acts and bodies on the basis of narrow ideas and opinions. The discussion is a terrain full of potential pitfalls, and a misunderstanding or a lack of clarification can easily be read as offensive.

It is almost a tradition in the scholarship of freaks to point out other authors’ problematic engagement or writing. Adams directly criticized Fiedler, who she claims comes too close to the subject, identifying himself with the freaks and failing to see his own privileged position. Bogdan criticizes Fiedler for treating the freak as an object based on her physiological condition. I would argue that Bogdan falls into a voyeuristic approach, as he in his introduction entices the reader not to leave. “There will be exhibits (and it will be okay to look!).” Shildrick points out that although trying to relate the freak to the

722 Thomson, 2009, pp. 79-84.
723 Bogdan, p. 278.
725 Bogdan, p. 7.
726 Ibid., p. 3
representation of them as such, the examples Bogdan gives shows an underlying “true” state of being. Although it is not entirely the same, it raises some questions about Bogdan’s view on identity and construction. The most severe critique is directed at Adams, who wrote about some performances at the Coney Island Sideshow in *Sideshow U.S.A.*, and mentioned one that would might have earned a job as a freak even in the old-time freak show – Koko the Killer Clown: “A rotund, developmentally disabled dwarf” who is loud and creates a “palpable unease” as the performance crosses some line of “individual agency and exploitation.”

In a review of the book however, Chemers criticizes Adams starkly, as Koko the Killer Clown is not disabled at all, but an act of Tony Torres, an actor of short stature. By labeling Koko disabled and critiquing the act as exploitation, Adams makes herself guilty of the same kind of othering that she critiques in her book.

As I write this chapter, I am struggling with how to relate to the display of human oddity in my text. Questions about the scholarship have been raised, and it is important to take them seriously. Are studies of the freak just another voyeuristic display of the bodies, for the pleasure of the researcher? When Bogdan approached the legendary sideshow operator Ward Hall about potential exploitation in the sideshow, Hall’s reply ended by stating, “I exhibited freaks and exploited them for years. Now you are going to exploit them. The difference between authors and the news media, and the freak show operators is that we paid these people.”

What I have tried to do in this chapter is to switch perspectives, as it becomes apparent that the experience is all about me when I encounter *They*.

**Chapter Conclusion**

If the first chapter on circus focused on connection and attention, and the second on burlesque dealt with norms and community, this third chapter has focused on the experience of freak show with a returning concept of curiosity and the Other.

In modern everyday life, we have almost seen it all, if not out in the streets, then in magazines, on tv-shows, or on YouTube. As such, we are rarely surprised by the strange. Our minds are already prepared; the experiences have

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728 Adams, 2001, p. 216.
730 Chemers, 2009, p. 132.
731 Bogdan, p. 268.
already been experienced. Watching, or maybe staring at the freaks at the sideshow, our curiosity runs high – at least until it dissolves as quickly as it hit us. We get to be amused and amazed by the rare or unusual. We are being duped and get to challenge our understanding of the human being, and ultimately the world.

In the experience, the sense of liveness is important, as everything is happening right there in front of us, in the same room at the same time. The risk of something unexpected is ever-present, and if we reach out, we can touch the people. In the words of Sandahl, “The desire to identify and possess an “authentic” bodily experience haunts those who feel dissatisfied with the glossy hyperreality of computer-generated images, television, photography, and film.”

In the discussion of the embodied experience, I felt the visceral sense of disgust with something unwanted coming too close for comfort. Scholar and former sideshow worker Fred Siegel argues that “the sideshow is a theater of guts; a viscerally titillating place where performers violate their bodies with spikes, swords, and fire and walk off the platform unharmed.” I have to agree.

The short moment experiencing the uncanny was not only a strange experience, but it also was felt existentially, as it made me doubt my mind and challenged my conception of what I thought I knew. As the body onstage belonged to a real person, with a lived experience, the experience created mixed emotions as well as questions of what spectating does.

In the final part of the chapter, I turned the discussion to how the experience of the other has been discussed in research on freaks, and framed potential positions of understanding of the attraction of the other. In the experience, we are challenged in our understanding of disabilities, the history of human exhibitions, and our relation to Others, and most importantly of ourselves. In a brief discussion on shame, I turn back to my experience from the uncanny and discuss how shame can act as a correcting device, aligning beliefs and actions. I also discuss how shame differs from pity, as although those feeling shame might stare, the person feeling pity rather looks away, and as such avoids any communication.

In this chapter, the discussion has been about curiosity creating attraction as it puts the other on display in one way or the other. What is regarded as other also relates to the ideas and norms that are produced and imposed by popular culture. The experience of the other is, however, not about creating a

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732 Sandahl, p. 270.
strengthened sense of an I, but it also reflects and makes me challenge my own position and curiosity. In the experience, I not only see myself in the other, but I also see the other in me.
Conclusion

This study began with the enthralling experience of a spectacular body on stage that triggered questions in me about what was causing the intense reactions and attraction. Starting from the multiple meanings of the word *sensational* as spectacular, as a quick fix of arousal, and as pertaining to the embodied senses, I set out on an exploration of the spectatorial experience starting in my own phenomenal experience, with the aim to broaden the understanding of what it is in these genres that makes them attractive to a contemporary audience. Through a range of examples, themes and topics, I have tried to describe and discuss the complex experience of being a spectator. For this final conclusion, I will frame the knowledge and understandings produced in relation to the four areas *Genre*, *Spectatorship*, *Performance Theory*, and the *Broader Field*. At the end of this conclusion, I will briefly suggest some areas of future research to explore.

Genre – the Attraction of the Experience

First, I will turn the attention to the question that initially sparked my curiosity and led to this study: what is the attraction of these genres and their bodies on the stage? To entertain is to grab the attention of the spectator, holding it for the moment, creating an experience of connection between the body on the stage and the body in the audience. In these genres, this is done by means of the sensational, by using the spectacular, aiming at an intense, embodied experience for the spectator, in the moment. The entertainment is sustained by a constant balance of novelty to keep it interesting, and familiarity to keep it accessible.

As my examples have shown, the spectatorial experience is complex and different aspects are intertwined, creating an experience where affect, thoughts, and intersubjective relations interact to create a ‘whole’ experience. I would however argue that the affective aspects are at the core of the attraction. Based on a phenomenological approach to affect, Thomas Fuchs suggests five affective categories. Starting in these categories, I will argue for the way the attraction of these genres is tied to the experience of affect and emotions.
Often, feelings are experienced in several ways at the same time and therefore relate to several of the suggested categories.

The Feeling of Being Alive
This seemingly fundamental affective state that constantly lurks in the background but most often goes unnoticed is at times brought to our attention in the experience of the bodies on stage as we become aware of the liveness of the experience. This can happen when we feel the movement of others in our own bodies through kinesthetic empathy, which turns our attention to our own embodiedness, and in the experience of risk that reminds us of our vulnerability and mortality. We can also get this sense in the visceral experience of disgust, which is an immediate reminder of having a body and being alive, or in the strong desire that aligns our wants and connects us to our passions.

Existential Feelings
There is also the potential to experience existential feelings. These feelings not only remind us of being alive, but also direct attention to our self as being in the world, our orientation, and where we are going. I experienced this sense as a loss of foothold through the existential crisis when the familiar was felt as strange in the uncanny, as the experience challenged what I thought I knew, and was taking for granted in the world. A similar existential feeling was sensed in the crisis of being pulled into action onstage, and out of the ‘reality’ of the auditorium, ending up in a state of uncertainty. The feeling of what is missing and the simultaneous sense of hope in utopia also have existential qualities, as it turns attention towards the state of the world, and also points to a direction of a future world. A more personal existential experience was felt in desire and shame, as they made me question what I know to be true about myself.

Atmosphere, Mood and Attunement
Although atmosphere, moods, and attunement are presented as separate categories in Fuchs’ discussion, I would argue that the way they work in the attraction of these genres is similar, as the atmosphere affects the mood and vice versa. I consider them affective experiences tied to the energy in the room, created by and in relation to the others present. This affective experience is dependent on the co-presence and liveness of the event, in which the feedback between the bodies on the stage and bodies in the audience affect each other, both in reality and in the realms of fiction. The experience of atmospheres and moods are crucial for the experience of emotional contagion, or when we feel a sense of sharing emotions with others. The atmosphere and the mood constantly affect the way our other feelings emerge and how they are experienced.
Emotions

The final category describes more directly felt emotions such as the joy and pleasure experienced through laughter, and curiously, in the feeling of disgust as well, although disgust is also an experience of repulsion. There are also pleasures to be found in the curiosity of the novelty, and the sense of being fooled by cheap tricks and humbuggery. In the experience, there are also several strong emotions that are not pleasant in themselves, like the feeling of anxiety in experiencing the risk of others and the self, but this comes with relief as the risk is resolved. There are senses of sadness, sympathy, and compassion for the migrants and their ordeals that might not be pleasant, but they create new understandings and realign the view on our own lives and our self. This also causes feelings of guilt as my privileges become apparent, as well as the shame of my own stare and reactions that challenge my own ideology. Our emotions also connect us to others in the sense of hope in utopia, in the feeling of belonging to a community, or when other bodies challenge what we take for granted.

Contribution to the Empirical Field of Popular Theater

The intense embodied experience of the spectator that is produced by the embodied expression on stage shows how affect and emotions are essential to the attraction of these genres, and for giving a sensational experience. Although I would argue that these genres, through their strong focus on bodies, have a special ability to create affective states, I would also argue that approaching the affect and emotion of spectators at large is a way to broaden the understanding of genres, as well as spectatorship.

Within theater studies, genres such as circus, burlesque, and freak show have often been neglected or treated as trivial, as they are genres related to entertainment rather than art. When they do appear, it is often as elements incorporated in dramatic theater, or as something belonging to history, as contemporary popular genres studies are quite rare. On the other hand, the genres have also received little attention in studies of popular culture, as they are marginalized within a broader field of popular culture that often focuses on industrialized and commercial mass-culture. With my study, I add to the scholarship of these genres, as contemporary theatrical performances within the popular culture.
Spectatorship – the Potential of the Experience

In my approach, spectatorship is all about the experience. As the study has shown, being a spectator is an intricate, intertwined cognitive and embodied experience where meaning is shaped in relation to the situation at the event, through intersubjective relations, and the broader cultural context as norms, ideals, and ideologies that are brought into the experience through previous impressions. As spectators, we are not passively receiving what is given to us through the action and the bodies on stage. Rather, we are active in our intentional direction towards and away from objects, moved by, and also move ourselves. In the experience, we make use of our pre-existing impressions, and through the experience, new impressions are created. As such, spectatorship is performative as we through the experience become someone new, and spectatorship is thus a position of potentials.

Potentials in Spectatorship

Popular entertainment is an arena where the body often is in focus, as it is being used as a tool to engage in discussions on politics, norms, ethics, and ideologies. One potential is found in the returning experience of being in the audience as a sense of being together with others, feeling a sense of belonging, and being together as a part of something bigger. In the experience of connecting with others through empathy or a sense of We, there is a potential of creating communities, both as a temporary sense of belonging and as a reoccurring formation with certain objectives. The experience of community is crucial to the sense of utopia and the emergence of a joint understanding of what is missing in the world, and feelings of hope in the possibility of another world.

Several of the examples in my study show how the spectatorial experience can challenge norms and ideals that are restrictive and make our lives poorer, and create new understandings that realign our beliefs and desires. As such, spectatorship has a subversive potential.

As my study has shown, many of the experiences challenge our ordinary perception of our own bodies. Through the experience, the notions of our body schema and perception are challenged, causing the sense of being alive and creating existential uncertainty in our self and our bodies. This uncertainty creates a space that opens up a potential for challenging ourselves.

Perhaps all of these potentials are mostly tied to the idea of the self, re-aligning our understanding of the world, and ourselves in the world. However, on a larger scale, we are all a part of the world, and our actions in it are what creates it. Popular culture is dependent on the circulation of images and ideas.
that co-create our culture, and if this circulation is interrupted and subverted, there is a potential for real change from the position of the spectator.

**Contribution to the Field of Spectatorship**

In my approach to spectatorship, I focus on cognitive, embodied, and relational aspects of the experience in order to get to an understanding of the full experience, and although this approach is highly theoretical and does not resemble the true experience of the spectator, it directs the attention to different aspects of the experience that are often overlooked, such as the embodied understanding, the focus on affect, feelings, and emotions, as well as the inter-subjective experience of others. The study also turns attention to the specificity of the entertainment of being a spectator, although it acknowledges the broader potentials and the complexity.

**Performance Theory – Analyzing the Experience**

In my theoretical and methodological approach, I focus on the spectatorial experience from a first-person perspective, using phenomenology. Although the focus is on the subjective experience, I would argue that phenomenology is not a tool for looking inward to find answers, but rather a method for reaching out and connecting oneself to others and to the world. In acknowledging the self as our access point to the world, some of the naivety involved in research is approached. The philosophical field of phenomenology is specifically focused on experiences and it is well-suited for the discussion of both the position of the spectator and the researcher. Due to its broad scope and the at times confusing uses and approaches to it, phenomenology is complex, but in the complexity and the multitude of concepts tied to it, there are many potentials for exploring new aspects of the experience of theater and spectatorship.

**Contribution to the Field of Performance Analysis**

In my introduction, I suggest a subtle shift in focus from the performance and the semiotic interpretation to the experience and the phenomenal meaning. Through my study, I have shown that the experience is far richer and more complex than an interpretation of signs suggests. In the introduction, I also make a quick remark that the phenomenal approach has qualities similar to meditation, and I am not the first to find the connection.\textsuperscript{734} Approaching the

\textsuperscript{734} In *The Embodied Mind* (2017), Varela, Thompson & Rosch connect an embodied view on cognition with phenomenology, Buddhism and mindfulness meditation.
phenomenal experience is taking a step back, letting the experience emerge, noticing it, and becoming one with it, and then letting it go as another experience emerges.

As a method it is difficult, as it requires a keen balance between holding on to the experience to keep it for analysis, but at the same time not interfering and influencing the experience. It is like holding a precious bird that you wish would stay, but you cannot force it to, because holding it too tightly would destroy it. If the temporal quality of theater makes it ephemeral and difficult to study, the experience of it is even more difficult to grasp, and to do it justice in the descriptions, analysis, and discussions is extremely demanding.

However, the semiotic habit is difficult to break, and the desire to interpret and assign meaning to the objects in the experience is strong. Through my previous experience in performance analysis, the semiotic approach and interpretation have become sticky. I find that I am correcting myself as I take notes, describe and discuss, as I repeatedly want to assign meaning to them. I do however, argue that it is worth continuing to correct myself and turn towards the experience and the meaning and not fall into the habit of interpretation. This difference might seem like a semantic question, but I do maintain that there is a crucial difference in assigning a meaning to the object that is transferred to the spectator by interpretation and that the meaning appears in the spectator’s experience, based on previous impressions, the specific situation, and the context. I would argue that the semiotic approach to interpretation closes in on itself as it brings in a naïve assumption of a correlation between sign and interpretation, creating a one-way direction from object to subject, while a phenomenological approach opens up to the experience as it is, and creates a circular movement between the subject and object, or between subject and subject, if the experience is of another living being.

**Contribution to Discussion on Aspects of Theater**

In the focus on the experience, the complexity of spectatorship emerges, and new horizons of understanding come into focus and give new aspects of the theater to explore, or new ways of approaching current discussions.

The bodies, both on the stage and in the audience, are being brought back into the discussion. By differentiating the body as an object and a lived body with experiences, an important distinction is made in how we experience not only the performer as having qualities as both subject and object; as I argue, the same is true for the character in a fictional understanding. In the discussion on liveness and co-presence, the intersubjective relationship adds to the discussion on how we connect, share and are being affected in the experience of others at the event. The focus on the experience gives new insights into the
engagement as a spectator, in how affect and emotions are of importance, and how the body and mind interact in the experience, using previous experiences and impressions to understand the situation and the context.

The Broader Field – the Importance of Experience

Throughout this study, the importance of the cultural and societal context has been apparent. The experience of the bodies on stage, as well as the own body, is shaped by our being in the world, relating to norms, ideas, and ideals that are shaped in our contact with the world. The theater is not isolated from the world, as it is both affected by and affects through its being. As a spectator, one is temporarily a part of the audience and the theater, but simultaneously in the world. Therefore, there is a need to broaden the horizon, stepping out of the backyard of the theater and engaging with the world in a broader sense.

Contribution to a Broader Field

The embodied experience is the way we access the world; it is our being in the world. This is not only the case as a spectator, but in all our engagement with the world. As such, I see a potential for using my approach, focusing on the cognitive, embodied and relational aspects, in other fields as well, to broaden the understanding of the experience tied to a range of public events, such as visiting concerts and sporting events, political rallies and demonstrations – but also in relation to traveling and tourism, marketing and social media, or social situations in a classroom or a workplace. The strength is in the lived experience as the empirical material, which can be discussed from a range of perspectives directed at the specific object, with the recognition of the social situation’s importance through the experience of the intersubjective relationship.

Trends of our Times

In the years in which I have conducted this study, there have been several times when the contemporary debate in the media has curiously connected to my project and added to my conclusion of the attraction of the genres. The discussion deals with three aspects of my study; empathy, community, and liveness. I would argue that the ongoing debates are all concerned with living in the digital era and experiencing a sense of being lost.

When social relations move online, real-life interactions are reduced, and the sense of belonging risks being lost. In the harsh online climate, amplified by the fact that the other is being an absent other, present only on the other side of a screen, connection and empathy are restricted. Through increasingly
living life online, switching on the phone or having one’s most intimate relation with a computer, experiences of proper liveness are decreasing. As such, the life we live is the opposite of what is experienced at the circus, the burlesque, and the freak show. The revival of the genres happened as people’s lives grew more and more digital, and I would argue that the possibility to share images and ideas online was crucial for the revival and the re-entry in the collective mind. However, spending more time online in a digital world might also have triggered a need for real intense experiences. At the circus, the burlesque, and the freak show, the body on stage is alive; it is there in the flesh, with a possibility that anything can happen, creating meanings from thoughts, emotions, and relations, and ultimately creating experiences that are truly sensational.

Future Research

As my study and this conclusion might suggest, this research has been motivated by a perceived lack in the field of research. In a Swedish context, the field of popular theater and entertainment is quite unexplored, and it is a field that I argue needs more attention, both in relation to the cultural history of the genres and on the contemporary stage. The popular theater not only attracts large audiences and affects the way we understand our times and ourselves, but it also has a value in its own right as a cultural expression, and to paraphrase Dyer, as ‘just entertainment.’ Besides the genres in this study, I would like to see more research on the Swedish revue, both the larger revues of the 20th century that shaped the sense of humor by attracting large audiences with their live- and televised performances, as well as the local revue traditions that are still vivid around the country. Internationally, the musical genre gets quite a lot of attention, not only from crowds but also in research. This is another genre that has gotten little attention in Sweden. Moving closer to the classic theater, I would like to see more research on the Swedish ‘buskis,’ a comical theater with elements of farce that is played at outside theaters in the summer months. The term buskis itself has become a derogatory word synonymous with ‘lowbrow’ culture. Finally, stand-up comedy is an interesting field that moves from the stage, into mainstream radio and television, as well as streaming videos and podcasts, creating a new type of entertainment that breaks the boundaries between fiction and reality.

Another field where I see great potential is the spectator as the focus of research on theater and performances. I would argue that focus on the spectatorial experience offers a way to broaden the understanding of theater, approaching not only the understanding and interpretation in a semiotic sense,
but focusing on the meaning that is created in the experience and directing attention to affect and emotions that are at the core of theater, but which are often overlooked in analysis and discussions. I see promise in further developing the understanding of intersubjective aspects of being a spectator, acknowledging the importance of the co-presence essential for proper liveness.

Another interesting aspect of the theater is the interplay of reality and fiction, and I would argue that a phenomenological approach can broaden the understanding of this experience, taking the intentional quality into consideration. In the final stages of the work on this thesis, I came to consider spectatorship in itself as performative, and this is something that could be developed focusing on the embodied and enactive perspective of the spectatorial experiences.

Finally, I see an interesting potential in bringing spectatorial exploration outside the theater, focusing on sensational experiences of everyday life, turning the attention to sports, amusement parks, meditation, cooking, social dancing, and other aspects of life we find sensational.
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Ravishing Byrds  
Sandy Sure  
Titsalina Bumsquash  

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Space Cowboy  
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Summary

In this dissertation, I explore the spectator’s experience of bodies on stage in circus, burlesque, and freak show. This venture began from my experience of a sensational body juggling kettlebells on stage in the circus show Undermän in 2011. The impressive act struck a chord with me and I noticed that I was feeling the experience through my body, and simultaneously as thoughts and emotions of the mind. This intertwined embodied consciousness triggered questions about how the meaning is constructed in the experience, and why I enjoyed it so much.

I later came to read Linda Williams article ‘Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess’ (1991), where she labeled the cinematic genres melodrama, pornography, and horror as Body Genres, since they have the specific purpose of creating bodily reactions in the spectator. I saw similarities with the act I experience earlier and came to think of the theatrical genres of circus, burlesque, and freak show. These genres had been in a steady decline since their heydays in the early 20th century. At the end of the century however, the genres were revived and realigned for a new era and a new audience with other values and beliefs.

Central to all of these genres is the sensational body on stage, challenging the spectators’ idea of bodies. Another body that is inescapably a part of the experience is the spectator’s, whose body is sensational in the meaning of experiencing senses and emotions. Finally, the bodies in these acts are often presented in a way that arouses a quick and intense response, and as such sensational in yet a third meaning. It is in the intersection of these perspectives this book emerges.

The aim of this dissertation is thus to explore the attraction of these genres by focusing on the spectatorial experience of the bodies on stage. Guiding the exploration are the questions what experiential meaning is produced within the subjective spectatorial experience of the bodies on stage in circus, burlesque, and freak show, how do the experiential meanings appear to consciousness in the subjective experience, from a cognitive, embodied and relational approach, and how are the subjective experiences, and the meaning that emerges from the bodies, informed by the world outside the mind, as in the specific situation, and in a broader cultural context?
Since the study is conducted in the field of theater- and performance studies, I start with a brief framing of the study in relation to research on spectatorship and audiences. Although most scholars agree on the importance of the spectator, the approach still tends to focus on the performance rather than the spectator and her experience. In the study, I take the perspective of the spectator and start the discussion from the position in the audience.

Since the focus is on the experience the theoretical approach is from phenomenology where the first-person perspective is used to get to the experience itself. I approach phenomenology as based in the body, and all experiences must therefore be understood as experienced as a bodied being.

To engage in the affect and emotions of the experience, I turn to a phenomenological approach that suggests that emotions should not be considered internal, as ‘natural’ reactions and expression, but rather as emerging in contact with other objects. Another important aspect is that the affect and emotions are experienced through the body as they emerge, and are not to be understood as merely cognitive.

The method I engage in is a performance analysis, which I prefer to call an experience analysis, as the word performance seemingly favors the action of the performer rather than the experience of the audience. I have also chosen to focus on the experiential meaning, which I would argue is the phenomenological approach, rather than the interpretation and understanding that is tied to a semiotic approach. The experience analysis is then used in line with autoethnography, with which I engage in a critical study of my own culture. By using a method of performance analysis and autoethnography, the focus shifts from the performance to the experience of the performance.

I explore the experience by discussing it from three different approaches: a cognitive approach focusing on the experiential meaning created intellectually; an embodied approach focusing on how the experiential meaning appears in and through the body; and a relational approach focusing on the experience of intersubjective relations with other people present.

Circus

In the first chapter, on circus, I discuss experiences from three contemporary circus shows by the Swedish company Cirkus Cirkör. From a cognitive approach, the first discussion focuses on entertainment and how attention is kept by balancing novelty and familiarity in the acts, making them interesting but still accessible. Although entertainment relies on easy access, that does not mean that it avoids difficult subjects or does not intend to inform or challenge the minds of the audience. The second part focuses on political aspects of the
performances. The three shows *Borders, Limits, and Movements* deal with the ongoing humanitarian crisis in which refugees are trying to reach safety. In the spectatorial experience of the acts, there are moments with utopian potential giving hope and showing that another world is possible, but there are also potential problems, as representations can be seen as stereotypes.

From the approach of the embodied experience, the first discussion concerns *feeling motion* of the body on stage in the own body, as we as spectators have the ability to connect our experience to the body on stage through kinesthetic empathy. One aspect that always has been at the core of circus is the element of *risk*. For a spectator, the experience of risk can be both visceral and kinesthetic as it turns the attention to the body on stage. Depending on the dynamic of the act, the experience can be sensed as intense suspense, through sudden surprises, or of a rollercoaster of emotions and senses.

In the discussion of the relational approach, I suggest an experiential difference in engaging with the performer as *He* or *She* versus engaging with the performer as *You*. Departing from this, I discuss how our ability to empathize with others creates potential for the relation between spectator and performer to take on different modes of intersubjectivity and therefore be experienced as more or less connected, which affects the experience.

**Burlesque**

The second chapter explores the experience of contemporary burlesque in a number of acts experienced in Stockholm and Helsinki in the last five years. From a cognitive approach, I start with a discussion on how the popular can be reconfigured using an approach that starts from the experience rather than the genre as such. Our ideas of beauty, norms, and ideology are created through the constant circulation of images in popular culture. This ties into the next topic, *subversion*, and how beauty ideals and norms of sexuality are challenged by bodies that do not conform to narrow ideals. There are also bodies that fit comfortably in the norms and beauty ideals on the burlesque stage, however, and my discussion also deals with whether they can be considered subversive.

From an embodied approach, I then turn my attention to the experience of *laughter* and how it emerges as expectations and what is perceived as mismatch. The second theme of the embodied approach is the experience of *desire*, where the assumption of the male gaze is challenged, as are my own identity and desires.

In the final part of the chapter, I discuss the experience of being in the audience and the different modes in which the feeling of being together appears
from a relational approach, as I is experienced as We. In the shared feeling of being together, the potential for communitas and utopia emerges.

Freak Show
The third chapter focuses on contemporary experiences from freak shows in the USA. The first theme in the cognitive approach is the staging. The acts are presented in a way that stimulates the spectators’ curiosity. Aiming to create sensation, freak show has a long tradition of fooling the audience, as acts are staged to look more extraordinary and dangerous than they really are. The staging of freaks is also interesting in relation to the experience of fiction and reality, as the positions experienced become unclear when the body on stage belongs to both the performer and the character. As the sensational is a key element of the experience, the liveness of the acts becomes an essential quality. The risk of something unexpected happening is ever-present, and knowing that if we reach out, we can touch the people, heightens the experience.

From the embodied approach, the feeling of disgust is discussed as an embodied experience of something unwanted coming too close, causing an intense visceral response. Then follows a discussion of the uncanny, as an experience in which the uncertainty of the familiar and the strange creates an existential crisis.

For the last part of the chapter, from a relational approach, I discuss the experience of encountering They and how the experience of the ‘Other’ ultimately turns out to be more about the self.

In the conclusion, I tie the experiences and the meanings that are created to the attraction of these genres, as they in different ways create strong feelings that are essential to us in the audience. These experiences are not only fun and entertaining, but they also raise existential questions, spark our sense of being alive, and show the potential of community, empathy, and utopia.

The embodied experience and the way that meaning appears both as thoughts and emotions also suggests how the spectatorial experience is intricately intertwined with previous experiences, societal norms, and cultural images that are circulated through our culture.

As for the contribution to the field of research, the study brings attention to genres that have received little scholarly attention, as well as to the field of spectatorship, which has also been somewhat neglected in theater- and performance studies. The study shows the importance of the spectator’s experiences, and also suggests the potential of using the experience as an analytical tool to broaden the understanding of theater and performances.
Svensk sammanfattning

Med denna avhandling vill jag utforska åskådarens upplevelse av kroppar på scen inom cirkus, burlesque och freakshow. Detta äventyr tog sin början i min upplevelse av en sensationell kropp på scen i Cirkus Cirkörs föreställning Undermän där två stora kettlebells jonglerades. När jag såg numret så kände jag hur min kropp reagerade med kraftigare hjärtslag, att min haka sänktes lätt och att min uppmärksamhet riktades helt mot kroppen på scen. Samtidigt väckte kroppen på scen tankar om maskulinitet, skapade associationer till mina tidi-gare upplevelser av cirkus och fick mig att vilja vara som honom. Något hos kroppen på scen fångade mig fullständigt och gav mig välbehag. Denna komplexa upplevelse av parallella och sammanflätade känslor och tankar stannade kvar och väckte frågor om hur jag som publik upplever kroppar på scen, vilken mening som skapas i upplevelsen och vari attraktionskraften ligger?

Dessa frågor hängde kvar och när jag vid ett senare tillfälle kom att läsa filmforskaren Linda Williams artikel ’Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess’ (1991) i vilken hon beskriver tre filmgenres direkta syfte att påverka publikens kroppar, så kom jag att tänka på min egen kroppsliga upplevelse av detta nummer i cirkus. I Williams artikel beskriver hon genrenas melodram som ska skapa tårar, porrfilm som ska väcka upphetsning och skräckfilm som har som syfte att väcka rädsla. Cirkusen blev min utgångspunkt men när jag funderade kom jag också att tänka på två andra genrer sprungna ur samma tradition: burlesque och freakshow, som båda har sina sätt att fysiskt påverka sin publik. Dessa genrer hade alla sin storhetstid kring förra sekelskiftet, men när det moderna samhället växte fram och nya underhållningsformer etablerades, minskade efterfrågan och genrenas förvann nästan fullständigt, även om den traditionella cirkusen stretade på och gör så fortfarande. I den mån gen- rerna fanns kvar så var de marginaliserade och betraktades som kuriositeter från förr. Men under de sista årtiondena av 1900-talet så händer plötsligt något och dessa genrer återuppväcks och omformas för att passa en modern publik med andra värderingar och intressen. Först ut var cirkusen som från 1970-talet och framåt utvecklas till nycirkus, sen kom burlesque som i kölvattnet av ett feministiskt uppvaknande fick ett nytt fokus och började växa fram som neo-
burlesk från mitten av 1990-talet, och slutligen runt samma tid får freakshowen uppmärksamhet och under början av 2000-talet sprids freakshowen som idé då den förekommer som tema i en rad uppmärksammade tevesserier.

I alla dessa genrer är kroppen på scen i centrum, kroppen som på något sätt utmanar publikens förståelse av kroppar, och samtidigt har till syfte att väcka känslor i åskådarens kropp. Min avhandling fick tidigt namnet *Den sensationella kroppen*, där titeln spelar på den mångtydiga meningen av ordet sensationell, i betydelsen av det som väcker känslor, berör eller påverkar våra sin- nen, i betydelsen det som har som syfte att väcka uppsedende, och i betydelsen spektakulär. Det är ur denna förståelse av sensationell som avhandlingen växer fram.

Syftet med avhandlingen är att utforska den attraktionskraft dessa genrer har, hur kropparna på scen skapar mening för åskådaren, hur denna mening upplevs i medvetandet och hur upplevelsen påverkas av den situation och det sammanhang i vilken den upplevs.

Avhandlingen inleds med att knyta studien till det teatervetenskapliga fältet och specifikt forskning om publik och åskådande. Trots att de flesta teaterforskare är överens om att såväl skådespelare och publik är nödvändiga i teaterögonblicket, så har åskådarens upplevelse fått lite utrymme i forskningen, och i de fall då publiken studeras så hamnar ofta ändå fokus på det som händer på scenen snarare än det som upplevs av publiken. Med min studie tar jag åskådarens perspektiv och utgår i min diskussion från min upplevelse som åskådare.

Min studie utgår från ett fenomenologiskt perspektiv, där den subjektiva upplevelsen för medvetandet står i centrum. Ibland hörs kritik mot att fenomenologin är inåtvänd och inte vetenskaplig då den fokuserar på just subjektivitet, men det är viktigt att göra skillnad på att bedriva forskning på det subjektiva medvetandet, och att göra subjektiv forskning. Vad den fenomenologiska utgångspunkten har som sitt signum är att vår förståelse av omvärlden kommer genom vårt medvetande, och därför bör detta vara utgångspunkten i vår förståelse, och hänsyn tas för att minska den naivitet som följer med att ta saker för givet. Genom den subjektiva upplevelsen hamnar fokus på hur det upplevda objektet uppenbarar sig för medvetandet, och de strukturer som skapar denna upplevelse kan studeras.

I min fenomenologiska utgångspunkt ser jag också kroppen som central då vi inte kan uppleva något utanför vår kropp, och därför påverkar våra kroppar hur vi upplever medvetandet. Ett fenomenologiskt förkroppsligt perspektiv motsätter sig en uppdelning av kropp och sinne, och ser kroppen som en helhet. Däremot kan upplevelser ta sig olika uttryck vad gäller tankar och känslor men kroppen är alltid involverad i upplevelsen.
För att diskutera affekt, känslor och emotioner så använder jag en fenomenologisk utgångspunkt som argumenterar för att känslor inte ska ses som en ”naturlig” inre reaktion, utan att de snarare uppstår i kontakt med, och i relation till, det objekt som upplevs. Upplevelsen av affekt och känslor påverkas av våra tidigare erfarenheter som finns sparade i vårt minne, och genom nya upplevelser omformas den emotionella minnesbank som i sin tur påverkar framtida upplevelser. Vår förståelse och upplevelse av särskilda objekt är därför präglade av tidigare erfarenheter som knyter an till det specifika objektet.

Den metod som jag utgår från är en föreställningsanalyser där analysen tar utgångspunkt i upplevelsen av föreställningen, snarare än i föreställningen i sig. I mitt angreppssätt har jag valt att fokusera på upplevelsen och den mening som skapas genom upplevelsen från ett fenomenologiskt perspektiv, snarare än den tolkning och betydelse som vanligen är i fokus då utgångspunkten är ett semiotiskt perspektiv. Anledningen till detta val är att ett semiotiskt förhållningssätt förutsätter att en specifik betydelse är kopplad till objektet och därför riktar fokus mot skådespelet och scen, medan fokus på upplevelsen riktar fokus på åskådaren. Föreställningsanalysen kombinerar jag med ett autoetnografiskt perspektiv där jag gör en kritisk observation av den kultur jag själv är en del av.

För att analysera upplevelsen har jag utgått från tre olika fokus eller angreppssätt. Ett kognitivt fokus, där jag diskuterar övergripande teman och mening som skapas intellektuellt, ett förkroppsligat fokus, där mening i upplevelsen skapas i eller genom kroppen, och slutligen ett relationellt fokus, där upplevelsen av intersubjektiva relationer diskuteras. Dessa tre fokus är sen riktade mot var och en av genrenna.

där publiken förenas kring en förståelse om vad som saknas i världen, och hopp om att förändring är möjlig.

Utifrån ett förkroppsligat fokus diskuterar jag hur rörelsen i kroppen på scen kan skapa en känsla av *rörelse* i den egna kroppen som åskådare, genom vad som inom fenomenologin kallas kinestetisk empati där vi ”speglar” en annan persons kroppsliga upplevelse. Ett återkommande tema då cirkus beskrivs är förhållandet till *risk*. Som åskådare kan upplevelsen av artistens risk ta sig direkt kroppliga uttryck som en känsla av att det knyter sig i magen, eller att en håller andan. I denna diskussion använder jag mig av begreppen anspänning och chock för att diskutera hur kontakten mellan kroppar på scen och i publikens skapas.

Utifrån ett relationellt fokus diskuterar jag hur upplevelsen av den intersubjektiva relationen till personen på scen kan ta sig olika uttryck, och ha olika grad av kontakt vilket påverkar upplevelsen i sig. Med utgångspunkt i det fenomenologiska begreppet empati diskuterar jag upplevelser där Han, Hon eller *Hen* blir till en upplevelse av *Du*, vilket jag hävdar upplevelsemässigt har en annan fenomenologisk kvalitet.


Utifrån ett förkroppsligat fokus diskuterar jag sen *skratt* och hur komik används för att inte bara klä av kroppen utan också makten, och hur skratten ofta skapas när det uppstår ett glapp mellan vad som förväntas och upplevelsen i sig. Därefter riktar jag fokus mot min egen upplevelse av *begär* i ett burlesque-nummer där den manliga blicken utmanas och en ”*queer*” förståelse av kroppen på scen, såväl som min egen kropp, tar vid.

I den sista analysen av burlesque, med ett relationellt fokus, diskuteras upplevelsen av att vara en del av en publik, och hur känslan av att bli smittad av
andras känslor skiljer sig från upplevelser där Jag upplever ett Vi, och en känsla av gemenskap skapas.


Utifrån ett förkroppsligat perspektiv diskuteras den magstarka upplevelsen av äckel när något oönskat kommer för nära inpå, och hur känslan av äckel inte är odelat negativ. De nummer som analyseras kallas ”human blockhead” och innebär att olika objekt stoppas in i näsan. Därefter följer en upplevelse av ”uncanny”, vilket är ett begrepp som beskriver den kusliga känslan som uppstår när något familjärt och välkänt plötsligt blir märkligt och avvikande, och i den parallella upplevelsen av det familjära och det märkliga uppstår en kuslig obehagssänsla.

I den sista diskussionen från ett relationellt fokus står upplevelsen av ”den andre” i centrum, hur upplevelsen av att Jag möter Dem speglar jaget och egentligen handlar mer om mig själv än om den andre.

I min slutsats knyter jag tillbaka till syftet att utforska attraktionen och den mening som skapas i upplevelsen och slår fast att den affektiva upplevelsen är central för attraktionen. Upplevelsen av kropparna i dessa genrer kan däremot inte enkelt ses som bara känslospelkande och underhållande då en rad frågor om politik, normer och ideal, samhället, och om en själv väcks, och potential för upplevelser av utopi, gemenskap och empati uppenbarar sig.

Analyserna visar också på det intrikata sammanhang där tankar och känslor sammanlänkas och tar sin form i relation till den specifika situationen och den andre, och ifråga om en bredare samhällelig och kulturell kontext genom minnen och tidigare erfarenheter.

Studien bidrar till forskningsfältet genom att rikta fokus mot genrer som är understuderade i en svensk kontext. Den riktar också fokus på åskåderperspektiv som öppnar upp för en bredare förståelse för betydelsen av upplevelsen och affekt i teaterhändelsen. Den fenomenologiska utgångspunkten och angreppssättet visar potential som ett analytiskt verktyg för att närma sig upplevelsen både inom teaterforskning och annan forskning där upplevelsen står i centrum.