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Dancing to Death: Ballet as Cathartic Coping Mechanism in Ukraine's 2022/23 Defensive War against Russia

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Abstract

Beyond ritualistic preparations for combat made by tribal societies and brief diversions when troops are rotated away from frontlines, war and dance would seem to have little in common—yet from the fifteenth century we may trace a profound connection between martial conflict and formalised embodied movement. While the Black Death (or bubonic plague) of 1346 to 1353 inspired various cultural works in which death, personified, leads mortals of all walks of life in an ultimate dance towards the grave, arguably the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) did as much—if not more—to stimulate sustained, morbid reflection on the matter of mortality. With the *Danse Macabre* of 1424-25 that once featured on a charnel-house wall at Paris's Cemetery of the Holy Innocents and woodcut impressions based on this work taken as *points de dèpart*, we trace manifestations of dance as a response to (impending) death from the medieval era, through the legend of Zalongo (1803) in which women—fearing rape and enslavement by the pursing Ottomites—danced to a clifftop from which they threw themselves and their children, to the bacchanalian debauchery of the *Führerbunker i*n late April 1945, and, finally, to dance in the context of the present-day Russian-prosecuted war against Ukraine. With the latter our focus, our aims are to show how war and dance are inseparable and to argue that, through dance, war's horrors are represented, confronted, and profoundly resisted. More particularly, through historical enquiry, semiotic analysis, the application of the principles of dance psychology, and primary research in the form of in-depth purposive interviews with two Ukranian dancers (and a personal reflection by one of the authors), we argue that, through dance, a cathartic state is achieved whereby death's morbid grip on the imagination is profoundly loosened.

Introduction

Beyond ritualistic preparations for combat made by tribal societies and brief diversions when troops are rotated away from frontlines, war and dance would seem to have little in common—yet from the fifteenth century we might trace a profound connection between martial conflict and formalised embodied movement. With the *Danse Macabre* of 1424-25 that once featured on a charnel-house wall at Paris's Cemetery of the Holy Innocents and woodcut impressions based on this work taken as *points de dèpart*, we trace manifestations of dance as a response to death (and impending death) from the medieval era, through the legend of Zalongo (1803) in which women—fearing rape and enslavement by the pursing Ottomites—danced to a clifftop from which they threw themselves and their children, to the bacchanalian debauchery of the *Führerbunker i*n late April 1945, and, finally, to dance in the context of the present-day Russian-prosecuted war against Ukraine. With the latter our focus, we aim to show how war and dance are inseparable and to argue that, through dance, war's horrors are represented, confronted, and profoundly resisted.

Methodology

Through historical enquiry, semiotic analysis, the application of the principles of dance psychology, and primary research in the form of in-depth purposive interviews with two Ukranian dancers (and a personal reflection by one of the authors), we argue that, through dance, a cathartic state is achieved whereby death's morbid grip on the imagination is profoundly loosened. As Argyres *et. al*. (2019) argue, 'historical analysis can be useful…for investigating how the context of contemporary phenomena developed… (p.344).' In the case of the present paper, we interrogate both primary and secondary sources 'to provide a contextualised explanation and interpretation of the phenomenon of interest (*op. cit.*)': i.e., dance in the context of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. While true that attempts to 'systematically [compare and] contrast cases that are situated very far from each other in historical time…raises the question about the

extent to which the historical data can be [reliably] used (Möller, 2016, p.652)', our aggregation of observations apropos dance in the context of historical conflicts is buttressed by both semiotic and psychological analyses—as well as by primary research in the form of in-depth purposive interviews and a personal reflection by one of the authors. In this way, we achieve a 'thick' conceptual composition—i.e., one that features multiple dimensions or attributes—as opposed to a thin composition based on a set of weaker likenesses (*op. cit*., p.655). We thus mitigate the risk of drawing false or strained analogies.

Argument

1. The *Danse Macabre* of the Holy Innocents

Sadly fitting to this time of European conflict, we begin our inquiry not (strictly) with a dance but with reference to a fifteenth century fresco: the *Danse Macabre* that once adorned a wall at the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris. As Seeta Chaganti (2012) has argued, static representations of the *danse*—such as those to be found in media including manuscripts, sculpture, stained glass, cloth, and frescos—not only betray a profound sense of kinesis but, in some settings, were accompanied by physical performance (p.7). As such, this fresco, vividly recalled and 'translated' by John Lygate in his poem of the same name and more or less faithfully replicated in woodcut prints that surfaced some sixty years after the mural was completed, serves as a useful *point de depart* for a consideration of dance in the context of war and a sense of omnipresent (and even imminent) death.

Rendered in 1424-25 and viewed in its then bright splendour by Lydgate in 1426, the fresco is now lost—sacrificed to a seventeenth century initiative to widen the streets (Chaganti, 2012, p. 17). The following, rather dramatic, image of the charnel-house nonetheless captures some limited sense of the work:

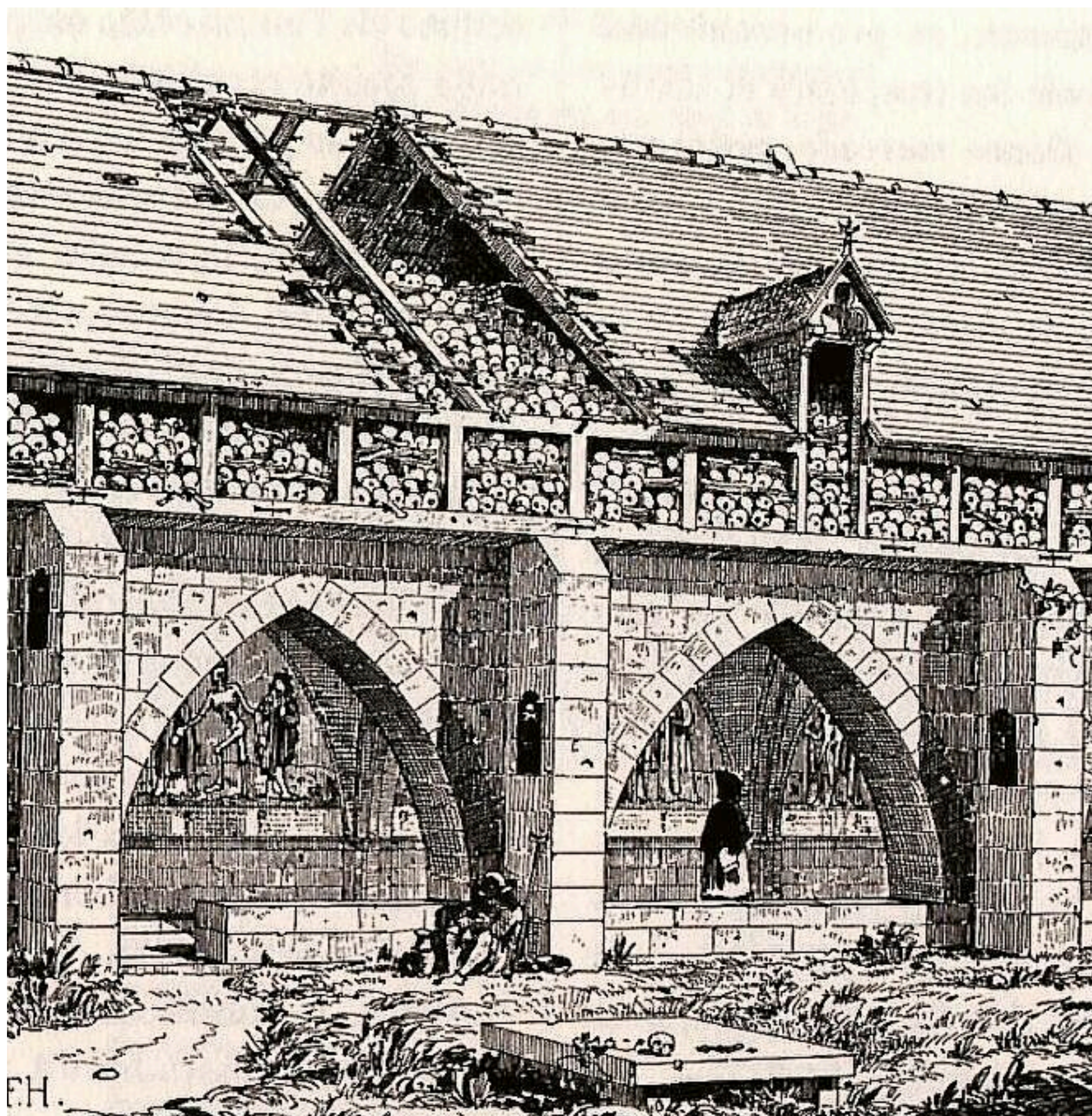


Fig. 1. Cloisters of the Church des Innocents. Source: Walton, 1906, p.143 —artist 'FH' unknown.

This second image puts the charnel-house (to be seen to the left of the church) in broader context:

Fig. 2. Cemetery of the Holy Innocents, c.1550. Source: Theodor Josef Hubert Hoffbauer 1839-1922, undated watercolour, public domain. http://4verbos.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Saints_Innocents_1550_Hoffbauer.jpg

In 1780, shortly after the weight of too many recently-buried bodies saw human remains, in various states of putrefaction, collapse into the basement of an adjacent property on the Rue de la Lingerie, a decision was made to close the overcrowded cemetery, move older bones to what are now known as the catacombs (quite a task, since the original cemetery housed the remains of up to two million Parisians), melt down for soap the fat of those corpses that had refused to fully decompose, and demolish the cemetery. This final task commenced in 1786 with the site finally cleared of all but the Fountain of Innocents in the early eighteenth century.

In *The Monumental News* of 02 February 1906, William Walton writes that 'The ancient church and cemetery of the Saints Innocents of Paris was one of the most celebrated monuments of the mediaeval city (p.142).' and so many would have seen there the earliest visual representation of the *danse macabre* genre. Emphasising that humanity is

joined in a common fate, the fresco that adorned the charnel-house's vaulted gallery depicted sovereigns, noblemen, church office-bearers, and simple farmers following the dead to the grave. According to Chaganti (2012, p. 8), the work featured 'gesticulating skeletons…leading a representative of each social estate…in a choreographed procession.' The visual catechism—according to Walton, fifteen of the arcades of the Charnier of the Innocents were decorated with this *danse macabre* (1906, p.142)—must have been very arresting, especially because many contemporaries would have imagined themselves one day arriving on a wagon at the cemetery's gates. Adding to the then prevailing sense of drama would have been the visibility of skulls in the upper cloisters (see Fig. 1, above) and the display, on All Saints' Day, of a small but grim alabaster sculpture: a piece representing the figure Death as a decaying corpse. See below:

Mort Saint Innocent, c. 1530. Sculptor unknown. Louvre, Paris.

Now preserved in the *Louvre*, in the semi-skeletal figure's boney left hand is grasped a shield bearing the following inscription: 'There is none living, however artful or strong to resist, that I do not strike with my dart, to give worms their share'. Missing from the figure's raised left hand is, of course, the dart of Death itself. But these were not the only stimulants to morbid imagination. Visitors to the cemetery on 11 October 1442 would

have witnessed the grim theatre of the Bishop of Paris walling up a willing recluse named Jeanne la Vallière in a cell barely large enough to accommodate a standing person. Here, according to Walton, the woman remained for some years, receiving air and food through a small grating. Following her death, she was replaced with another compliant female resident whilst, eventually, a wildly protesting woman (accused of killing her husband) was so incarcerated (*op. cit*).

There were, then, no real limits to the horrors of the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents. Despite this, however, it became 'the favourite place of resort for the inhabitants, for dances and festivals, and, at night, for debauchery and prostitution (op. cit.)'. Whilst only extreme lust or avarice (or both) might account for charnel-house couplings, of interest to us is that real-life dances were performed against this phantasmagorical backdrop and against a broader setting dominated by (recent) pestilence and still raging war. Along with other activities, dancing, it seemed, was an antidote to a pervasive feeling that death was just around the corner—and so, even in the face of catechism in the most forbidding of places, the *carpe diem* tradition would appear to have been alive and well.

Of course, dance was an activity to which prelates pointed as an example of the kind of excess that might draw one to everlasting anguish. Binski (1996, p.56), for example, observes that 'a thirteenth-century council at Rouen forbade dancing in churchyards', yet we know that the activity was not uncommon within the spectral walls of Saints Innocents. Perhaps it was the super-abundance of death visible there that encouraged these living, ritualistic, and formalised responses? At the very least we might argue that the Saints Innocents death-dancers—both representations and actual—point to the notion of bodily community in the face of mankind's universal fate. We might further argue that this dancing serves as a last hurrah to life and, therefore, as a repudiation to death's grip on the imagination.

Further to the matter of the death-dance on the wall of the *charnier de Lingèries,* while scholars are of course unable to refer to the original images, as Sophie Oosterwijk (2009, p.64) observes, they may instead take satisfaction in a set of woodcut impressions first

published by Guy Marchant in 1485. With the exception of some details pertaining to costume, these, Oosterwijk notes, are thought to be fairly reliable representations of the frescoes that had appeared sixty years prior. What makes these woodcuts otherwise remarkable is the careful framing and foregrounding of the figures, the clear sense of tension between vertical and horizontal planes—where the former is the vector of the living and the latter the vector of the dead, a palpable sense of anxiety conveyed by the bodily attitudes and facial expressions of the living as they are drawn into the dance by the dead, and the extraordinary sense of kinetic energy conveyed through what is a less-than-yielding medium.

Le cardinal + le roy

(Source: Oosterwijk, 2009, Appendix 1)

For example, exquisitely framed by pillars and arches echoing the architecture of the *charnier de Lingèries*, in the woodcut 'Le cardinal + le roy', above, a dart-bearing corpse tugs on a cardinal's cloak, drawing the reluctant figure (the semiosis of his leaning back and looking away is clear) into a dance towards the grave whilst a second corpse—to whom much flesh still adheres—prods the prelate along whilst smiling, grimly, at a king who looks only somewhat less discombobulated than his religious counterpart. In this

instance, in addition to grinning grotesquely, the skeletal figure has his left leg lifted in a jig-like move whilst the king, per the cardinal to his left, seems to recoil whilst adopting what appears to be a saddened expression. Importantly, the two living figures are connected via the two dead, although the unknown artist was not, of course, able to join all participants per the original fresco: that is, the panels of the woodcuts are separate, breaking the uninterrupted chain of the living and the deceased as they almost certainly appeared in the primary work.

In the panel entitled 'Le medicin + lamoreau', below, we find a similar representation of the death dance. Here, and framed as above, the doctor and the lover are likewise drawn into the procession by rotting corpses redolent of those routinely revealed in the cemetery grounds following heavy rains. On the left, and clutching what appears to be a grave-digger's shovel, a shrouded and decomposing corpse leads on a doctor who, somewhat defiantly, holds up a bottle (presumably, but naively, he may hope this to be an antidote to death) whilst the dancing corpse to his right places its bony hand on the same doctor's cape whilst looking back at a lover who raises his hands in a gesture of rejection. The same corpse grasps the lover's cloak and, with its bony left leg raised, enjoins the lover, anyway, to participate in the bleak jig:

Le medecin + lamoreux

(Source: Oosterwijk, 2009, Appendix 1)

The final woodcut we consider, below, features a parish priest and a labourer being drawn to their common fate by their deathly counterparts.

Le cure + le laboureur

(Source: Oosterwijk, 2009, Appendix 1)

Once again, the tension between horizontal and vertical planes is clear with fluid activity along the former appearing to undermine the sense of solidity and permanence suggested by the latter. In this way, the artist reinforces a primordial binary opposition: the desire for immortality and the certainty of death. To the left, a grinning grim reaper nonchalantly rests his scythe on the ground whilst grasping the clerical collar of his recoiling and apparently terrified subject. More or less central to the image, and therefore given salience, is a draped and rotting corpse that joins the priest (towards whom the deathly figure glances in grinning delight) with a not-so-shaken labourer. Indeed, the contrast between the two living figures could not be more pronounced: the priest, fearful and resistant; the labourer, impassive and accepting. The message here seems plain: the ordinary person—far less insulated from the prospect of death than is the case for elites—is better prepared for the end and so meets it with a resigned equanimity.

Because the labourer's passivity is unique in this series of woodcuts—his figure upsets established contiguities along what Saussure (1916/1959) originally identified as the syntagmatic plane of signification—we may see the labourer's lack of response as a sign

of a new sensibility in the face of death. While hardly enthusiastic about joining the animated dead in their dance to the grave, the labourer, at least, does not resist, and so appears to occupy a transitional, liminal space in which death is neither shunned nor embraced—an aesthetic that finds far more regular expression in later manifestations of the *danse macabre*, including the Italian fresco *Oratorio Dei Principi*. Attributed to Giacomo Borlone (1485), a fragment showing a procession of more or less resigned figures led by cheerful skeletons appears below.

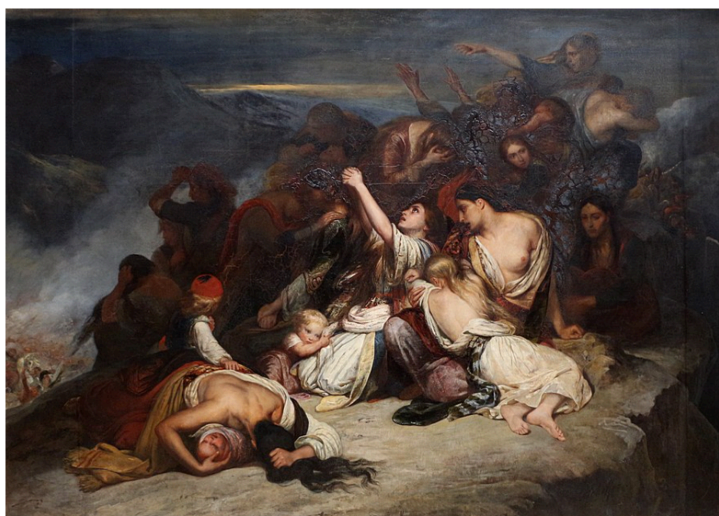
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/
File:Clusone,_Oratorio_dei_Disciplini_01.JPG

By way of summary at this juncture, taken as a whole, the woodcuts—there are seventeen in total—exhibit a category of binary opposition identified by Robert Cantor (2016) as an 'opponency' achieved by the 'subjective connotation of contrast', the 'spatial connotation of contiguity', and the 'situational connotation of reaction (p.218).' With respect to the impressions discussed above—and in the balance of the seventeen woodcuts, save the first and last—all three characteristics amplify a play of opposites. Whilst leveraging Peirce's ideas on categorical relations (i.e., similarity, contiguity, and convention, custom or habit), Cantor identifies two further categories of binary relations: similarity and conventionality. For now, the above consideration of the *Danse Macabre* as it once likely appeared on the walls of the *charnier de Lingèries* has served to establish a history of dancing in the face of death (at a time of war) that runs back to the fifteenth century. It has also explored an emergent *danse macabre* tradition in terms of a 'vivid shudder' that gave a 'spectral and fantastic shape' to a primordial–and, at the time, omnipresent—fear of death (Perry, 2015, pp.326-327). Roland Barthes (1964/1977) might have identified this as a radically new (defamiliarised) code in what he might have

called 'the death system'—the chief sign of which is dancing in the most traumatic of circumstances.

2. The Dance of Zalongo

While the One Hundred Years War had raged, off and on, over the course of some ninety years prior to the completion the original *Danse Macabre* fresco at *Saints Innocents* and for some thirty years after, we now leap forward to another death dance that took place in the context of an entirely different conflict: that is, to the so-called Dance of Zalongo (16 December 1803) in which—rather than being captured, raped, and enslaved by pursuing Ottomites—women from the municipality of Souli in modern day northern Greece danced to a cliff edge in the mountains of Zalongo from which they threw themselves and their progeny. Interpreted, in numerous reenactments and representations, as an affirmation of the female will, David Roessel (2001) notes that word of the tragedy spread throughout Europe. At the Paris Salon of 1827, for instance, French artist Ary Sheffer exhibited *Les Femmes souliotes* ("The Souliot Women"):



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Les_Femmes_souliotes_%28Louvre_INV_7857%29

But in modern day Greece, too, school children from the area are taught the tale. Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (2004, p. 35) recounts the words of a woman who, then in her thirties, remembered performing the Dance of Zalongo:

> We used to dance the "Dance of Zalongo " after the history class or during the days preceding the celebrations for the War of Independence. We used to hold each other by the hand, singing the well-known song about the women of Souli (tragoudontas stin stairia den zei to psari). Then, each girl was jumping off the three steps separating the classroom from the schoolyard, pretending that she has fallen from the cliff of Souli and making a dramatic sound: aaaaaaaaa!

Similarly, in their essay *Imagined Boundaries and Borders: A Gendered Gaze* (2002), Nira Yuval-Davis and Marcel Stoetzler cite a contributor who remembers performing the Dance of Zalongo 'dressed as a 19th-century peasant woman, in the school theatre during one of our many national celebrations (p. 337).' Apart from a nationalistic significance (as noted by the interviewee cited by Theodossopoulos, the event is reenacted in the context of the Greek War of Independence), the above representations of the Soulouite death-dance celebrate the courage and agency of women in the face of degradation and death. The original dance also seems to have served as a way to abolish, or at least mute, the fear of the imminent death-plunge. We shortly develop this argument with reference to the terminal writhings of Nazi elites prior to the fall of the Third Reich and—following this—in the context of Ukrainian dancers' responses to the present day Russian-prosecuted war on their homeland. For the present, and by way of an intermission before we get to the horrors of the *Führerbunker*, we leave readers with the following image of George Zongolopoulos' 1961 Monument of Zalongo:

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zaloggo,Greece.jpg

3. Twisting in the *Führerbunker*

Having returned to Berlin on 15 January as the Russians slowly but surely closed in, a hunched-over Hitler who had danced so jauntily on the terrace of the Berghof—an event filmed some years earlier (see image, below)—dragged his left leg behind him and grasped his left hand with his right to conceal the trembling of the former limb (Beevor, 2002, p.58). No longer capable of joining in festivities, Hitler nonetheless appreciated the performance of others—especially his soon-to-be wife. On the 6th February, with the Russians having crossed the Oder exactly a week earlier, Eva Braun celebrated her birthday at the home of Hermann Fegelein. While the Nazi leadership was already contemplating methods of suicide (Beevor, 2002, p.75), the Führer was in an uncharacteristically 'radiant mood' (*op. cit*., p.75) and watched Eva dance with others. On 8th February she held a small farewell party for Hitler and departed with her sister for Berchtesgaden in Bavaria. She would, however, return to the *Führerbunker* on 7th March to marry Hitler and join him in his fate—the leadup to which was characterised by a marauding sense of fear mixed with despair.

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eypJfOKeSJU (still @ 0:48)

While ordinary Berliners—and especially women—trembled at what the Russians might do to them (rumours of gang rape, for example, had been filtering through from the front), by day the SS went on a murderous rampage—liquidatiing political prisoners held in concentration camps. By night, as if to mask the horrors and to perhaps hold at bay the sense that a terrible revenge was imminent, officers partied. Beevor (2002, p.182) records what a clerk saw through a window of his headquarters: 'I thought I was dreaming… Glittering dress uniforms swirled around with tarted-up women, music, noise, laughter, shrieking, cigarette smoke and clinking classes.' Dance and music, it seemed, had acted as antidotes to a fear that might, at any time, have erupted through the surface with paralysing impact. This is, perhaps, no better exemplified than by the final performance of the Berlin Philharmonic on 12 April. In what was a macabre irony, a programme architected by Albert Speer concluded with the soaring—and, finally, soothing—strains of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. Were this not bitter-sweet enough, as the dazed and numb concertgoers left the roofless venue (it had caved in during an air raid) it is reported that members of the Hitler Youth were on hand to offer to them cyanide capsules (Kavena, 2013). While this was the experience on the surface, we now head underground.

In his 2011 essay *The Bunker: Metaphor, materiality, and management*, Luke Bennett records eyewitness testimony vis-a-vis the grim conditions faced by the thousands of inhabitants of the *Führerbunker* in April 1945. For example, a Captain Beerman notes that it was 'like being…buried alive in some abandoned charnel house' (Bennett, 2011, p.161) while others refer to the bunker as a 'dead room…like a tomb'; 'a dungeon'; 'a waxwork museum' (*op. cit*.) in which one dwelt as 'a living corpse' (*op. cit*., p.162). Another hapless inhabitant, Bennett notes, speaks of the 'upside down world of the bunker' (*op. cit*.) and it is upon this metaphor that we focus as a way of understanding the apparently irrational behaviour exhibited in that tenebrous underworld just before the final curtain fell.

As noted above, on 31 January 1945 the Russians crossed the Oder. On the same day the Russian 5th Army took Kienitz—just sixty-five kilometres from the Reich Chancellery beneath which the *Führerbunker* lay. As also noted above, On 7th March, just a month after her departure from the capital, Eva Braun had returned to Berlin from Berchtesgaden. There is little doubt that she knew what lay in store. She would hopefully be able to celebrate with Hitler his fifty-sixth birthday and perhaps had some intuition that the *Führer* would marry her before she would kill herself alongside him. As things turned out, German resistance sufficiently slowed the Russian advance on Berlin to permit the former events to take place.

The 20th April 1945 opened with a heavy air raid on the capital—a birthday gift to Hitler from the USAAF and the RAF. Later that morning guests began to arrive at the 'half wrecked' Reich Chancellery (Beevor, 2002, p.250). Hitler looked at least seventy-six years old and there was 'no mood for celebration (*op. cit*., p.251).' In the afternoon, a decrepit, broken dictator oversaw a medal presentation to members of the Hitler Youth and in the early evening he received a few senior visitors before retiring. Beevor records that Eva Braun led the abandoned guests up to the ruins of the Reich Chancellery where 'they drank champagne and made a pretence of dancing… (*op. cit*., p.252).' Traudl Junge, Hitler's secretary, described the party-goers' behaviour and hysterical laughter as 'horrible (*op. cit.*).' Pretence or not, this would not be the last dance of the Nazi elite.

In what is possibly the most extraordinary evidence of the power of dance to numb or annul a sense of tragedy and to banish fear, we now consider the final acts of Hitler and Eva Braun in the Reich Chancellery's bunker and the extraordinary reaction to these by those who remained. In the immediate wake of perceived betrayals by Braun's brother-in-law Hermann Fegelein (on the afternoon of 28 April a search found him with his mistress—bags packed, and ready to run), Goering (who had slipped away, and who had written to Hitler in an attempt to assume power), and Himmler (who had also slid off scene, with a view to negotiating with the Allies), especially, the *Führer* turned from the hopeless military situation to questions of final posture. Having just had Fegelein executed, shortly after midnight on the evening of 28/29 April Hitler married his long-time mistress. The ceremony for which Eva had longed took just a few minutes, after which the couple retired to celebrate over a champagne breakfast. Hitler then dictated to Tradl Junge his political and personal testaments after which, at approximately 04:00 on April 29th, the *Führer* and Frau Hitler retired (Beevor, 2002, p.344). Nearer the surface, things were not so muted. Here, Junge saw things that shocked her: 'An erotic fever seemed to have taken possession of everybody', she noted (*op. cit*.), adding that 'everywhere, even on the dentist's chair, I saw bodies locked in lascivious embraces. The women had discarded all modesty and were freely exposing their private parts. (*op. cit*.).' Yet these were not the ultimate gyrations of the Nazi elite. There was a final dance to come.

In the early hours of 30 April 1945, with Soviet artillery pounding the government quarter and the assault on the Reichstag to commence at dawn, Hitler emerged from his private quarters to farewell some members of his entourage. Soon after, William Shirer (1959/1995, Vol. 2, p.557) observes, Hitler retired to rejoin his wife whereupon 'a curious thing happened (*op. cit*.)'. Shirer writes that 'the tension which had been building up to an almost unendurable point in the bunker broke, and several persons went to the Reich Chancellery canteen—to dance (*op. cit*.).' The Russians (and, therefore, death), Shirer observes, were close at hand and so these few final hours were devoted to pleasure (*op. cit*.). While Shirer's view is that the dancing was a reaction to freedom from

Hiter’s rule, the fact is that the *Führer* and his wife would not be dead for some hours. In fact, as Beevor (2002, p.359) notes, the partying dancers were required to pause their festivities sometime before mid-afternoon while Hitler and Frau Hitler did what they had to do—after which, in the face of an imminent demise or a long captivity that would likely precede it, the death-dancing went on. Indeed, it went on while the bodies of the recently married couple were set alight in the garden of the Reich Chancellery—an event witnessed by one of the partygoers who, in the spirit of the warped entertainment, called out to Rochus Misch—one of Hitler’s bodyguards—’The chief’s on fire. Do you want to come and have a look? (*op. cit*., p.260).’ Beyond this, the dancing went on well into the night.

4. Dancing against the Russians

We have seen that, through dance, death’s dark grip on the imagination is loosened, if not nullified. So it is in the context of the present-day conflict in Eastern Europe where the Russian invasion of Ukraine has seen Ukrainians responding to the horrors of war and to an omnipresent fear of death through ritualised, formalised, and often inchoate bodily movement. It is in this context that we explore modern and contemporary ballet—forms properly received as cryptic, abstract manifestos which, to be properly read, require the application of semiotic theory and an understanding of dance psychology. We begin our exploration of Ukrainian dance in the context of the present war by recapping the relevant semiotic theory.

As is well known, the term itself *semiotics* was first introduced by the French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in the beginning of 20th Century (Lascano, 2014, p.11). Saussure proposed that the sign comprises two components: *the signification* (the referent concept) and the *signal* (the sound pattern). In establishing the arbitrary connection between the sound signifier and the referent signified, Saussure emphasises the internal sign structure through which more or less shared understandings might emerge (Yakin & Totu, 2014, p.6). For Saussure, then, linguistic signs in the language system permit human beings to

communicate with each other (*op. cit.*). Of course, Saussure's work has to be considered alongside that of logician Charles Sanders Peirce (1838-1914), phenomenologists including Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), proto structuralists including Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), and full-blown structuralists including Roland Barthes (1915-1980). These and other figures applied and developed semiotic theory to unveil the rich, but often hidden, significations of abstract—apparently impenetrable—texts. Contemporary ballet is one such text: a performing art rarely understood.

Husserl, Durand, and other phenomenologists argue that "dance has always been associated with the domain of 'pre-reflective' experience with the immediacy of being in the world" (Durand in Popa-Blanariu, 2013, p.2). It has been proposed, then, that dance, like any other performing art, is composed of 'signal' and 'symptom'—requiring the de-encryption of arcane socio-cultural codes (Popa-Blanariu, 2013). Also applicable here is Roland Barthes' idea of the 'culturalization' of the natural, Pierce's notion of collateral experience—otherwise labelled collateral acquaintance or collateral observation, Jonathan Culler's principle of the sociolect, though which competent readings or interpretations might be achieved, and Michael Riffaterre's precept of super-readership. Each of these articulations points to the need for a more or less specialised body of knowledge through which one might discern connections between action and object—including the capacity to recognise patterns within even the most profoundly defamiliarised art form.

From the earliest times, stylised or choreographed bodily movements such as rhythmic foot beats and stepping from one side to another have served as signifiers in ceremonial rituals. In her book *Towards a Framework of a Semiotics of Dance*, Nicoleta Popa-Blanariu argues that where such regularities may be observed (no matter how subtle), these point to ideas or values and are thus 'culturally codified behaviour[s]' (2013, p.2). Elsewhere, Popa-Blanariu argues that there are, nonetheless, more unscripted actions or gestures 'able to induce particular significations' (2022, online). These, Popa-Blanariu argues, may illustrate Greimas' principle of semio-morphological 'disarticulation' or kinesic signification. In a similar vein, Peirce places dance in a category of primary

emotionality (or firstness) related to pre-conscious or unconscious feeling exteriorized by way of spontaneous, quasi-involuntary gestures (Peirce in Blanariu, 2013, p.2). Such gestures, although lacking in intention, might nonetheless signify—acquiring a symbolic character (or thirdness, in Peirce's work) 'as a kind of mediating thought, conscience, [or] law that includes various codes such as choreographic ones' (*op.cit*.).

Returning, briefly, to the matter of competence, as suggested above, a grasp of relevant semiotic conventions is necessary to decoding a dance form that seems, *prima facie*, bereft of signifiers. As Popa-Blanariu (2013, p.12) puts it, where a 'socius' or set of semiotic conventions might be called upon, dance may yield to efforts at interpretation. This is one of the reasons why some less conventional dance styles may only be decoded by those familiar with (a) the social reality within which dancers perform and (b) 'a theatrical frame [of reference] that comprises a set of transactional and interactional conventions' governing both performers and audiences (Blanariu, 2013, p.4). For example, with reference to contemporary dance, we might discern an occult kinetic code behind a dance act. Therefore, we might not only see a group of people responding in some sense to a score of some description but may witness a social movement that responds to collective anxieties. As Popa-Blanariu argues, 'body movements can exteriorize involuntarily and unconscious processes' (2013, p. 2). Thus, dancers might express emotions that are difficult—or even impossible—to verbalise.

Apropos, in *Dance Psychology,* Peter Lovatt analyses the mental health benefits of dance, arguing that the activity improves our divergent thinking. According to Lovatt (2018, p.45), 'we use divergent thinking when we are trying to solve problems that have more than one correct answer.' Apropos, a case study undertaken by Maxine Campion and Liat Levita (as cited by Lovatt, 2018, p.47) demonstrates that people engaging in dance classes showed an 'increase in positive affect' and an immense appetite for creation. In addition, the study finds that there was a considerable reduction in feelings of fatigue. Lovatt also observes that 'there is a clear link between moving and thinking; therefore, when we move our body it changes our thought processes, either by speeding up the way we think, or by making us more creative' (*op. cit*.). Similarly, Gardner (as

cited by Serlin, 2020, p.177), argues that [the] arts provide access to multiple modes of intelligence, connecting us to the imagination, and bridging the conscious and unconscious.' Further, and crucially to this study, dance is also said to have a cathartic effect on those who have suffered from both individual and collective trauma. As Serlin (2020) argues, although contemporary dance may reinterpret frightening episodes, it can at the same time have a tremendously positive impact on mental health because it creates a feeling of relief: 'Stories of death and rebirth descend into sadness and ascend into joy' (p.177). Hence, 'art heals…' (*op.cit.*). Moving, now, towards our declared interest in dance as a response to the present day Russian prosecuted war against the Ukraine, in *Performance in Place of War* (2009) Thompson *et. al*. make the same point, noting that from large-scale spectacles to more intimate stagings, artistic performance not only channels trauma but presents a counternarrative to the destructive performance of war itself (pp.3-4).

While trauma may be thought of as 'a psychic wound that comes from the experience of an extraordinary event that is liable to return as a spontaneous flashback rather than remembered in narrative form' (Thompson *et. al*., 2009, p.33), Streater (2022) defines collective trauma as 'the impact of traumatic experience upon a group' (p.36). Citing Reiman *et.al*., Streater observes that '[a] collective trauma may require a collective identity marker; a shared mental representation of an event in group history that produces collective narratives, memories, values and mental models that alter collective functioning' (Reiman, Konig & Volkan in Streater, 2022, p.36). Of course, there are different types of collective trauma (including those caused by radical political movements and natural disasters), but the present paper now focuses on the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian War as a trigger for a plethora of traumas ranging from the now well recognised Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)—with its tendency to sporadically erupt—to depressive, behavioural, and dissociative malaises in which people's fundamental consciousness is more or less permanently altered. In this sense, war-induced trauma may be said to be 'encoded as a form of sensory, implicit reality' (Malchiodi in Streater, 2022, p. 36) for which it is commonly considered there is no lasting cure. Yet, as Lovatt (2020) has suggested, and as Thompson *et.al*. (2009)

argue, despite fears and anxieties, performance can prove transformational. The latter, for instance, argue that 'making something beautiful' provides an antidote to the 'extreme ugliness of a war zone' (p.27); that ruination (unmaking) might be met with acts of creation (making/remaking) (p.29); and that more than removing some of the horror (Theodore Adorno's proposition), performance might speak to encompassing principles of restoration and justice (p.31). Thompson *et. al.* are therefore prompted to ask whether or not 'survival may depend on a range of performance forms' (p.33). It is a big question, the answer to which—if one considers the growing body of supporting evidence—appears to be an emphatic 'yes'.

At times of war, people focus on survival—activating coping mechanisms while internalising feelings of sadness, grief, anger, and frustration. In order to understand the therapeutic effects of dance in the context of martial conflict, one of the authors interviewed two Ukrainian pole dancers who have engaged the medium of contemporary dance as both a means of self-preservation and as a political manifesto against the war. In 2018, Evgenia Svishchova (42 years old) started practising pole dance. She explains that she was searching for an exotic leisure activity. Although still controversial, pole dance has proven to be an empowering sport for women who wish to express elements that are held deep in the subconscious, while combining elements of strength, flexibility, and balance.

For Svishchova, pole dancing became a crucial emotional support during the latest outbreak of hostilities between Russia and the Ukraine:

> During the first two months of the war', she says, 'I couldn't listen to music at all. I couldn't even imagine how it is to dance again; to feel the rhythm; to feel alive—but after I relocated [as a refugee] to Romania I slept without sirens and turmoil
>
> (pers. comm., Svishchova, 2022)

Svishchova recalls reengaging with the choreography of her previous trainer in the Ukraine, explaining that although it was difficult for her to regain focus (the lack of same is a common manifestation of trauma) that she nonetheless ‘had a strong desire to overcome [her] anxieties and do what [she] loved most’ (pers.comm.).

> After my first pole session in Romania, I started to regain my confidence and feel empowered in this world of chaos. I remember using a melancholic romantic song for my choreography and when I posted the footage on social media, I did it in black and white because I couldn’t see any colours. The second time though, I started feeling the rhythm again and surprisingly, I was able to create my own choreography without the trainer's support. In that moment only, I felt that I started a new life. A new life where there’s no war, no suffering people, but music and dance. I felt that this war cannot ruin me as a person. It can destroy buildings, territories, but it cannot destroy me. So, this is my manifesto!”
>
> (pers. comm., Svishchova, 2022)

She continues:

> Nobody can prepare you for war and, moreover, empathise with your trauma. I know many people who gave up and drowned in depression and suicidal thoughts, but that was not my case! I am a fighter! I want to feel alive and be a flawless model for my children. This is one of the reasons I stayed strong, maintained my beauty routine, and pursued my hobbies. It wouldn’t help anyone if I stood in a corner weeping and complaining all day long! While others have lost their creative desire and passion for life, I decided to move on and do what makes me happy. Therefore, I stopped watching the news and focused instead on my pole classes which felt like an incredible escape from reality.

> Yes, maybe I found my own bubble. I know the war is real and the terror floats in the air, but what I want is to show resilience and prove to the World that Ukraine is not defeated! … This is our manifesto towards the Russian Government.
>
> (pers. comm., Svishchova, 2022).

Although Svishchova is neither a public figure nor a key opinion leader, her story is inspirational—demonstrating how art might help one to resist an oppressive political regime. In this way, Ukrainian civilians show an irrepressible fortitude in the face of a brutal Russian invasion.

A second interviewee, Anastasia Miller (24), similarly demonstrates tremendous resilience in the face of war's horrors. Miller is a young single mother who successfully requested political asylum in Romania where, despite the terror, dislocation, and social disruption that she has endured, she strives for a normal life by using pole and contemporary dance as coping mechanisms:

> I was always an active child and tried different dance styles. I started dancing at the age of 16. When I relocated to Bucharest, I found dance to be a relief from pain. It was the only place where I felt myself again: calm, joyful. Dance is a wonderful way to release all the negative energy. This is how I express myself the best. When the war started, everyone stopped working for a month. For me, it was heartbreaking because my hometown, Mariupol, was destroyed entirely, and as dance was the only source of income at that time, I found myself in a very difficult situation. However, I restarted pole dancing in Bucharest where, again, I didn't have a permanent job—but I decided to do my best. Besides, I felt that the International Pole Sports Competition would be a great chance for me to demonstrate that I am resilient and I will not give up no matter what. So, off I went and I chose a Ukrainian song as a tribute to my country. In

> that moment I knew that …nothing [could] stop me from doing what I love the most. Although I have a busy schedule, I always make time for dance. I even take my daughter to the pole studio because I want to show her the magic of dance. I hope she will find psychological comfort in this sport and maybe in the future she will follow my path
>
> (pers. comm., Miller, 2022).

Both Svischova's and Miller's stories clearly demonstrate the embodiment theory outlined by Patrice Pavis (1996), where dancers develop a special relation with their roles by embracing an alter ego that expresses emotions in a non-verbal way. Thus, words that are difficult to utter due to their disturbing significance translate into often tortuous bodily movement in space and time. By externalising negative emotions, the dynamic of rhythmic steps, pirouettes, shoulder rolls, and inverts reduce the anxiety associated with PTSD. During these movements, the body releases endorphins that not only significantly reduce the level of cortisol caused by chronic stress but that may generate feelings of euphoria. Moreover, because focus shifts to choreography and performative experience, when learning new dance routines, there is little cognitive scope for negative intrusions. Furthermore, while both pole and contemporary dance involve plenty of discomfort (for example, in the case of the former, contact with the pole can result in burning and bruising) these wounds are perceived by the body as *catharsis*—a moment when pain has a therapeutic effect. This is one of the reasons why many pole dancers (including the interviewed dancers) show to other members of the community their pole bruises and burns. Called 'pole kisses' by the cognoscenti, these wounds are physical manifestations of psychological trauma and are proudly displayed as trophies. In concluding this argument, Adela Marian, one of the authors of this paper, shares her first-hand experience as a pole dancer and explains the therapeutic effect of this new sport and art.

> I started pole dancing in the summer of 2020, right after the pandemic restrictions were removed. I was actively seeking a physical activity that would reflect a sense of release from the

> lockdown and that would ultimately contribute to my personal development. At first, I knew nothing about pole dance—except that it was practised in night clubs. When I informed my friends and family about my decision, I received puzzled looks. "Are you really going to do this? Don't you think you'll show too much skin?" However, for me, pole dancing was more than meets the eye. As I've noted, it provided an outlet in response to the restriction of the lockdown (of course, Romania's twentieth century history speaks to the idea of restriction more generally) and I was drawn to a combination of flexibility and strength elements that reminded me of the classical ballet classes I used to practise in my childhood. But there was something else: a mix of femininity, confidence, and sensuality that I have never experienced before. … I was amazed by the things my body could do in such a short period of time: inverts, splits, and handsprings. After just a few sessions, I noticed not only significant improvements in my body but an emergent emotional strength. Crucially, I became connected to a community of psychologically confident women.
>
> (pers. reflection., Marian, January 2023)

Conclusion

From the grisly *danse macabre* that once featured on the now levelled walls of the charnel-house at the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris, through the sundry squirmings of the living that took place in that grim graveyard, through the legend of Zalongo that recalls the defiance of Greek women who (children in arms) are said to have danced to death as they were pursued by murderous Ottomites, through the terminal twitchings of the miserable souls who inhabited the *Führerbunker* during the twilight of

the Third Reich, to the tortuous bodily responses of Ukrainian women to Vladimir Putin's invasion of their homeland, we have—via the intersection of historical enquiry, semiotic analysis, the application of dance psychology, and some key primary research—argued that through dance, a cathartic state is achieved in which one's fear of death might be greatly diminished or even dissolved. From a churchyard reeking of rotting corpses to the horrors of Hitler's underground, we have demonstrated that dance acts are performed in the most forbidding of settings and that, through these often-spontaneous acts, people face down their worst fears. Dance, then, emerges as a panacea of sorts: as a psychological antidote to the indescribable terrors of war and as a mode of creation that defies the will to destroy.

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