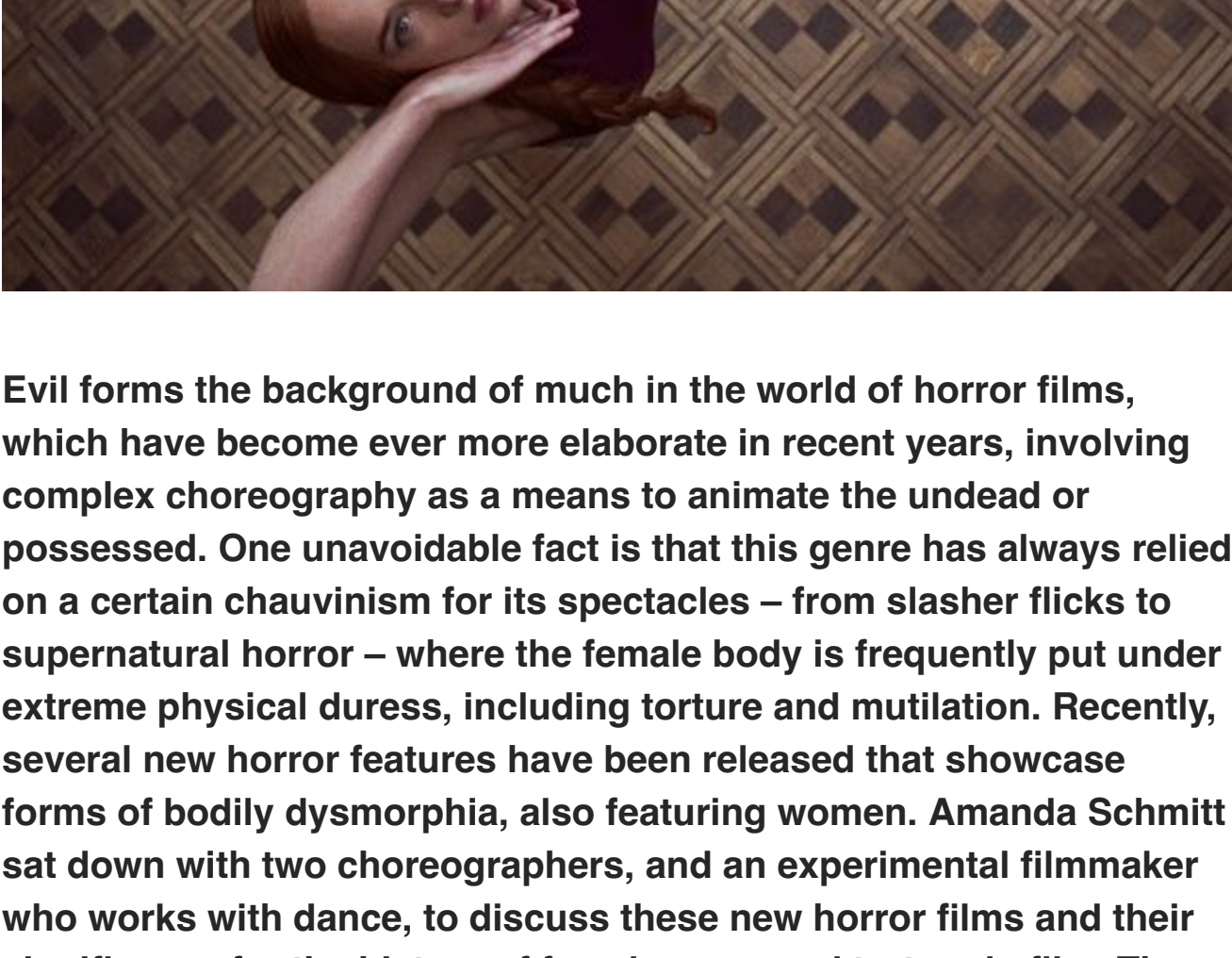


46 **SUPERNATÜRE – AMANDA SCHMITT IN CONVERSATION WITH LORETTA FAHRENHOLZ, MADELINE HOLLANDER, AND MONICA MIRABILE**



Evil forms the background of much in the world of horror films, which have become ever more elaborate in recent years, involving complex choreography as a means to animate the undead or possessed. One unavoidable fact is that this genre has always relied on a certain chauvinism for its spectacles – from slasher flicks to supernatural horror – where the female body is frequently put under extreme physical duress, including torture and mutilation. Recently, several new horror features have been released that showcase forms of bodily dysmorphia, also featuring women. Amanda Schmitt sat down with two choreographers, and an experimental filmmaker who works with dance, to discuss these new horror films and their significance for the history of female corporeal torture in film. The discussion provides a unique behind-the-scenes look at how gesture and movement become translated into intricate arrangements for the screen.

This roundtable brings together three artists – Loretta Fahrenholz, Madeline Hollander, and Monica Mirabile – to discuss two films that both debuted in the last year: Luca Guadagnino's remake of the cult classic *Suspiria* (originally inspired by the 1945 Thomas de Quincey essay and rewritten for release as a feature film directed by Dario Argento in 1977) and Jordan Peele's original Hollywood blockbuster *Us* (2019). The two films have something in common: their use of choreography as both a theme and technique to depict the (often female) body in states of despicable horror. Joining curator Amanda Schmitt in conversation, these artists occupy the triad of roles investigated throughout the discussion as film makers, choreographers, and dancers. Fahrenholz is a filmmaker and director of experimental films that have involved collaborations with dancers; Mirabile is a dancer and one half of the collaborative performance duo *Fluct*; and Hollander, a dancer and choreographer, was actually engaged on the crew of Peele's *Us*, hired as choreographer and movement director for the film.

AMANDA SCHMITT: The three of you have occupied the role of filmmaker (Loretta Fahrenholz), dancer and choreographer (Monica Mirabile), and in one case, that of an artist who was actually on set as choreographer and movement director of Peele's *Us* (Madeline Hollander). Let's talk about the emergence of a fashionable genre that uses radical body distortion, deformation, and disfigurement through symbolic means to demonstrate a collective post-millennial (and perhaps post-#MeToo) psychosis, employing extreme physical expression as a form of catharsis. In each of these films, the directors have engaged choreographers to work with their dancers/actors to develop a physical language of communication that interprets the psyche as a form split open through the medium of the female body. In all of these examples, you have terrifying images of women possessed from within, deformed by interior forces, capable of monstrous acts.

LORETTA FAHRENHOLZ: What struck me about these new films is how the body and movement of the body is replacing language and plot. Instead of the "good story," these films are driven by bodies carrying collective horror, conflict, and alienation within a very loose narrative structure, like a new era of silent film.

MADLINE HOLLANDER: Early on in *Us*, we witness a flashback where the protagonist of the film, Adelaide, suffers a traumatic experience as a child. Following this incident, the young girl ceases to speak, and her concerned parents take her to see a therapist, who encourages them to enroll the child in dance class as a tool to encourage an alternative mode of expression. What I'm interested in as a choreographer is not how dance can be a form of communication per se, but how all of our movements – the ways we walk, move, gesture, and perform (on a daily basis) – reflect all of those things that we don't or can't say; that which is repressed.

SCHMITT: In the film, a middle-class American family of four is violently and disturbingly confronted by another family of four, who resemble them in an uncanny and terrifying way; degraded, doppelgangers. Part of your job, Madeline, was to choreograph not only an iconic and shocking dance scene at the end of the film (set to Tchaikovsky's *pas de deux*, from the Nutcracker), but also to choreograph the physical movements of each character as they traverse through the film. What was your discussion like with Peele in creating the subtle horror of each character?

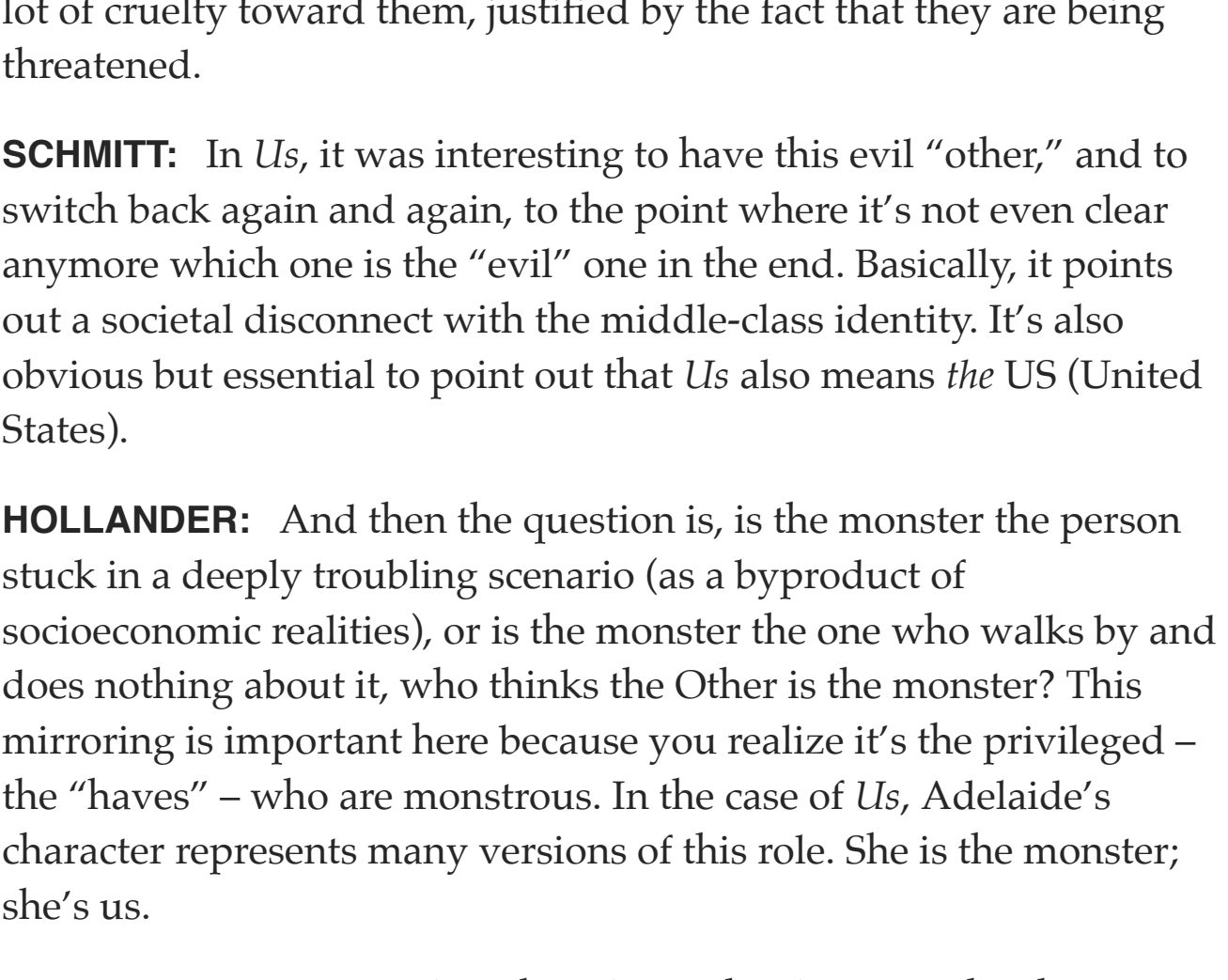
HOLLANDER: We spoke a lot about the uncanny, and what you can tweak in order to transform something from normal to horrifying. One technique that I focus on when choreographing is to zone in on each individual's nuanced and singular way of moving, and illuminate the unconscious. This becomes a choreographic mechanism: if I set a sequence in motion with a dancer (or any moving object), like a simple movement pattern or dance sequence, through repetition they will inevitably encounter this phase where it becomes "autopilot," and so then encounters a glitch. These glitches are unpredictable and entirely creative.

SCHMITT: This aspect of the technical is interesting to me, specifically when looking at recent trends and developments in contemporary dance, where skill doesn't necessarily lie in more traditional forms of grace or agility, but in technique, and in some cases, technique as it relates to digital technology, even. Loretta, in 2013 you released *Ditch Plains*, a film in which you collaborated with dancers and choreographers Corey Batts, Jay Dehn, and the Ringmasters Crew. In the docu-fictional film, you show Corey and the members of his all-male, all-black dance group (the Ringmasters Crew) as they drift through dreamlike dystopian landscapes throughout New York City. You identified these dancers specifically because of a style of dance they had developed (circa 2008–2010), called "bone breaking" or "flexing," where they violently contort and distort their bodies, but also carefully with a technique. What was your approach in working with Batts and his troupe and their choreographies in relation to your camera?

FAHRENHOLZ: Often ideas from sci-fi films like the *Matrix*, or specific characters like the Joker, are embodied in the dancers as alter egos. The routines are mostly developed while filming them, so they exist only in communication with a camera and the movements and effects of the lens. Glitches, distortion, or changes in speed are not added in post-production but translated into the body movements, as a very direct communication with technology. The way the Ringmasters explained it to me, some kind of energy is moving their body, it's basically the force that is creating the movement. It's not necessarily improvisation, but something more esoteric.

MONICA MIRABILE: As a choreographer working today, I am able to move and think mechanically in a way that choreographers from the 20th century couldn't. For example, when I am working in my studio – on my computer – I will often watch a recording of a dance and move my body (or the dancer's body) back and forth in the iMovie playback.

SCHMITT: We could, then, explore how a choreographer generates patterns and why, when a dancer is slightly "off" in following a pattern, it creates these glitches that in turn lead to the uncanny.



Luca Guadagnino, *"Suspiria"*, 2018, Filmstill / film still

HOLLANDER: I think there's a lot more to say about how the aesthetics of the uncanny have changed over the past ten years and with technology and social media. This ties directly to movement in regards to expectation and anticipation, and what happens when you see a dancer do something that throws you off, that you can't anticipate. For example, there is a scene in *Us* where you have the characters above ground at an amusement park, mirroring the behavior of the characters underground (who are tethered to their counterparts). In any case, the passengers who are above ground are on a roller coaster. Underground, the others are smashed together in a group, like in a sardine can. They're leaning back, and throwing their arms up, and mimicking the act of screaming, although they emit no noise. I was really just taking something from real life and then removing the main elements; that's what makes it so disturbing, because there is no synchronicity between action and reaction, cause and effect, behavior and sound, and so on.

SCHMITT: Perhaps this is also what is so shocking or affecting about the dancers in *Ditch Plains*: they are contorting their bodies in extreme ways that we can't quite figure out at first.

FAHRENHOLZ: A dance style like bone breaking, where your joints are dis- and relocated, means exposing the body to very literal pain and distortion.

SCHMITT: They're really pushing the limits of the body, in a way that seems beyond human. In many ways, dance is about pain. This shows up in *Suspiria* or in *Us* in the figure of the ballerina. Of course, these ballerinas are explicitly being tortured in these films, but a lot of training to be a ballerina or any sort of extreme athlete is about the ability to endure pain. The idea of pain as empowerment is of course related to power dynamics inherent to sadism and masochism, and in these films, the pain is often derived as a forceful reaction to oppression. The characters have been oppressed by some immaterial force that's been internalized. Thus, rather than an ideological struggle, what we experience are the contradictions of the subject in the form of torsion and distortion.

MIRABILE: Precisely! When physical history hides behind learned behavior there will always be an open seam, and often that seam busts open. The body always reacts. Our reactions to oppression become invisible with learned behavior, but there is always a root to the sickness and often it comes from the way someone was treated by another in the hierarchical power structure we all know, where the one on top rests on the powerlessness of the one at the bottom. The pain that gives strength to move forward also becomes a power to strike back at the thing that injured it.

SCHMITT: The oppression depicted in these films is indeed wider than a gender boundary: often this is a socioeconomic form, and even. Because of the direct relationship to the class, when the de- overlaying motif throughout *Us*, which is the sardonic reference to the Reagan-era publicity stunt "Hands Across America," which was a nationwide fundraiser with the alleged goal of combating hunger and homelessness in America. In *Us*, each of the main protagonists who are living the "middle-class" lifestyle (the nuclear family vacationing in Santa Cruz, for example) has a shadow character, their "tethered" other selves, as you've referred to them.

HOLLANDER: These "ethered" characters inhabit the "underworld" in the narrative, and they are staging an uprising against their oppressors or, more generally, against the system that is keeping them tethered.

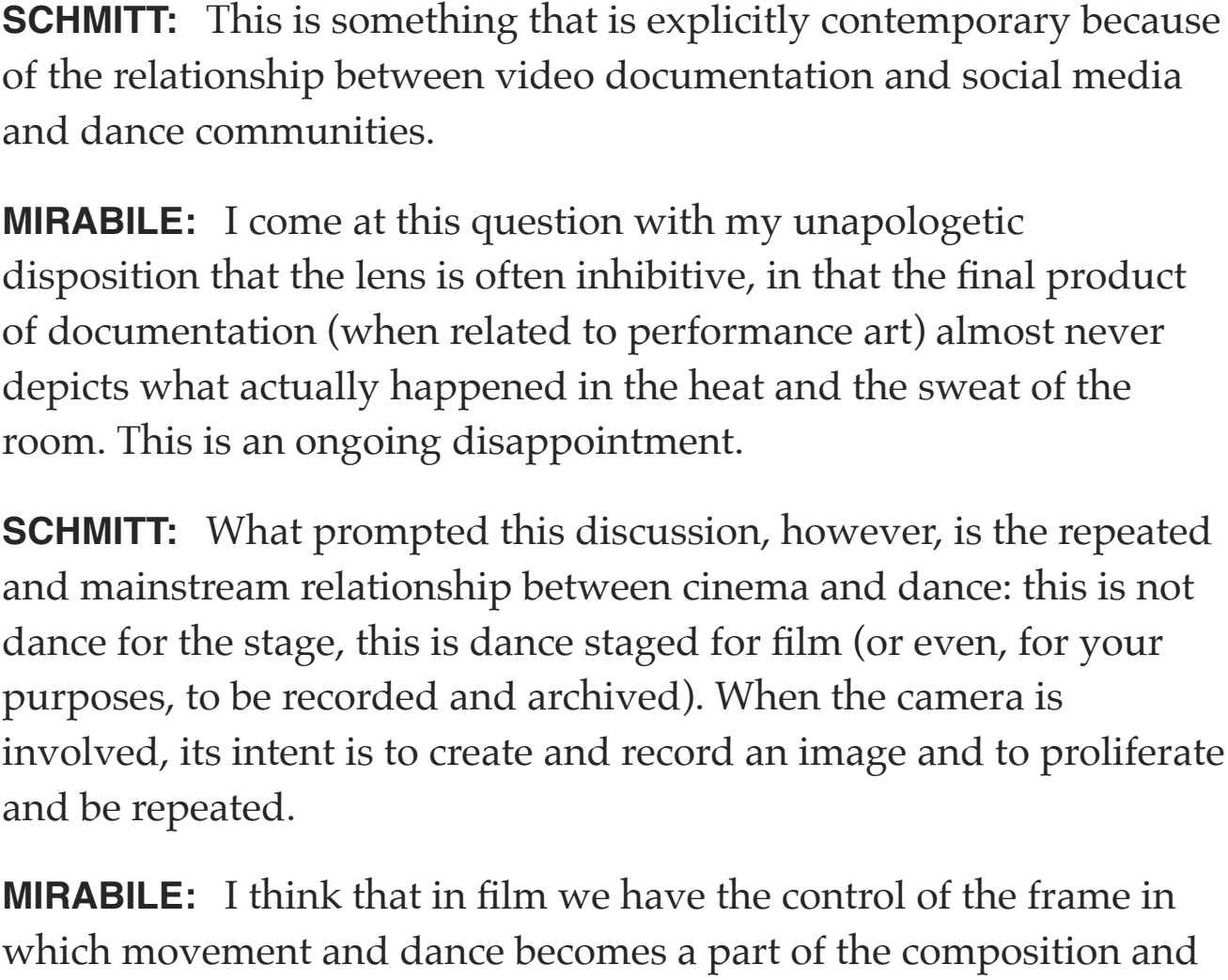
FAHRENHOLZ: This was something that really struck me with the film. The middle class is in this unstable state of mind where they feel targeted by their lower-class avatars but simultaneously direct a lot of cruelty toward them, justified by the fact that they are being threatened.

SCHMITT: In *Us*, it was interesting to have this evil "other," and to switch back again and again, to the point where it's not even clear anymore which one is the "evil" one in the end. Basically, it points out a societal disconnect with the middle-class identity. It's also obvious but essential to point out that *Us* also means the US (United States).

HOLLANDER: And then the question is, is the monster the person stuck in a deeply troubling scenario (as a byproduct of socioeconomic realities), or is the monster the one who walks by and does nothing about it, who thinks the Other is the monster? This mirroring is important here because you realize it's the privileged – the "haves" – who are monstrous. In the case of *Us*, Adelaide's character represents many versions of this role. She is the monster; she's us.

SCHMITT: We've described the relationship between the characters in *Us* as a "tethering." That there are two sides that are inextricably linked. This is portrayed very clearly in one of the final scenes of the film that you [Madeline] choreographed, during a scene where one character's grand performance as a ballerina on stage is directly connected to another's performance underneath it. This tethering is also paralleled in *Suspiria*, during the most unforgettable scene in the film, where the protagonist Susie is implored to perform an intensely physical improvisational dance which is somehow linked to another character, Olga, locked in a room below. As Susie jumps, twists, juts, and kicks, Olga's body – which almost seems to be tied to Susie's limbs – is smashed against the walls, and painfully, slowly, torn apart. Both characters in both films are reduced to a pulp. We have seen levels of visual aggression toward the female body in recent years that seem unprecedented.

HOLLANDER: The most horrifying aspect of this scene is the girl's loss of agency. It was choreographed and directed in order to portray the idea that her other self, above ground, was in control and responsible for dragging and smashing her around like a puppet. When I was working with the actors to choreograph the sequences, I wasn't so much developing new forms of movement for them to learn, but working with what was already natural to each actor, in order to evoke the nature of their characters. To start with, I'd instruct them: just walk normally, ten paces forward and backward. Then I would see what sort of movement they naturally demonstrated, and I would turn up the volume on their predispositions. It was like adding an extreme saturation enhancement filter on all of the characters, rather than me developing new things.



Jordan Peele, *"Us"*, 2019, Filmstill / filmstill

FAHRENHOLZ: I really like the idea of dance as a grading filter. **SCHMITT:** So you're working with what's already there? **Unfettering** the awkward movements we may unconsciously suppress, in order to appear normal or uniform, to detract attention? **HOLLANDER:** The directors are working with the choreographers to develop the signifiers that demonstrate when a character surpasses the threshold of normalcy, using the body to show when they've hit that edge. It goes back to social norms and social architecture as well.

MIRABILE: Agreed. In my work, I often have a motive to say something about social order as we know it. I'll also take from average social interactions and exaggerate those movements to further employ this motive, attempting to push it forward into consciousness.

HOLLANDER: For the supposedly horrific characters that portray the "others" (in *Us*), I worked with the actors to ensure that their innate tendencies are not dampened; it's almost like there's no mirror. So there's no feedback, there's no criticism, there's no judgment.

SCHMITT: So in this case, the choreographies are evoking a feeling driven by some internal force, rather than attempting to achieve an externally defined aesthetic ideal. This is in fact part of what *Ausdrucks Tanz* arose from in the early decades of the 20th century. *Suspiria* actually alludes to this era: Tilda Swinton's character is based on the figure of Mary Wigman, the pioneering modernist choreographer whose work was notorious for being ugly and distorted, who placed expressiveness above prettiness. In fact she was once criticized for her "imbecilic dislocation of the joints" in her pieces.

MIRABILE: Expressionism as a phenomenon in dance may be more well known in the West. I'm inspired by the practice of Butoh, a technique or anti-technique that appears post-WWII in Japan. Originally, it was a response by the two key founders, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In Butoh, the movements appear grotesque. Some people refer to it as "the dance of darkness." The idea is to move from the inside, and this often the darkest place. The practice celebrates the externalized attempt to deal with internal forces. And I think it's some of the most beautiful dance I've been able to sit with.

SCHMITT: We've discussed the idea of the "possession" or the horror coming from within, but what about those external forces?

HOLLANDER: I think one of the more fascinating things about possession is that it can take so many different forms. Ballet is a sport that is so impossible in so many ways (for a human body to achieve), it almost seems like the music, in this case Tchaikovsky, is getting pushed out through the body into another form.

SCHMITT: Like a transmutation of medium?

HOLLANDER: Well, it doesn't have to be the music. It could be a type of energy. It could be another person on stage, or the lighting, or the legacy of the role you're inhabiting.

MIRABILE: When I dance, I definitely feel like a transformed version of myself; physically, what I think is happening is that I'm releasing a stress hormone, likely adrenaline. The oldest part of our body is the stem of the brain. When we experience trauma, the brain stem reacts first, releasing stress hormones before the prefrontal cortex has a chance to understand what that something is. These stress hormones supposedly help you perform, effectively giving you super powers like strength and speed to escape the impending danger against your body or mind. It's a physiological response not determined by cognition.

In relation to possession, and sacrifice, I am romantic in my convictions about the body being the vehicle of what it means to be alive and not just existing. I'd like to imagine that ultimately I'm sacrificing some learned behavior that doesn't serve me anymore for something more poetic and peripheral.

SCHMITT: Loretta, let me ask you about docufiction in your work more specifically. What can be jarring about docufiction is that it takes real people and real places, depicting them in real time, but presents its elements as fiction. It's almost like the spectacularization of another's truth, another's existence, depicted through the power of one's own lens.

Loretta Fahrenholz, *"Ditch Plains"*, 2013, Filmstill / film still

FAHRENHOLZ: To me, filmmaking, at least in a post-cinematic sense, is about dealing with reality in a way where you're not erasing conflict before you even start shooting. I think the friction needs to be in the film, not in a predetermined message or position. In the case of *Ditch Plains*, ideas and choreographies were made up on the fly. To let things unfold like that in front of and behind the camera is an approach that can lead to unpredictable, complicated outcomes, but I don't see that as something negative. That's also why I encourage the dancers to employ the direct gaze into the camera, because it's also very much about confronting your image. It becomes about movements and reactions, generating a feedback loop. Because of the cyclical relationship to the camera, the dancers' movements become more about a type of mechanistic, technical expression, rather than about emotional self-expression (something more typically aligned with the idea of modernist dance).

SCHMITT: This is something that is explicitly contemporary because of the relationship between video documentation and social media and dance communities.

MIRABILE: I come at this question with my unapologetic disposition that the lens is often inhibitive, in that the final product of documentation (when related to performance art) almost never depicts what actually happened in the heat and the sweat of the room. This is an ongoing disappointment.

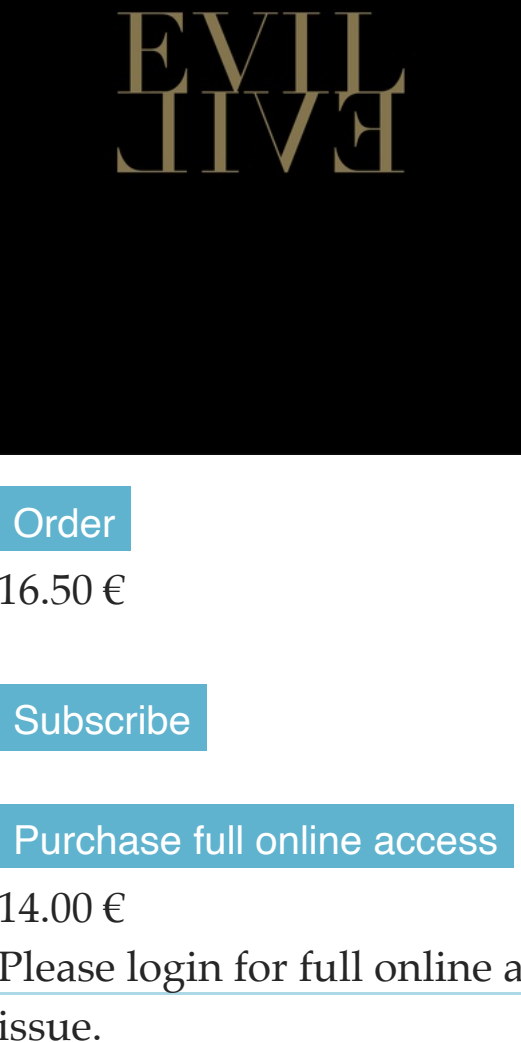
SCHMITT: What prompted this discussion, however, is the repeated and mainstream relationship between cinema and dance: this is not dance for the stage, this is dance staged for film (or even, for your purposes, to be recorded and archived). When the camera is involved, its intent is to create and record an image and to proliferate and be repeated.

MIRABILE: I think that in film we have the control of the frame in which movement and dance becomes a part of the composition and inevitably adds to rather than subtracts from meaningfulness. The frame has a motive to capture the psychology of the body in a given context. Often, when I make performance that is being filmed, I ask the performers to look at the camera as a face they are responding to. Facial expression is a big part of my practice. I want to elicit a response from the other's side.

SCHMITT: This is interesting, as I know in Madeline's case, she'll often inhibit or even restrict the focus on facial expression.

MIRABILE: Looking someone in the eye is impactful. I think it has something to do with being seen and being heard, seeing and hearing someone else. It feels less aggressive in theory than it is in practice. This may be because we have learned to ignore the remarks. To make a statement by looking back is a political act or statement because it says "I'm worthy" or "I'm here," "I'm alive." It's perhaps poetically idealistic and at the same time a thrill, but it's still dangerous in real life. In film, or organized performance art, it's safer. I'd like to believe we have arrived at a different place today, but I'm not sure.

Title Image: Luca Guadagnino, *"Suspiria"*, 2018, film still



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