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Exploring Pregnant Embodiment with Phenomenology and Butoh Dance

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Abstract:

How does pregnancy transform our embodiment? This question will be explored with the help of phenomenology and Butoh dance. Although Butoh has not yet been able to fulfil its true potential for disclosing female embodiment and particularly pregnant embodiment, it will provide us with helpful clues. In pregnancy, objects are less ready-to-hand, more out of reach -- world as we know it becomes removed. The habit body vanishes away. But pregnancy is not just a loss of the ordinary: it also opens up new dimensions. One such dimension is that of being touched from within. A phenomenology of the pregnant body thus leads to a removal of world, but also reveals new dimensions of world, and it even comes to disclose the other as a new world within. It means to carry something alien, like the stone in Butoh play *Child's Breath*, which can only be carried slowly, awkwardly.

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On the horizon of a story is found what was in the beginning: this naïve or native sense of touch, in which the subject does not yet exist.

Luce Irigaray¹

Touch is finitude.

Jacques Derrida (*OT*, 138)

The blind were a theme that you [Derrida] favoured: *salut* to the vision that did not cling to forms or ideas but that let itself be touched by forces.

Jean-Luc Nancy (“Salut to you, salut to the blind we become” in *OT*, 313)

Phenomenology and dance complement each other well in an exploration of the lived body. This will be indicated with respect to a particular mode of embodiment: the pregnant body. In line with the topic of east and west, a specifically Eastern kind of dance will be selected, since phenomenology is a mode of Western philosophy. There is a form of dance that was developed, in the 1950es, explicitly in response to the predominance of Western music and dance: Japanese Butoh. Japanese Butoh is concerned with the body, and even more specifically, with the ‘crude’ body as well as with bodily taboos. Pregnancy and the maternal body also do come up in Butoh, but as we will discuss below, there are a number of external factors as to why Butoh has not yet fulfilled its potential to reveal the pregnant body as a mode of female corporeality.

I. The Abnormal Body as Disclosive

Pregnant embodiment is a form of abnormality that proves disclosive with respect to our normal existence. This is a general mechanism from which phenomenology has often

¹ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 185.

benefitted. The main reason as to why abnormality can be disclosive about our existence is that normality tends to remain hidden. Normality is what we take for granted, and focusing on it requires a special shift. Phenomenology tries to bring about such a shift through the phenomenological *epoché* (which means a suspension of judgment about the being-in-itself of an object, or a shift from ‘what’ it is to ‘how’ it appears to me. But it is not easy to motivate the *epoché* unless somebody is already motivated in a different way. There are everyday experiences and especially everyday problems that call for such a shift.² Pregnancy and birth could well fall into that category, except that they are so abnormal or extra-ordinary that it is difficult to reflect back from them onto our normality. But as we will see, there are indeed some interesting lessons about the body to be learned.

The contrast between the normal and the abnormal is used very successfully by Merleau-Ponty to elucidate what we experience as normal concerning bodily movements, spatiality, speech, sexuality, and so on. The most frequent abnormal case discussed in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* is the patient Schneider. Schneider suffered a brain injury in the war, and as a result, he experiences a number of abnormal motor functions which empiricist and intellectualist approaches cannot account for. Schneider can still perform concrete movements more or less normally (e.g., lighting his lamp), but he can only perform abstract movements (like tracing a figure in the air) if he is able to watch his limbs and position them as if they were external objects (e.g., he first has to watch his arm and lift it parallel to the floor before commencing the figure). He has lost the ability – possessed by the normal body subject – of carrying out movement requests without representing body parts and having to consciously move them into the relevant starting positions.

How can pathological cases shed new light on our normal experience? Merleau-Ponty warns that it “is impossible to deduce the normal from the pathological, deficiencies from the substitute functions, by a mere change of the sign” (*PhP*, 107). Normality and pathology do not exhibit a straightforward relationship of opposition; we cannot deduce the normal from the pathological by way of a mere reversal. Yet by describing how the pathological strikes us as odd, we gain some insight into our normal expectations. This is particularly crucial when it comes to those abilities and activities which we take for granted because we have successfully habitualized them. At the same time, it has to be noted that normality and

² Art can also be very useful for facilitating the shift, especially if combined with a focus on the abnormal body, as exemplified in Alexander Kozin, “The Uncanny Body: From Medical to Aesthetic Abnormality,” *JanusHead*, 9:2, pp. 463-84.

abnormality are intertwined; there are many moments of abnormality in an overall normal existence, and those who are affected by a more sustained pathology learn to normalize their behavior to a certain extent. We will see how this is the case for pregnancy.

However, even if texts like the *Phenomenology of Perception* provide multiple examples as to how the pathological elucidates the normal experience, an important question for our theme is still open: is pregnancy a pathology? There may be an intuitive resistance to such a claim. And the examples which Merleau-Ponty discusses indeed stem from a different realm: psychology. For our purposes, it is not necessary to establish pregnancy as a pathology, as long as we can plausibly describe it to be an abnormality – and this designation seems fairly uncontroversial. While pregnancy is certainly a natural process, it is undeniable that it interrupts our normal existence and is not experienced as a state of normality.

Describing pregnancy as abnormal does not necessarily turn it into a state of deficiency, lack, or disadvantage. There are ‘advantages’ as well as ‘disadvantages,’ and especially where new experiences are concerned, there are certainly more ‘gains’ than ‘losses.’ A phenomenological concept of normality does not connote superiority, as Edmund Husserl has shown quite successfully in his manuscripts on normality.³ In fact, the abnormal can under certain circumstances prove optimal, even though we usually consider the normal situation to be optimal. Husserl defines optimality in perceptual terms as that which allows me to perceive best, in the most complete and differentiated fashion, such as perceiving in daylight rather than at night. Yet sometimes a change which is initially dis-preferred because it breaks with my familiar normality can lead to an improvement and thus create a new normality that proves preferable. For example, my familiar bodily state might include certain pathologies (such as an auditory or visual impairment), and healing or aiding this impairment allows me to see in a fashion which is at first unfamiliar and thus perhaps disturbing, but then creates a new optimality because my perception becomes more refined. Husserl states that such improved perceptual abilities “would not be abnormal, but more normal than ever, an increased normality, and what was previously called normal would be abnormal.”⁴

Pregnancy means a profound transformation of our normal embodiment. Yet some of these changes can be described as establishing a new normality that is extra-ordinary and even optimal, such a being touched from the inside (see next section) which is not usually an

³ These manuscript have been brought into a systematic format by Anthony Steinbock who distinguishes between normality as concordance, familiarity, and optimality. See Anthony J. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond. Generative Phenomenology after Husserl*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995.

⁴ Husserl, unpublished manuscript D 13 II, 63a, cited and translated in Steinbock (1995), p. 147.

option for us, and which makes our perceptual landscape richer. Beyond the perceptual changes, there might also be a new optimality as I discover my responsibility for a new being which brings about a new world. But before we move to those deeper and more encompassing levels, we need to begin by outlining those changes to my normal embodiment which probably nobody would describe as optimal, yet which reveal features of normal embodiment that I usually take for granted, like my habit body and my habitual access to the world around me. These changes are such that they can reveal world, and as we have seen in the previous chapter, becoming aware of world is something rather rare and remarkable since we take it so much for granted as the background of all of our experiences.

Before turning to an examination of the habit body and how its loss leads to a revelation of world, there is a discovery on the more internal bodily level that is worth noting. This concerns the way in which pregnancy can shed light on other bodily abnormalities, such as sickness and disability. Take sickness as a first example. One of the revelations that come from being pregnant concerns the way in which there can be bodily symptoms that initially feel like sickness, but turn out to be ‘normal’ within the context of pregnancy. In fact, it is quite amazing to read pregnancy books during pregnancy and find those same symptoms afflicting one’s own body – luckily in most cases just some and not all of them. The case of pregnancy is particularly interesting because especially during the first three months, there is always the possibility of miscarriage, and later on, there is still the danger of early labor, etc. Therefore, some of the symptoms take on an alarming status because especially slight cramps or stinging sensations in the lower abdomen can initially appear to point to miscarriage, yet usually come about because of the way in which the uterus expands and affects also the tendons and ligaments supporting it. Without entering into a medical discussion, let it suffice to say that pregnancy requires interpreting bodily symptoms of discomfort or even pain as non-threatening. That is a helpful lesson because it shows the extent to which sickness also involves anxieties – about whether it is a sickness, what sickness it is, or if that is known, how severe it is – which contribute majorly to the negativity of the experience. Once it is being realized that the discomfort stems from something that relates to the fetus’ expanding and growing, the sensation is much less painful because it is not threatening.

This insight could be used to calm down patients with actual sicknesses, provided there was enough time available to healthcare professionals to explain that the discomfort or pain is ‘normal’ within that condition, and might even be pointing to healing. It is in any case also a strong argument for comprehensive ante-natal care since it is important that pregnant

women have an opportunity to find out whether their symptoms point to anything threatening or ‘abnormal’.

The experience of sickness-like symptoms can be useful outside of pregnancy in at least two ways. Firstly, it shows that symptoms are much easier to endure, much more bearable, if we know what is behind them and that they are not a sign of something threatening. What consequences to draw from this – whether to see a doctor for reassurance or engage in meditation exercises to counteract anxiety, or whether the experience of pregnancy is just such that any sickness becomes easier to endure without needing to take further action – depends on the person and the situation. Secondly, pregnancy teaches us that some alternative forms of medicine or home remedies are actually quite effective. Given that most forms of pharmaceutical medication have warnings about pregnancy, even those women who usually do not worry at all about taking medication will be likely to consider herbal, anthroposophical, or other forms of relief. Just one small example: realizing that almonds (if chewed slowly) indeed help with heart burn can be a very helpful lesson, perhaps even to carry a small package in one’s bag at all times.

Furthermore, pregnancy is a useful lesson as to what the body is capable of in terms of transformations, which can lead to more confidence in one’s own body, including its possibilities of self-repair and healing. A different dimension concerns the body’s possibilities to adjust to radical changes as relevant with respect to disabilities.⁵ Yet the role of world has not yet been sufficiently considered, which is what the next section will allow us to do.

II. World Removal

Phenomenology allows investigating the observed changes in bodily experience with the help of the phenomenological concept of world: a meaningful context of references or involvements in which one object points to the next, related one (e.g., the nappie points to the wet wipes, to the changing table, etc.). We do not really encounter isolated objects, but

⁵ Amy Mullen explores the affinities between pregnancy and disability regarding the need to rely on help and the responsibility of society to organise such. Amy Mullen, *Reconceiving Pregnancy and Childcare. Ethics, Experience and Reproductive Labour*. Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and Public Policy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

objects which are embedded in their meaningful world. Of course, this holds not only for ordinary objects in the spatiotemporal sense, but also for references to something less obvious, less visible (e.g., the pregnant belly pointing to the baby inside, or music pointing to dancing).

Merleau-Ponty describes the advantages of the phenomenological notion of the world as follows: “Probably the chief gain from phenomenology is to have united extreme subjectivism and extreme objectivism in its notion of the world or of rationality” (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP*, xix). Rationality might be a surprising term in this context, but Merleau-Ponty explains that rationality, rather than being concerned with inwardness, describes our inextricable connection to the world; furthermore, “rationality is precisely proportioned to the experiences in which it is disclosed” (ibd.). While extreme subjectivism and extreme objectivism always lead to one-sided or insufficient explanation, phenomenology allows exploring existence as being-in-the-world (Heidegger) or being-toward-the-world (Merleau-Ponty).

With respect to pregnancy, this means that phenomenology allows describing how our existence is changed in a more fundamental fashion than a list of specific features would have us believe. Such features include a variety of changes because pregnancy makes it more difficult to

- get up
- bend down
- maneuver in space (between people and objects)
- move or walk quickly

etc.

Of course, an objectivist perspective would explain such changes merely as a matter of extra weight or the protruding belly; but this is dissatisfying because the changes differ from those which would be connected to, say, gaining weight. Even when I lie down, the world presents itself to me differently from how it used to be, and simply creating a longer list of the features that have changed does not account for the fundamental shifts in experience.

A subjectivist account would likely stress that my world experience has changed because I try to be more careful and protective, due to my changed circumstances. But such an explanation also falls short; even if I do not want to be protective or know that I do not have to be, the world presents itself differently to me than before. Furthermore, the changes

are not really experienced in terms of protectiveness: the world does not appear more dangerous. It might rather appear more irritating, frustrating, or annoying, at least at certain times.

From a phenomenological perspective, the change in world experience can be explained by first considering that our body is not some material entity located in space like any other object, but is experienced from within, as a lived body or embodied existence. By way of our body, we are in the world and experience world. The changes during pregnancy can be described from a Merleau-Pontian perspective as a loss of the “habit body” and from a Heideggerian standpoint as a transformation and partial loss of the ready-to-hand.

What is the “habit body”, briefly put? It designates our normal expectation of being able to move in the world without accidents and interruptions. Everyday activities like walking, climbing stairs, or eating food are habitualized in such a way that we do not need to reflect on them, and we do not need to be aware of our environment in terms of specifically measured distances or qualities. Only if I have a leg injury or if the stairs are broken, will I need to start reflecting on my activity of climbing the stairs. Otherwise, these movements are habitual, where “habit expresses our power of dilating our being-in-the-world” (*PhP*, 166). An expansion of my bodily existence can include certain instruments, such as the car in which I drive or the blind man’s stick which become incorporated into my bodily space. It turns out that “habit is neither a form of knowledge nor an involuntary action” but rather, a “knowledge in the hands” or in the body (*PhP*, 166).

While the habit body expands my world, the pregnant body gets in the way of itself and disrupts my habitual activities. Those activities which I thought I had learned to master, like walking, driving a car, or riding a bike either become impossible or have to be reacquired in a modified fashion. My formerly mobile body becomes a lot more ‘inert,’ revealing the phenomenological side of inertia (in contrast to its physical concept as proportional to an object’s mass). The world is thus less accessible to me, more removed; hence my experiences of the world as more frustrating. While habit “dilates” my being-in-the-world, pregnancy could be described as contracting or diminishing it, despite the fact that the physical volume of my body grows.

As a result of my difficulties to move in space, distances expand, and the region that is accessible to me becomes smaller. This effect puts pregnancy in an unexpected contrast to modern transportation technologies as described by Heidegger: these technologies are said to shrink distances. The ways in which pregnancy changes my experience of space will now be

examined in a bit more details since the differences in spatiality show quite well how the ready-to-hand is no longer to hand. Heidegger announces at the outset of his considerations on spatiality that his reflections will serve to show how the spatiality of things in the world is grounded in the worldliness of the world (*BT*, 102). This is an important discovery for our purposes because it indicates how the modification in spatiality is not just a matter of one object or a few objects being less accessible to me, but a change of my environing world (*Um-welt*) and thus of my existence.

When considered in terms of spatiality, handiness presents itself as nearness or as that which is “within reach, grasp, and look” (*BT*, 106). If we also consider Heidegger’s concise and convincing statement, “An essential tendency toward nearness lies in Dasein” (*BT*, 105), it becomes increasingly plausible how pregnancy creates problems as it inhibits this tendency toward nearness (or toward bringing things close). The world becomes more removed, and the circle of things that are handy or within reach shrinks.

Furthermore, the world becomes more clearly delineated into regions. Heidegger describes how spatiality in the existential (rather than objective or geometrical) sense falls into distinct regions for all of us; for example, “the ‘below’ is what is on the floor” (*BT*, 103). For pregnant existence, the divisions between regions become much sharper since the distance between ‘what is on the floor’ and ‘what is on the shelf’ increases. More deliberation is required: before I sit down, I need to consider and bring close what I may need later one.

Due to these changes to my habit body, the spatiality of my existence, and the character of things around me, the world appears differently. I become disorientated and need to find new ways of orientation as well as organization. One such possibility consists in communication (“Could you please bring me...”); but the disruption of my normal word relation is only confirmed by the need for such mediation and dependence. Overall, the world has become removed from me and proves more difficult to access.

The other, positive side of this world removal, however, is my growing nostalgia for the habit body. This growing nostalgia is an important motivation for wanting to give birth. Of course, there is also the desire to see the baby, especially since the creature on the inside does not really feel like a baby while it is on the inside, as we will see in the next chapter. Yet while the desire to see the baby might certainly also be a strong factor, it is a constant factor, and there is no particular experiential reason for it to grow stronger as the pregnancy lasts. The nostalgia for the habit body, on the other hand, definitely grows stronger and stronger as the huge pregnant body is increasingly difficult to handle. On the mundane level, this is

sometimes expressed as the urge to wear normal clothes again – but it does not take a person like myself who cares little about clothes to notice that there is a lot more at stake: an entire way of being and of relating world, that is, a way of being-in-the-world, that is linked to and dependent on the habit body. Such a strong motivation is helpful and needed to counteract the anxiety that ultimately emerges from the fact that it is inconceivable to give birth because of our sense of body as singular and self-enclosed.

There is yet another lesson about our body that can be learned from pregnancy which may stay with us even as we reacquire the habit body through birth. This is the lesson that even the radically modified body can adjust, and we can adjust with it, to world in a new way. Whether it is a newly acquired liking for being in swimming pools⁶ or a way of arranging pillows around the body to facilitate the often painful turning-over in bed at night: the challenge of the abnormal body makes us creative. The enormous potential of such creativity and adoptability would certainly also be a good lesson for disability studies.

III. World Disclosure, or Being Touched

Pregnancy reveals how fundamental touch is, in contrast to our usual emphasis on vision. Touch is the most basic or elemental sense because it corresponds directly to the experience of being a body – it is the most bodily sense –, and being a body is the most basic fact of our existence. Because of these fundamental connections, some of the ideas presented in this section will sound self-evident, if not tautological. At the same time, these fundamental connections are to some extent alien to us, just as our bodies are alien to us, for a number of reasons. They are alien to us because they bring home some uncomfortable truths about our existence as finite and vulnerable.

“Touch is finitude”, Jacques Derrida says in discussing Jean-Luc Nancy (*OT*, 138). He points out that a “finite living being can live and survive without any other sense” (*OT*, 139), as is the case with a number of very basic animals. It is important to read such a statement in a phenomenological rather than biological fashion. A phenomenological perspective takes a first person perspective and focuses on our experience of being a body, as

⁶ In water, the extra weight gets lifted, and the body feels almost normal, except for the fact that the element of water is presupposed which only allows for a certain range of activities, as diverse as walking, swimming, dancing, relaxing, chatting; but not so diverse as to include cooking, eating, watching TV, etc.

we will see, whereas a biological perspective would focus on a natural scientific (and thus third person) perspective on it. The impossibility of being a living creature without touch is not an empirical proof for the fundamental role of touch, but helps us imagine, by way of a typical phenomenological thought experiment in which we vary the limits or basic parameters of that which we consider, what it means to be an embodied, living creature. Being a living body means being in touch with the world. That can happen in a very basic way, but it can also happen in ways that are supplementary to and competing with other senses.

Being a body means being finite. It means having been born and being confronted with the certainty of death (yet absolute uncertainty about its when and how). Independently of the question whether there is anything before or after death, it is true that existing in this world means being embodied and thus being limited, in space and in time. It also means being in “contact” (*OT*, 139/40), with world and with others -- while vision directs us away from ourselves and into the world. Since we have learned from Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty that existence is being-in-the-world, this could be fine – except that the body is forgotten, and the body is our point of access to the world. Vision orients us away from the body, we are drunk in by world. Touch brings us back to the body, pulls us towards our own materiality. Then again, is it helpful to become alerted the body? What about everyday phenomena like hypochondria which can be interpreted as an exaggerated awareness of one’s corporeality? Without getting too drawn into everyday or empirical phenomena, it should be obvious that a forgetfulness of the body can cause severe problems where our handling of sickness, ageing, death, but also sexuality, pregnancy, birth, and being with infants are concerned. Due to the forgetfulness, these experiences are often alien and sometimes even shocking to us when we undergo them. Moreover, we are lacking concepts and a familiar discourse that would allow thematising them.

Vision contributes to our idea of “masters and possessors of nature.”⁷ It also contributes to our almost exclusive focus on activity, agency, and action at the expense of passivity. Touch, on the other hand, embodies passivity, and we will see that passivity is highly relevant for pregnancy. Moreover, being a body means being exposed to world, being touched by things conducive as well as detrimental to our existence, being touched in pleasant as well as harmful ways. Being a body means being vulnerable, and on the basis of that fundamental vulnerability, also able to experience pleasure.

⁷ Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*, trans. Paul J. Olscamp, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2001, p. 50.

Touch is the most bodily sense to the extent that philosophers like Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida call it *the* sense. Nancy states: “Sense *is* touching”.⁸ Derrida takes this idea further by proposing: “This sense transcends the others; it also grounds them; it makes them possible, but to the extent that it is not quite a sense any longer” (*OT*, 146 f.). Touch is not a sense alongside the others, not the second, third, fourth, or fifth sense, and not even the first sense, because it lets the other senses originate and thus does not stand in a line with them. Touch grounds the other senses, not by being temporally earlier than the others, but because all senses are in some way concerned with world touching us (even vision, though it goes furthest in giving us the illusion of distance and mastery). Being touched is the original meaning of what it is to sense things. As a result, touch is also the most existential sense that makes us aware that existence means being-in-the-world and being touched by world. Touch is not the same as the touching of surfaces: for an unconscious body, it is possible that there is contact between surfaces yet no experience and thus no touch, in the phenomenological sense. Being touched means being affected, being touched in the wider sense, and when we are strongly affected through the other senses, they become reminiscent of touch: confronted with very bright light or a shrill sound, I shrink back because world is affecting me too much, *as if* it was pressing too hard on me.

What does a phenomenology of touch yield? If we take the historical perspective, as it were, and consider how touch has been discussed by the first phenomenologists, the phenomenon that stands out comes under the heading of double sensations. Both Edmund Husserl (in the second volume of his *Ideas*) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (in the *Phenomenology of Perception*) focussed on the possibility of double sensations, such as one of my hands touching the other hand, or more generally, one part of my body touching another part. Double sensations are important because they designate one of the crucial ways in which my body is different from mere physical objects.⁹

In relation to our topic of pregnancy specifically and female corporeality more generally, there is a particular kind of double sensation which has been pointed out by Luce Irigaray, namely, that of lips touching. This is a key phenomenon which Irigaray takes up in many of her writings and which does not fail to evoke a reaction in the reader which is

⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, p 110.

⁹ Other differences include my body as a ‘constant here’ (that is, a point of orientation that I cannot get away from), my body being affective (that is, it is the actual region where affects are located, rather than just the cause of affects), and *kinaesthesia* (that is, the interdependence between *kinesis* (movement) and *aesthesia* (perception) or the intricate link between our moving body and our perception).

probably best described as shame. We are not used to this level of intimacy – lips touching, labia touching – in philosophical descriptions (even though there has been much descriptive exhibitionism in recent fiction literature). Yet if we overcome this initial unease and attend to the phenomenon of lips touching, one cannot fail to wonder how the fact that all humans have at least two lips impacts on Irigaray's emphasis. Granted, having four lips or two pairs of them does not come down to a simple doubling of numbers since we are concerned with an experientially very different bodily region (mouth vs. genitals). Nonetheless, I would like to propose that there is another phenomenon which is as crucial if not more crucial to female corporeality as that of lips touching: the experience of being touched from within.

This corrective does not undermine Irigaray's philosophy since she herself points out in an interview that it makes a crucial difference whether you carry somebody inside or outside your body and whether you have sex inside or outside your body.¹⁰

Irigaray's statement prompts an important clarification. It is certainly not our intention here to claim that pregnancy is essential for female corporeality. This can already not be true since by far not all women get pregnant, and it is also not our intention to set it up as any kind of norm or ideal since could appear to undo or ignore crucial feminist accomplishments to detach femininity from motherhood. Crucial is rather the *potential* or possibility to be touched from the inside, and the example of sexual activity raised by Irigaray makes it clear that this is not limited to pregnancy.

In order to describe better what it means to be touched from within, we will benefit from a concept which Merleau-Ponty introduces as he himself overcomes his early account of the body which strikes him in retrospect as too subject-orientated. This is the concept of flesh (*la chair*) which Merleau-Ponty explores in his late philosophy and especially in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Perception, according to the model of Merleau-Ponty's late philosophy, resembles the touching/touched relation of double sensations, including the way in which such roles can become exchanged.

Merleau-Ponty refers us to the old term "element" to understand flesh better (VI, 139). Elements are material, but already in an internally differentiated fashion. An element belongs to a particular location or region without being tied to it: air is usually, but not always 'above' earth. My body is made up of these elements, thus inhabiting an intermediate position. Furthermore, the element in the ancient sense is not strictly speaking material, but "midway

¹⁰ 'Of Relations and Rights. An Interview with Luce Irigaray' conducted by gbtimes in March 2013, available on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODD8-wayDhM>

between spatio-temporal object and idea” (ibid.). This midway-character is difficult to capture; it is a materialized idea or an “incarnate principle” which introduces a certain “style of being” (ibid.). The concept of flesh provides a good opening for a discussion of alterity. It accommodates otherness by way of folds. Folds of flesh designate a “coiling over” of the visible upon the visible (VI, 140) in such a way that vision comes about. In vision, the seeing and the seen come to touch, like a fold in which inside and outside touch each other.¹¹

However, pregnancy is not a double sensation in Merleau-Ponty’s sense. Double sensations involve two parts of my body touching each other, such that I sense each part from the inside (as touching) and from the outside (as being touched). In pregnancy, my body acquires an additional surface since I can now be touched from the inside. Yet what is touching me is not a part of my own body, but a creature with its own movements which are not in my control, as becomes increasingly clear.

The experience of being touched from the inside involves various layers which can be distinguished. When I touch my belly from the outside with my hand, there are initially two layers, connected by a double sensation: the hand touching the surface of the belly, and the belly touching the hand. Yet at certain moments, there is a movement under the skin, and as the belly is being touched from the inside, I can direct my hand to the right spot. A friend or partner who tries to trace the movement merely from the outside will most likely not be successful because the third layer, the inside of the belly, is missing for them as a point of identification. The fourth layer is the touch from the inside, the touch by the alien body inside me. Because I know (on the level of theory rather than experience) that this alien body has the same body parts as my body, I try to identify and attribute the touch to a foot, a hand, the head, the bottom – but most likely, I will fail, unless somebody (e.g., a midwife) has already informed me that the body on the inside is in a definite position.

The experiences of touching and being touched in pregnancy thus do not amount to a doubling of double sensations, as it were. Rather, starting the explanation from double sensations shows how this idea breaks down in light of pregnancy and moves me towards being touched by the Other. It is my initial impulse to think that a hand on my belly will

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is generally characterised by a strong emphasis on vision. Yet with his discussion of visible and invisible, Merleau-Ponty attempts to describe a structure of sense perception in general, including the significance of the invisible or shadows (see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and his Shadow,” in: *Signs*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, pp. 159-181), which to him is best explained in terms of vision. The special suitability of vision for such explanations should be familiar since Plato who uses visual metaphors (sun, etc.) in order to show that the visible is surpassed by the thinkable or ideal.

create a double sensation, but in pregnancy, there is something ‘alien’ inside me that cuts through my normal expectations of sensing, making me aware of the otherness within.

IV. Being Touched by the Other: Paradox and Paradigm

In ways that would need to be spelled out more fully, pregnancy has emerged as the paradigm case for perception as a two-way movement which involves touch as the fundamental sense, and the realisation that the Other and otherness are always already part of me. How does the Other manifest itself on the non-literal level? By way of inaccessibility, unavailability, imposition – and this imposition is ultimately the imposition of a whole world, as we can see with the help of Derrida.

Derrida provides a plausible link between otherness in the same and the imposition of the Other that proves to have ethical implications, though in a reconceived sense of ethics. Derrida points out that the otherness *in* the same manifests itself as me being *for* the Other – yet this is not to be taken in a simplistic sense either. More precisely, the scenario which seems to be a matter of literal being-*in*, namely, pregnancy, turns out to be more multi-faceted. It remains an issue of the Other *in* me, even after the baby is born, and it is already a matter of being *for* the Other, even while the Other is still *in* me. To see the deeper level of this responsibility for the other, it helps to introduce a third element into the relation between me and the Other, between me and you: world.

Derrida points us to an intriguing line from Paul Celan: “Die Welt ist fort, ich muss Dich tragen” – “The world is gone, I must carry you.” This line, the last line of a poem from the collection *Atemwende (Turn of Breath)* is interpreted by Jacques Derrida in *Rams*, a text devoted to the memory of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Derrida explains how death each time means the end of a world, of a unique world tied to the singular Other. Phenomenologically more revealing than my own death is thus the death of the Other. While the world becomes irrelevant in anxiety before death, the death of the Other means that I can experience a/the world disappear. As ‘their’ world disappears – the world of meaning they had set up and which is now imposed on me – there is the moment in which ‘the’ world becomes eclipsed.¹²

¹² For an excellent interpretation of the connection between death, world, and carrying, see Michael Naas, *Derrida from Now on*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, pp. 227-34.

In the case of pregnancy, there is also a multi-faceted world-relation. As the world of *a* new human being originates, my relation to *the* world is transformed in various ways. These ways are so closely connected that here, as well, it does not make sense to draw a clear distinction between a world and the world. In order to discern the different modalities of world-relation, we need to first consider Derrida's explicit description which emerges from his interpretation of the verb 'tragen,' 'to carry:'

Tragen, in everyday usage, also refers to the experience of carrying a child prior to its birth. Between the mother and the child, the one in the other and the one for the other, in this singular couple of solitary beings, in the shared solitude between one and two bodies, the world disappears, it is far away, it remains a quasi-excluded third. For the mother who carries the child, 'Die Welt ist fort.' (*Rams*, 159)

Initially, this description struck me as implausible, prejudiced, and romantic: mother and child as self-sufficient, self-absorbed, not interested in any other human beings or in the world. I wanted to object and ask: does not the impending arrival of the child exactly return me to the world since I know that the baby will (initially) share my world, and I will need to show and explain this world to him or her? To be sure, there seems to be some world-removal through pregnancy, on the practical level, as we have seen in the first section.

Yet all in all, we arrive at three different dimensions of impact on my world relation, each of which can be explained further with the help of the initial Celan citation. Derrida's original statement thus proves to be true, but incomplete.

A child relates to world in three ways:

- 1.) As an *origin of world*, opening up a new context of meanings and possibilities. At the same time, this origin opens up a realm of responsibilities which do not even cease in death, but acquire an even stronger dimension: "(If) the world disappears, I must carry you."
- 2.) As an *eclipse of world*, as described by Derrida when he writes that for mother and child, the world disappears or becomes a quasi-excluded third. One reason for this disappearance of world seems to lie in the excessive vulnerability which the child exhibits before being born and in the initial period of life: "If I must carry you, the world disappears." Derrida proposes that this inversion of the sentence is permissible and plausible (*Rams*, 158).

3.) As a *new encounter with world* because I start imagining (already before the baby is born) what it might be like to encounter world for the first time. In this attempt at imagining such initial encounters (which can never quite succeed because I can only partially abstract from my familiarity with world), some essential phenomenological characteristics of world come to the fore: world always precedes me as a meaningful context that I did not bring about, and this is one dimension of the world's uncanniness. Derrida, following Celan, refers to the "unreadability" of world (*Rams*, 147) which becomes manifest in its complexity, preventing full comprehension. To be sure, this is one of those paradoxical moments where it holds true that we always already have read the world, and will need to read it to the child, despite the ultimate unreadability of world. – This time, we need to transform the initial sentence a bit more: "The world is unreadable, I must carry you". At the same time, going beyond Celan but following the general phenomenological finding that a disappearance of world (as in anxiety) can mean a revelation of world because concealment and disclosure are in general closely linked: "If I must carry you, the world (re)appears." Considering the relations between me, you, and world -- or, in our case, mother, child, and world --, it turns out that pregnancy is not simply about two entities, one being located *in* the other. Rather, it involves a number of complex relations between these two beings and their respective relations to world. The paradox of pregnancy thus indeed serves as a paradigm for our experience of others and of world, informing us of a more interrelated existence in which we carry the Other and their world: the Other who has always already touched us.

V. Butoh

We have thus seen that world in the phenomenological sense is a helpful concept in thinking about pregnancy, and that it can easily accommodate the Other, or intersubjectivity (better understood as intercorporeality). Pregnancy is an experience of oneness as it is still me, and some alien creature inside which is alien (at least from a certain point), to be sure, but alien in a much more vague sense than another human being would be. This alienness within is initially not very different from other forms of a kind of inaccessibility in myself that I am used to, such as the body becoming strange in sickness or the way in which the Other gets under my skin. This latter experience, the responsibility for the Other who calls on me, often

despite myself, is explored also in Doris Dörrie's *Cherry Blossoms (Kirschblüten – Hanami, 2008)*, a remarkable film about Japan as the alienworld, Japan.¹³ It is a very phenomenological film in the way in which it discloses the everyday, even in pace and certainly dialogu. At the same time, it confronts us with the existential extremes, the meaning of life and death. The film raises these questions, but does not consider them, except very indirectly through its Butoh scenes.

Butoh is expression of the Japanese cultural world. It is therefore an invaluable tool to supplement phenomenology, in a way which is admittedly presented here in a very condensed fashion.¹⁴ World is a phenomenological key concept, yet normally hidden because it is so excessively familiar to us, and thus entirely taken for granted. Art is one way of confronting us with world because it is the special power of an artwork that it can set up a historical world, as Heidegger explains in "The Origin of the Work of Art."¹⁵ Art that sets up a cultural world, like Butoh, has a double potential to help us explore a hidden phenomenon, like female corporeality, because it confronts us with what we take for granted by way of art and by way of the alien. An encounter with the alienworld is instructive because the alienworld is a context that I cannot take for granted, but that I recognise to be the familiar meaningful world for others.¹⁶ Such an encounter might thus make me aware of the significance of world in general.

Yet Butoh has not yet really come to reveal the world of female corporeality to us as it remains in many ways on the level of potential.¹⁷ It is off to a promising start that is worth recounting here briefly, especially since the two reasons that have prevented it are in some sense external, empirical, or contingent: Butoh's founder, and the Japanese conservative attitude regarding the female body. We will get back to the latter point in the next section. For now, let me just note that Butoh's founder Hijikata was mostly interested in thematising

¹³ The most well-known example of a Western exploration of the Japanese alienworld is Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003).

¹⁴ For a detailed explanation of these connections, see my forthcoming *Hegel, Husserl, and the Phenomenology of Historical Worlds*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, especially Chapters 6 and 10.

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Basic Writings*, ed. D.F. Krell., San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993, p. 170.

¹⁶ Mezur explains how being strangers (even when they return to Japan) is an intrinsic part of what it means to be a Butoh dancer. Mezur, Katherine, "Stranger Communities: Art Labour and Berliner Butoh," *Theatre Research International*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2014, pp. 217–232.

¹⁷ Note also Curtin's article which aims to "uncover the disruptive potential of early Butoh" in such a way as to open up "possibilities for women beyond those compatible with the male ideal." Catherine Curtin, "Woman as Plaything? Configurations of the Feminine in Japanese Butoh," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 25:4, 2015, p. 546.

taboos around homosexual embodiment.¹⁸ Female embodiment only came into the picture for him in a vaguely psychoanalytical fashion, including images of the pregnant body as abject.¹⁹ Yet the potential in Butoh to engage with female embodiment is clearly there because Butoh aims to undo taboos around our embodiment and strives to counter the artificial elegance of ballet by returning us to the ‘crude’ and ‘real’ body. Furthermore, Butoh includes several elements that facilitate the shift to break with the everyday, such as caricature, slowness, and basic structures. It would thus be particularly well suited for an exploration of hidden forms of embodiment, which in Japan include particularly pregnancy and birth..

VI. Child’s Breath

Child’s Breath takes the idea of Butoh into the Western world. The piece is based on a poem by Bruce Teifer (New York) and has been performed in the United States and Germany.²⁰ It is thus merging the idea of Butoh dance with Western elements. It discloses several important elements around pregnancy and birth, as outlined below; but it fails to convey pregnant corporeality as such, especially the loss of the habit body, and the new adjustment to world which the pregnant body calls for.

Some other features of giving birth are brought out very well and confirm the enormous potential of Butoh for exploring corporeality. A crucial feature is slowness. By slowing down all movements and accompanying it with an almost painfully slow music, Butoh confronts us with the body in an abnormal mode which we saw in the first section above to be disclosive. At normal everyday pace, the body just rushes through the world, from one engagement to the other. Slow movement brings the body and its movement to the fore – not just through slow motion, like a technically altered film, but through the performance and celebration of slowness. When we ask what a step is, we have difficulties giving a satisfying response. Butoh gives us such a response by performing steps in the emphatic sense, and other movements as well.

¹⁸ Kazuo Ohno & Yoshito Ohno, *Kazuo Ohno's World from Without and Within*, trans. John Barrett, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004.

¹⁹ Curtin, “Woman as Plaything? Configurations of the Feminine in Japanese Butoh,” explores this in detail with the help of Kristeva, Butler, and Irigaray, including photographs.

²⁰ A visual recording is available here (accessed August 2016):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEosV0EI40>.

It was performed at Northport Public Library in October 2013 and in Regensburg in November 2013.

Pregnancy also slows us down, as we have seen in the second section above. It slows us down and returns us into our bodies where being touched from the inside happens. Pregnancy slows down everything, in awaiting a strange event, an event in which something strange is given to us. Something strange is to be disclosed. When the female dancer enters the stage (without her body displaying any signs of pregnancy in the ordinary sense), she comes from concealment, from behind the veils – a performance of un-concealment. The dancer moves as if being a body in the world for the first time. She appears like a strange animal or creature, fingers stretched out high, reminiscent of shadow games which easily evoke birds. But here, also in the movement, there is receptivity, opening up to the sky, air, breath.

Yet in order for a true engagement with female corporeality, pregnancy and birth to be truly explored through Butoh dance, a different approach to these matters would need to emerge in the Japanese culture. Due to the 2014 case of Sayaka Osakabe that was discussed in the international media, it has come to general attention that pregnant women and recent mothers find themselves in a difficult situation in Japan; this has led to the promising establishment of Matahara Net²¹, a network against harassment around maternity in the workplace. Around 60% of women leave their jobs in Japan when they have their first child. This is not so much due to the legal situation as rather due to social perceptions. Japan places strong emphasis on work discipline, usually including long hours. Taking maternity leave is conceived – in the Japanese culture and many others – as placing a special strain on co-workers. Only clear provisions around maternity leave could help remedy this, making it clear that maternity leave does not disadvantage co-workers; yet many other countries including the UK do not have such provisions either.²²

As we have learned through many memorable examples from Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir that culminate in the ambiguous statement from *No Exit*: “Hell is other people,” others indeed have an enormous impact on our self-perception and especially our emotional life. Returning from maternity leave and partly meeting hostile attitudes from others is a very difficult experience because it makes work unenjoyable at a time when it is

²¹ <http://www.mataharanet.org>.

²² The UK Parliament has recently published a report on pregnancy and maternity discrimination for which I submitted evidence. It is published here: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmwomeq/90/90.pdf>

difficult to find the energy to do the work well, due to sleep-deprivation and other difficulties of adjusting to one's radically altered world.²³

Understanding the world transformative changes that becoming a mother brings with it can help designing compensatory measures.²⁴ *Child's Breath* shows us some of these world transformations, such as feeling exposed to the elements, sky, air, breathing and earth, ground, weight. It also shows how all of this happens through our body, which deserves much closer exploration, and it is my hope that Butoh will undertake such a closer exploration of female corporeality, including pregnancy and birth. But what we already see in *Child's Breath* is the importance of relations, of giving the gift and sharing the gift. And what a difficult gift it is to share: it leaves us cross-armed, like the X or *chi* in Merleau-Ponty's idea of reversibility, as we realise how intertwined our worlds are.

We carry worlds within and relate to the shared world outside, and we are part of many relational worlds that are difficult to negotiate. Relations are confusing. Butoh makes them slower, focuses us on the body, on intercorporeality, being from body to body. For this, a rhythm needs to be found, and Butoh reminds us that this rhythm can be difficult, almost painful, sometimes shrill. This world, this unreadable world is difficult to navigate. But now and then, an event occurs that focuses us, like a stone that symbolises the infant in *Child's Breath*. An alien, we hold it awkwardly, with crossed arms. But once it reminds us that pregnancy, birth and being with infants are paradigmatic for existence in general, we might realise the only way to carry a stone with crossed arms: by doing it slowly, relating to one another from body to body, in the most elemental ways.

Title Abbreviations:

BT = *Being and Time* (Martin Heidegger)

OT = *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy* (Jacques Derrida)

PhP = *Phenomenology of Perception* (Maurice Merleau-Ponty)

²³ If this is furthermore met by judgmental attitudes about the work since it is a widespread implicit assumption that recent mothers produce inferior work, due to being distracted or weak or indeed sleep-deprived. Yet it is obviously a faulty argument that this would necessarily make the work inferior, as one can compensate through time/sleep management and overcompensated effort.... Yet this can easily give rise to a vicious circle that leaves recent mothers exhausted and discouraged at work.

²⁴ Simple examples at work include allowing for worktime adjustments to milk-pumping time, or creating conditions for the possibility of taking a nap, to name just two practical possibilities.

Rams = “Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue. Between Two Infinities, the Poem” (Jacques Derrida)

VI = The Visible and the Invisible (Maurice Merleau-Ponty)

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