

**A Description of Costume Materiality in Consideration  
to Gender & Sexuality. What Insights Does This Give  
Us for An Ongoing Performance Costume Practice.**

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If we look at the word materiality in isolation, what is its basic definition? It is, by definition, the quality of being composed of matter, the quality of being relevant or significant (in law), or more subjectively a material quality or thing. Within these most basic definitions, there is a clear nuance between definitions. The simplest distinction is being a thing, physical and present that is made of actual matter. Secondly to be relevant is, as I read it to materialise something of relevancy, though I don't think it needs to be literally physical. And finally, it can refer to the material quality, the thingness of a thing. This is fairly straightforward. Now to do away with the isolation, and look at the word in application, we find that it potentially becomes complicated by its usage for a broad scope of disciplines and areas of thought, it is easy to get lost in the nuances. Although materiality refers to a material quality, a tangibility, as an applicable notion it arguably refuses tangibility. This is a never-ending issue with grasping materiality

In accounting, it is an auditing concept of importance and relevancy, whereas, in the social sciences, materiality refers to how a cultural artefacts physical qualities impact on our interaction with it, thus affecting how it is used and related to both personally and culturally. This is much more akin to its intention within the arts, where it has become increasingly trendy within the in the past decade or so, particularly in consideration to the fine arts. It is something of a buzz word, no doubt a reaction to the post-Duchamp era of conceptual art, where ideas are prized above all else. In conceptual art it can be easy to forget the importance of material quality and how we experience it. In a fine art context, materiality often comes to describe the felt impact of a material presence, in materialising an immaterial something, and also in a similar vein to the approach of the social sciences, is fixed to the traces of the making process. That is, the perceivable presence of the artist, the material traces they leave. How do we then utilise the term in consideration of theatre and performance's most centrally material component, the performance costume?

As a conceptual framework, it has precedents in philosophy and is increasingly centred in ecology and the fine arts, as a discussion, levelling humanities hierarchy in the world of matter. Object-oriented ontology continues to redress this balance in galleries all over the planet, as a focus of materialism. This is arguably a reaction to the threat of looming environmental disaster, as well as a result of our more personal 'democratic imaginations interrupting our anthropocentric hubris' (Bennet: preface), and a reaction to our increasingly digital online half-lives.

A costume is a material thing. By this we can refer to more than the textile materials most commonly used in their construction, but also to a costumes thingness, its quality as a thing, its material quality. We already know that costumes are more than just frivolous objects. They are symbolic and read as such, telling us immediately about the 'characters' they clothe. This is what we call semiotic dress and it largely, though not exclusively dominates the world of costume. At the very least it is the founding approach to costume design and practice that is built on in varying degrees between practitioners. Donatella Barbieri describes costumes as 'socially situated, communal acts, time-limited, deliberate and discrete - (they) connect the body with the material world as no other stage "object" (137). In this statement, Barbieri identifies several important facets of costume. That they are signifying cultural objects, viewed in a temporal space, as well as drawing focus to their proximity to the body, the physical real, and thus their complexity as cultural signifiers that also have a unique connection with our bodies and bodily experience.

Aoife Monks describes the constant juggling act that takes place when critically and theoretically considering the phenomenon of the performing costume: 'it's important to resist the temptation to interpret, to look for the meanings beyond or beneath the dress while ignoring the dress as dress. On the other hand, it's also crucial to resist the desire to look at surfaces alone, to fetishise the object of costume without attending to its possible affects on actor and spectator alike'. (Monks:11) When focusing on a particular element of costume, it is easy to lose sight of the other elements that work in conjunction with it and complicates interpreting the costume effect as well as how and why that effect is produced. She then uses the analogy of an onion, stating that costumes, unlike onions are not constructed with layers of meaning, (though are often constructed by layering), with a truth situated at the core. A poignant analogy, given that I have crafted an entire work (Smells Like Butter), on peeling back the layers of queer/female representation and appropriation, and questioned if this is too simplistic a metaphorical gestural act. They are intact, as she describes, more akin to 'a kaleidoscope, with the same ingredients creating new effects and outcomes depending on how it is viewed'. This is a vastly superior analogy of costumes performative effect, considering how a single factor, physical, material, environmental, or contextual can shift the effect of the performance costume. Costumes are unstable, never fully knowable, subjective scenographic modes that live half live between actor and object, reality and simulacrum, semiotic and phenomenological, they are conscious and constantly in contact with the unconscious, the uncanny, the deeply familiar and completely undefinable. Often in Modernist theatre, a costume's role is to perform unseen, but really it is always in what Monks calls the periphery of view, and occasionally it slips strangely into focus. Sometimes a costume's sole purpose is to perform this strangeness, offering peculiarities and pleasures.

To scale the problem of the performing costume phenomenon, and locate its ambiguous materiality within costume practice, I am citing Rachel Han's consideration of scenography from a position of orientation. That all aspects of the scenographic experience, staged or otherwise, contribute to orientate the space and of course the viewer. Han describes a porous understanding of theatre which I suspect will extend to the materiality of costume, in light that it is the conceptual effect of a scenographic factor, rather than a definite and concrete thing itself.

Within this investigation we will also be required to at times, isolate and comprehend the nature of experience made by the speculation and empirical conditions of performance.

For the past two years I have been working towards what I would describe as an integrated performance practice, by which I mean an post discipline approach to performance costume rather than a cross-discipline approach. In my search to challenge the orthodoxy of the designer's role within performance practice and world building, I gravitated to the term materiality, finding it flexible enough to float ideas and experimentation in as well as being vague enough to get quite lost in. Materiality is not a concept I have or would ever expect to come across in the traditional script led arena of theatre that I have been experienced in, but it is certainly the can't of change in perspective and consideration that I am looking for out of an integrated and collaborative performance practice. It is for this reason that I have chosen to produce this research paper, in the hopes of informing and developing my own ongoing costume practice from it.

I am also developing this paper with particular consideration to Gender and Sexuality, although it is not a guiding point of research, because of their prevalence within my work over the past two years. Hopefully developing my understanding and competence in utilising a gendered or sexuality oriented costume materiality, as it is already a prevalent theme within my work. I have found a semiotic led approach to costume design is ill-equipped to develop an embodied queer lineage from, an academic analysis source, on etymology and the cultural landscape it is woven through. I was in search of an embodied notion, that entered relational experience, that could be lived, and absorbed, and felt. Materiality appealed to me, given that our material experience of the world permeates our metaphoric language (something I've been looking closely at developing my Pansy performance concept), and this is particularly true in regards to textile. We relate our day to day happenings to textile analogies with frequent alacrity, even quite habitually. It is deeply woven into our use of language.

'The wealth of meanings that are found in the everyday metaphors derived from our physical proximity to fabric indicates the extent to which meaning originates in sensation. Sense was not always antithetical to sensibility, and in ontogenetic terms, it is through maternal reverie that the matrix of "primary maternal preoccupation" (Winnicott 1987) that sensation and physical experience is transmuted into meaning and from there further transformed into language.' This quote establishes the premise of an important connection made between the close proximity relationship to textiles we all share, the way experience the world on a sensorial level, process experience and meaning, that ultimately shows up in our use of language. This challenges the ocularcentric view of how we experience and process the world that should be taken into consideration throughout this paper.

Within scenography and more particularly performance costume, we are habitually concerned with modes of expression, so too are we concerned with such actions in anthropology. I had originally intended to apply Clifford Geertz' technique of the thick description to the materiality of performance costume, as a system for guiding my research and observation. A thick description is a microanalysis, an anthropological form of qualitative research used to describe a phenomenon in sufficient detail to assess the degree to which a conclusive and transferable observation can be made.

My intention by framing this study around a thick description was not only to gain a better understanding of how I utilise materiality within my own practice but that instinctively or with overt and relevant intention for a particular performance. But also to enact a kind of materiality through this text in its own right, as part of the aim of a thick description, is to experience a sense of verisimilitude through reading. This outcome was described by Denzin as 'truth like statements that produce for readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described' (Denzin, 1989:83-34). The effect of such a description would undoubtedly be a verbal materiality, that may help us comprehensively conceive materiality in all of its transferable but ambiguous nature.

In order to centre my own specific interest in performance costume materiality, I have opted to process and present an interpretation of a thick description, and have forgone some of the larger societal investigative requirements in order to focus on theatre performance minded study.

I will, however, consider the micro scale of costume materiality by using Dorothea Tannings move from painted canvas to soft textile sculpture as an example of textile materiality.

This will be followed by going to the macro scale to consider case studies of performance costume materiality including; Equus 2019 production at the Royal Stratford East, Pina Bausch's 1975 production of The Rite of Spring, and the Sound Suits of American artist Nick Cave. In each of the case studies, there is consideration given to the gender & or sexuality represented or addressed within the work, or in Dorothea Tannings case gender bias surrounding her use of a textile materiality. These examples have been chosen because; the material impact of textile is integral to the analysis of performance costume given its prevalence in costume making, costume materiality needs to be considered beyond the physical costume, and costume materiality needs to be understood as not being confined to the stage.

What we will find in this almost thick description is that culture is semiotic, and that semiotic culture is often material.

### **Materialising A Textile Materiality**

We move now, from the contextual conversation of materiality to discussing its presence and application, through Dorothea Tanning's transition from her early style of painting to her famous soft sculptures, from the symbolic to the abject materialised. The nature of materiality is found at the core of her transition, and the lack of critical discourse around her sculptures correlates with the underdeveloped theoretical conversation around costume. This is certainly no mere coincidence.

In the same way as Barbieri states it was only in the early 20th century that 'Theatre then emerged for the first time as a serious art form, whereas before no one had considered any performance, even classical dance (ballet), as having anything like the high seriousness of painting sculpture, or music' (138), fine art is not without its hierarchical prejudices.

Tanning said, 'In the first years I was painting on our side of the mirror -the mirror for me is a door-but I think that I have gone over to a place where one no longer faces identities at all' (From Tanning's interview with Alain Jouffroy). Initially, Tanning was approaching surrealism and alterity through the oculo-centrism inherent to the world of Modernist painting as set out in surrealism by Andre Breton, its founding father. She was dominated by semiotics and symbolic language, evident in her early paintings, where she places female bodies, often her own, in worlds that are reached just on the other side of this. Crossing thresholds of windows halls, walls, mirrors and doorways, on the mirror.

As she transitions to materialising something of a human, possibly female form, through her soft sculptures, Tanning arguably crosses into the heart of the borderland, into a far more abstruse world, defined by Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, that parallels the surrealist approach of George Bataille. He aimed for what Sienna Freeman sites as an 'anti-dialectic experience of otherness beyond the symbolic realm' (19), locating a departure between the physiological and the psychological. In the same vein, the abject wields the psychological and the aesthetic by, as Freeman describes, offering 'a counter approach to patriarchal psychoanalytic theory by considering a confrontation between self and other before a child takes up a permanent position in the symbolic order of language'(24), that is, the pre-symbolic. Tanning leaves two acknowledged Patriarchal strongholds by utilising the



Dorothea Tanning, *Chambre 202, Hôtel du Payot*, 1970–73.

CENTRE POMPIDOU, PARIS

materiality of tactile cloth, first by her departure from the rigid ideal of the canvas and secondly in her embodied manifestations seemingly unconcerned with semiotic conditioning and dominance, the prerequisite of established surrealism.

This is also not dissimilar to Claire Pajackowska establishing how 'the spectators gaze is first and foremost an infantile gaze', that is to say as spectators we always look first from the position of the infant, and this never leaves us. It is difficult for those of us who are now conditioned to symbolic law, our ocularcentric cultural theology and the language structures that underpin it all to reconsider how much of a haptic experience we actually have of the world, whereas at infancy this is all we have. Pajackowska then states 'That the gaze is mediated by curtains as symbols of the unseen and unseeable,' that is of primary significance (Pajackowska:228). She speaks of an instinctual subconscious established through the use of a curiously tactile metaphor, phrasing that in itself is imbued with materiality. She is describing the ever cyclical nature of textile, materiality and the subconscious, a bodily connection. The metaphorical involvement of the unconscious is in the weave of cloth, ever present due to its close proximity with infants, forming connection, and an experience of the world, before being superseded by language, that enforces a symbolic ordering of the world.

The infantile gaze is often referenced within textile critical dialogue. It is how we instinctually associate fabric with the protective and comforting role it plays in our lives, tending to our physiological needs. Curtains, clothes and bed sheets are all everyday interactions where textiles both shield and comfort us, further compounding this association, a material

association, and an infantile gaze, that is instinctual. This association is not lost in Tanning Hotel as her figures are transmuted in and of the walls and furnishings.

A prime example of Tannings surreal materiality is Hôtel du Pavot busy with figures that embody abject's vague otherness within a Victorianesque sitting room. The bodies sit in 'fusions and fissures between inside and outside of the body, or self and other' (Freeman: 25), in parts being excreted and in others being subsumed or absorbed.

In their threshold positions, the figures compound their proximity to the viewer, as 'mediating bodily interactions with the world at borderland sites of the body such as the skin and mouth—thresholds for the experience of the abject' (Freeman:24). Tannings fascination with the borderland is felt and experienced with everybody in the Hotel. In the Hotel, we are held in transition.

The active nature of the bodies are all together haptic, liminal and familiar. Though warped and morphed they mirror our own liminality, our corporeal nature, materialised and abject.



Dorothea Tanning, Time and Place, 1970–73.  
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They are human like and uncanny, Tannings “living cloth”. ‘Tannings sculptures are ‘eliciting thoughts of our own abject corporeal fusions and divisions, the sculptures evoke the presence of a material “other” that is disturbingly like ourselves’ (Freeman: 28). Everything about Tannings soft sculptures is at all times, both relational and disturbing. This was every bit Tannings intention, to embody our feeling of ourselves, in proximity to her textile figures, and ultimately to remind of us our own fragility, mirrored in her abject creations. She is quoted as saying ‘Some people said they won’t last. Too bad they aren’t hard. Things like that. They might as well of said, too bad they aren’t dead.’ This is a marvellous quote when you consider how Dorothea fully intended to materialise fragility in her work, as in reality, love and life are delicate soft things that never last. Her sculptures are prone to degrade just as we are. We can also, perhaps detect a contempt for the neglect and lack of reverie given to her ‘textile craft’, in comparison to her paintings, as well detect just how alive and corporeal her soft sculptures were for her.

There is undoubtedly a scenographic observation to be made of Hôtel du Pavot. In *Beyond Scenography*, Rachel Han establishes the scenographic as being distinctly related to orientation. She states that ‘Materiality . . . denotes not only a physical or visual object, but also a system of relations between objects, bodies and motion. Building on Ahmed’s conflation of proximity with otherness, my approach of place orientation draws attention towards the means by which theatre places individuals and the modes by which these same individuals place themselves within materiality (an affective atmosphere)’ (Han:37). In the case of Hôtel du Pavot, I would argue we do find ourselves, as viewers, drawn into scenographic proximity with the soft sculptures, despite the work being presented effectively as a museum diorama. The fleshy figures are ingesting, assimilating the corporeal space of the Hotel, of the furnishings they seep from and are consumed by the Hotel. As viewers, we are drawn into that action, pulled compelled and repulsed, by a kinetic connection to the cloth and an abject familiarity with the contorted figures. Here the folds and twists of the corporeal body are manifest as the folds and twists of soft but utilitarian home textiles, becoming one and the same. The figures depicted share a sympathetic material, textual aesthetic with one another and their environment, which we have already established an embodied connectivity with. In this way, a material association is created between the half-life figures, the borders of the room, the borders of the abject, and ourselves, by a materiality that is not only textile but scenographic.

In other cases, such as with costume, textile’s materiality is often subordinate to its symbolic reading. In everyday life, we see and read textile clothing, a kind of everyday costume, by reading it symbolically. Our clothes are semiotic. They tell the world about who we are and the choices we make.

This is worth serious consideration when comparing audience reception of textile artworks and sculptures compared with performance costume. However, in Tannings works, the materiality of her sculptures take president as they are not formed so much from a semiotic alphabet, but instead speak to us with a bodily familiarity, and are seen by our infantile gaze.

But its also worth considering that given our close and intimate proximity to textiles, that they are a materialisation of the personal and political, whether that is seen through the infant gaze, or read symbolically.

In the next section, we explore materiality in the absence of cloth and apparent costume.



## Materiality Of The Un-costumed Costume

Graduating from the microfocus of the materiality of textiles and the gallery experience, we will now observe the materiality of the performance costume on stage. Noticeably in this main case study, there is a very distinct lack of textile taking us to the opposite side of the costume materiality spectrum.

*Equus*, written by Peter Schaffer in 1973, is a play in which 'a deranged stable boy, who worships horses, and engages in ritual bareback horse-riding intended to unite his human nature with the horses animalism' (Barbieri:14) I was recently fortunate enough to see Ned Bennet's version of *Equus* at the Royal Stratford East, that will soon transfer to central London, designed by Georgia Lowe, lighting designed by Jessica Hung Han Yun, and with movement by director Shelley Maxwell. I make a point now of mentioning all three of these contributing creative as they have provided a brilliantly affecting, and congenial example of not only costume materiality that is expansive intrinsic, and dependent to the larger scenographic materiality, and vice versa. We will come to see why throughout this section.

In the early moments of the play we have a specific introduction to the central horse character, Nugget, played by Ira Mandela, almost as an aside where the only immediately obvious point is to meet the audience. Ira enters steadily to the centre of the stage, he is only wearing small black shorts, almost boxers, simple and discrete. His physicality is at first marvellously intriguing and very quickly becomes quietly and captivatingly transformative. The material effect of the skin and postured anthropomorphic muscular movements, combined with the wider scenographic atmosphere are beautiful and well considered. As Ira stops centre stage, he huffs a deep breath of mist out through his nostrils the way that horses do, intense, powerful, and other, compared with our own usual breathing manner, before leaving the stage with all the muscular grace of a powerful horse moving clankingly slower than his muscles are made to go. There is a scenographic presence established in this moment.

Immediately we aware this is an *Equus* that has spurned the usual route of anthropomorphising men with the use of masks, that is synonymous with the production. It is a bold and vital choice. These previous productions inevitably create the effect of 'marginalized fragmented identity through animal embodiment' (Barbieri:12), splicing the clearly clothed and performing body of the actor with the theatricality of a prop horses head or mask. The jarring figure can be very difficult to place in an atmospheric drama with sexual and violent scenes. In *Costume in Performance*, Donatello Barbieri describes the 'embodiment uniting human and animal in one body' (15) effect of the shaman figure, undoubtedly achieved in part by the immersive traditional effects of the ritual by firelight, in the midst of natures, sights sounds and smells. In the absence of this immersion *Equus* takes place on a theatre stage and so it is worth pondering how much scenography, and perhaps Rachel Hans description of the stage as 'space' rather than 'place', (more on this later) can do to appease the alternative route of an un-costumed costume.

Aoife Monks describes the 'double vision' (13), which applied, in this case, might ultimately rule, a man performing without the protective fiscal of the established theatrical costume convention (mask work), might feel uncannily distracting or feel too much like seeing the



Ira Mandela Siobhan (Young  
Horseman,Nugget), Ethan Kai (Alan Strang)  
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bare mechanics rather than the show. The partial nudity of the actors, men also have the potential stage what Monks calls a 'drop in power' (109), where the public exposure of the male body risks inviting ridicule or objective voyeurism. This risk should be crippled given the jumps being made by audience members to suspend their disbelief as they watch a man anthropomorphise and watch the homoerotic, borderline bestial relationship that plays out. *Equus* does not, however, fall victim to these pitfalls for several reasons. There is a transmogrification of power that we are inclined to accept due to the virtuosity of Ira's embodiment of a horse. It is convincing, an intimidating presence and profound, which also magnifies the sensuous masculine thematic that saturates the play.

Rachel Han 'argues that the notion of orientation focuses on the bodily methods through which place, as a material situation of spatial imaginary, is felt. As with Ahmed and Gibson's usages, place orientation is body-centric as it focuses on holistic systems of sensory encounter'(Han: 37). In this production, I feel we can see something of what Han means here, in that the material presence of the horses' bodies are not just impressive but scenographically, are more than just their muscular physical perimeters. To return to my initial description of Ira huffing a deep breath of mist out through his nostrils. This initial meeting not only established the approach and presence of the horses, unique to this production, we also see an internal essence expelled outwards. The horse is often then staged engulfed in that mist essence, creating a presence much greater than the restrictions of the human body particularly when that body grows in number for Alan (the central character to orgasmically bestrides Nugget to climax. I am peculiarly more inclined to believe the spectral spirit of the horse inhabit Ida's body than I am to believe he moved so convincingly as a horse, or I am at least happy to suspend my disbelief for the duration of the play. Even as the horse grows bodily in number imbued with muscular power, I am happy to accept this I suspect in part because the scenographic materiality has primed me for it.

'Its what material (scenography) does not what it is . . . Scenography concerns itself with a concept of 'space' rather than 'place', that is to say, 'place' is an ideological 'material circumstance' whereas 'space' is 'always ideological in its formative conception: as an ordering of materiality.' (Han:23) Lowes pristine white curtains, at times clinical, while at other points fade into the background, are favoured over busy place orienting scenery, because, as Han explains the stage is ordered by the ideology of the play. There's no need for it when a visceral, palpable materiality is established from the start. An embodied materiality that is felt in a bigger and more atmospheric, air is shared by one and all in the auditorium, as one and all are living breathing corporeal liminal creatures, a connection is established with the spectral horse that seems to inhabit Ida's body, and his fate hangs in the air also. We are in a space of materiality embodied; place is obsolete.

Even with an encompassing scenography it quite a tall suspension of disbelief to accept, a queer ritualised passion with a horse. So it is perhaps also worth us considering the effects of kinetic empath, which will also be a great help to us in the following section where the somatic continues to be very much of the materiality felt. Reynolds and Reason coined the term 'Kinetic empathy' of the audience to speak of something deeply instinctual within us all. 'Such empathy is not emotional sympathy, nor is it identification with a performer, but is much more visceral and physical-and largely sensed below the level of conscious thought' (Trimingham:138). Kinetic sympathy is about a physical understanding. This makes sense when to put in the simplest terms, we consider how the brain is made of matter, just as our bodies, and the bodies of others man or animal, are made of matter, and that messages between the body and the brain travel through and are of matter, it is unsurprising that there should be a sympathetic and felt understanding between objects of matter. An understanding that is felt more readily and instinctually than the objective cognitive process of reading the symbolic order of the world, processing and relaying that message to other appropriate bodily systems. To elaborate on this point further, we should also discuss Gibson's idea of the "haptic sense", by which he means how we experience our environment with our entire body, a kind of 'whole body sense of touch'(Trimingham:137). With both of these points in mind, we have to consider then the fact that the body informs how we think, it is instinctually, constantly feeding us information. So when we experience an atmospheric psychological presence, an aura, anchored to a transmorphic physicality, perhaps the virtuosity of the performers' posture is enough to trick our haptic sense, or our kinaesthetic empathy into suspending disbelief, whilst, ideally, our brains are pleased enough to follow and go along with it too. It is then not such a great leap of anthropomorphising when you also consider that 'It is the perceptual system by which animals are literally in touch with the environment (Gibson:1966).

Another angle to interrogate the effective anthropomorphising through pure physicality is by considering the 'potential transformation of identity, through the enactment of rituals of gendered, social and cultural roles' (Nolan and Mitchell:218). We can safely assume, if we look at it with the perspective of gender, that it would be a far bigger leap for an audience to accept a women playing the strong muscular action of Nugget, given that she would be going even further from her socio-cultural role as female, feminine, girly, and ideally petite and slender, than it is for a muscular man to go. Perhaps also we should consider the mention of rituals, in a play where the central homoerotic relationship is a deeply ritualistic one, carried out by a boy who is psychological ill-equipped to appease his faith with his homosexual feelings. If the ritualised manner of the relationship helps to placate some of



Ira Mandela Siobhan (Young  
Horseman,Nugget), Ethan Kai (Alan Strang)  
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our discomfort or disbelief around these central figures, we should also consider the perspective of this spectral physiological equine, who given his embodied connectivity with the scenographic and elegant materiality displayed, might unsurprisingly have a greater sensitivity to human emotional states than we already know horses as well as many other animals to have. Does this help bridge those leaps in disbelief? And is it bolstered by the seductive materiality of the production and of the uncostumed costume?

It is tempting to say there is no such thing as an uncostumed costume. In the absence of a relevant textile or otherwise physical clothing item, there is no costume. But Han states that 'the body is physical emotional experiential, a complex performative dynamic that is central to a costume practice and its reading' and that 'scenography can only fully be understood as a richness of lived materiality and the orientations that proceed from this experiential context'(Han:134) To describe the materiality of Equus and more specifically Ida's physicality of that materiality as not emotional, experiential, or of a rich lived materiality, would, in my opinion, be inaccurate. And if we have established anything within this discussion on Equus, it is that the embodied physicality and materiality is a complex performative dynamic to understand and requires consideration of costume practice and concessions.

Besides all this, it is a costume choice not, as was done in the original production of Equus, dress "the actors wear tracksuits of chestnut velvet" and "tough masks of silver wire and leather". A prop head coupled with the muscular flesh and physicality employed would likely feel incongruent, topping an embodied flesh horse, with an imitatory literal likeness of a horse. I suspect the broader scenographic materiality of the horse would also be compromised if not a little restricted by a head that insisted on outlining the horse. With a clothed or theatrical approach to costuming the horse, it is of course also very difficult to

embody and materials the sensuous sexual anxiety at the heart of the play. In Bennet's *Equus*, Alan's equine obsession plays out as a visceral metaphor for the homosexual urges he struggles to understand and thus ritualise, it is allowed to go further and become explicit in the materiality of Ida as Nugget.

This play wouldn't benefit from a miraculous visual transformation to what you would draw a horse to be, complete with hoofs and tail, but instead basks embodied manner of its materiality.

### Materiality In Chorus



Pina Bausch and Rolf Borzik's *Rite of Spring*, first staged 1975. Photograph by Zerrin Aydin-Herwegh.

Though Ned Bennet's *Equus* achieved a visceral materiality in its exclusion of a material costume, it should not be assumed that this is essential for achieving such an effect. In 1975 Pina Bausch's Tanztheater Wuppertal debuted their interpretation of *The Rite of Spring*, designed by Rolf Borzik. The ballet is a series of choreographic episodes, ritual spring dances that eventually culminate in the sacrifice of one of the female dancers, known as the Chosen One.

Like in *Equus* there is a visceral materiality that fills the stage enveloping everyone in it. It is a subdued organic aesthetic all but for the red voile shift dress of the female sacrifice, marking

her out as the latest in a long line of female casualties to the stage. The visceral scenes depict gendered tribalism materially and physically. The muscular physique of the male dancers is on show here, but they don't risk Aoife Monks 'drop in power' (10), wearing generic black slacks, we avoid the titillation or possible humour of an (almost) fully exposed physique. What we do have is a brooding chorus of masculine monolith(Barbieri:55), situated next to the delicate and tender fleshy bodies of the female chorus. They perform, exhausted and bemired, sweaty and continuing compulsively, irrationally. 'Through the corporeal materiality of the body/costumes in the elemental muddy space, a palpable performance can be sensed by the audience, witnessing the heavily breathing sweating bodies materially and physically transform' (Barbieri:56). From Barbieri's description we can taste the air, sweat and soil, but are also reminded of the audiences close proximity, who really can taste the air, and are implicated in the sacrifice, by being reflected and placed by the by both of the chorus casts, as well as by the enveloping materiality of the stage action. The carefully costumed chorus and scenographic materiality coalesce to pull the audience in as viscerally present and implicated witnesses.

In *Equus* Bennet's team successfully subvert our expectation for how the play is staged, and subsequently for what constitutes costume materiality, as well as very firmly placing it central to the scenographic experience and its affecting materiality. 'Scenographics are manifest in the potential of material cultures to evoke worlding thresholds that happen in time' (Han:134). Both *Equus* and Bausch, in fact seamlessly utilise material cultures, codes, and practices, be that audience expectations, or our willingness to witness violence, each enacting deeply engaging scenographic materialities, and material encounters. It is more of these material encounters that we will explore in our next case study.

## **A Material Explosion**

Barthes theory of the "endless garment" describes textiles as continuous and ongoing; his opinion is that textiles are 'bound' to the mainstream symbolic language whilst also being 'bound' to the margins, they risk being unseen if they are not addressed (As cited by Nolan and Mitchel:213). By this Barthes means to say that it is unavoidable for textiles to be interpreted symbolically, within the cultural lexicon, if they are not, they may be relegated to obscurity and subsequently lost completely. This theory of the endless garment speaks issues around cultural identity, technical process, anti-aesthetics i.e. 'punk', and ownership. These all issues addressed within the materiality of Nick Caves Sound Suits. His suits also provide great, but starkly contrasting opportunity for analysing the relevancy of the scenography and the haptic with interpretations of a costume materiality.

Nick Cave made his first sound suit when he was feeling especially vulnerable, right after the racially motivated beating of Rodney King by members of the Los Angeles police department. Nick said he "started to think of myself more and more as a black man-- as someone discarded, devalued, viewed as less than." Other artists in Caves position might choose to negotiate with their cultural identity in an attempt to communicate and reassert the narrative. But I would say Cave chose to utilise the body as site enactment, to perform meaning where performing meaning is most obvious, on the site of the body. And not only that but on the site of a political body othered and beaten. It is, therefore, a site in need of catharsis for the emotions it carries unseen, and to do this, he created a costume surrogate that can take the role to act out complex identities. His identity altering, full body skin suits adopt the lexicon of the carnival and relish their overt artificiality, even when constructed in





natural materials. The catharsis of the costumes provide freedom from the political body that is constantly, within the symbolic lexicon of the culture, benign, gendered, radicalised, sexualised and objectified. In a sound suit, a new cultural identity is allowed.

Han says that 'scenographic practices evoke attentive places or scenes through interventional methodologies, exceeding strict definitions of vision or spatiality'. (Han:133). There is an interventionality in the masking of Cave's suits that, just as Han describes, demands an attentive spatiality while, they far exceed the conventional definitions and spatiality of the public and political body. You could argue that as he so often places his suits, performative in the habitation, out in the general public, in the lexicon he re-politicises his scenographic suits, if this is the case then perhaps he succeeds in saving the body from the margins, although it's hard to know if the body within isn't rendered invisible. Either way, there is an undeniable materiality and presence to Cave's suits that hits you sometimes as a burst of energy. The technical process here provokes as much as it answers.

In a ritualistic re-collective aesthetic, where the physiological form is anamorphic while the psyche is masked 'the action of stitching & pattern making not only begets but often supersedes the product, opening out the symbolic meaning of the act.' (Nolan and Mitchel: 220) Does the collecting and crafting action take precedent, drawing all focus from the body? Perhaps that would happen if the suits weren't haptic and made to perform. Arguably, even in a gallery space, the materiality, scale, colour, texture, semiotic explosion has a materiality that is performing, not quite a figure or character but far from a simple object. Cave has intentionally made suits that feel and in-between spaces, being that they are almost sculptural, but not quite, they are almost the shaman but not really the intention of making people ask questions about the suits. That too is an embedded performativity that comes from the suits materiality.

The shamanist experience 'works as a lived affective experience and does not work when it is merely a symbolic demonstration of an idea' (Trimingham:138), the shaman is active, a kinetic body for a community member to view and experience. In the viewing, we draw upon muscle memory of the somatic and its confrontations, our kinetic empathy activated before a full reading of the symbolic shaman is drawn. This active visual notion is supported by Han who states that 'scenography can only fully be understood as a richness of lived materiality and the orientations that proceed from this experiential context' (Han:134),





**Titles: As Is by Nick Cave**  
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reframing the perspective to the body that inhabits the suite. Her orientation proceeds, here not just from the viewers' navigation of the suit, in its materiality and potential motion, but also from the wearers. How does the wearer navigate? How do they see and experience the scenography they inform, and how are they directed in their sensory motion? These questions are hard to answer without better knowledge of the wearers experience but seems safe to assume that the individual materiality scape of each suite would have quite individual haptic experiences of bodied scenography.

The anti-aesthetic of Caves suits are found in their nature as collected shamans garbs. Cave gathers huge amounts of unwanted disposed of material object from buttons and beads to metal spinning top toys, and directs his team in constructing varying sculptural and performative forms. He uses scraps as symbols of renewal. To think that these once disposed of things, margin bound are not only seen, utilised but actively seen with kinetic active sight, signify symbolic renewal but also are renewed in the materiality of the suits. They are both the signified and signifier situated in a materiality action, with a presence, an active presence far bigger than their actual physical form. Caves bodies are anchor points for explosions of renewal, transmogrified in glorious material energy that, the aesthetic is surprising celebratory, questionable but ultimately intently pleasing and exhilarating — the avant-gard shaman.

We should remind ourselves here of why performance does not necessarily need a linear narrative, that being that it is the body that is the mechanising factor, the thread that connects the body of the maker, the wearer, and the viewer, the body is shared, and between the three of them it is an embodied practice. 'Aoife Monks says that 'if we take fashion theorists seriously, who point to the ways in which clothing anchors and produces the social body, and embeds that body with a web of social and economic relations, we might need to acknowledge theatre costumes crucial role in the production of the body on stage.' (Monks:10), and also in the not theatre stage. When the social and economic signifiers are stripped from the body, replaced by a second skin, the body remains and is active in creating a caged space.

'That space has always, historically and ontogenetically, tended to be corporeal, an anthropomorphic space, the "second skin" of clothing that literally and metaphorically envelops the body and the self, within the orbit of meaning, the furnishing of religious, ritual or domestic space. The loom, viewed as aperture or portal, allows us to explore the contradictory status of textiles as cultural practice and the trouble that textiles cause for cultural criticism and analysis. Like the culinary arts, the textile arts combine the ambivalence that accrues to arts that are too proximate to be accorded the prestigious status of distant "object." This proximity is one of emotional not technical reality, and is a question of the uncanny' (Pajackowska:233) The second skin is a veil, ritual covering, it becomes a site situating space act, entering into the corporeal, it is anthropomorphised outside of itself and is purely semiotic value to be liminal and transgressive, the corporeal veil, contradictory and freeing all at the same time. The freeing nature of the corporeal then, however, begs the question of ownership, when placed in the public sphere, with a physical and material presence that is on an environmental scale.

Cave's work never fails to centre the body surrounded in performativity. His fur suit series does operate in a slightly different material context to the sculptural sound suits that are worth dissecting. These fur suits often perform as multiple materialised performative bodies. They're haptic and frankly hypnotising effect is made through the symbiosis of their movement and furry surfaces that reverberate, unified and rhythmical they coyote the bodies inside. They are the hyper haptic descendants of Wildmen: pagan costumes of the northern European regions mixed with Christian folklore in early Christian Europe. In the tradition of the Wildmen, pagan costumes, the effect is to close the fissure between the real and the simulacrum in fluid motion together. It is in the public space that 'representation and materiality intersect' (Nolan and Mitchell:209).



**Titles: As Is by Nick Cave**  
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For Nick Cave, costume materiality could never be confined to the stage, it is always explosive, with an overwhelming material presence, never viewed in isolation from its semiotic narrative, it has at times scuppered them because they are in opposition to repetitions of performance normatively. The materiality of the skin suit gives catharsis and experience of being seen and erased all at the same time. It compounds identities within identities providing political momentum where the political body is hidden and replaced with haptic semiotic and its materiality presence all at once.

My conclusion of this investigation is to assert that, in line with Rachel Hans theory of scenography, performance costume materiality is an orientating factor of the performance costume. This can come from a holistic approach to scenographic practice, such as in the case of Equus, but can also be manifest by costumiers free of the stifling limitations of a traditional theatre practice discipline, such as in the case of Nick Cave. Materiality acts to orientate the viewers experience of the performing costume, as well as the performing body within it. A holistic practice seems to be embedded in the very essence of materiality, given that the nature of experience is made by acts of speculation and conditions of the senses as a whole. If the way we experience the world is holistic than perhaps the way we world build, costume and orientate ourselves should be a little more holistic too. Many theatre practitioners would argue we are heading into a post-disciplinary era within the British theatre model, and if this is the case, materiality is a conceptual approach that is certainly worth developing. After all, scenography is a complete sensorial experience.

Barbieri propositions a 'revolutionary concept of embedded narrative into costume and the construction for performance working outwards from it' (Barbieri: introduction), which could possibly be achieved through holistic materiality minded scenographic approach rather than mis-en-scene centric performance construction. This approach is potentially borderless in scope and intention.

Dorothea Tanning used materiality to enter into the borderland of the abject, the material, the subconscious, & importantly evolve her practice from the constraints of a symbolic, image-focused concept of art and surrealism. The question is, can materiality do the same with costume textiles? This is difficult to answer given the lack of an orientating body in tannings works, though it might be assumed that experience of textiles through the infantile gaze would be universal it is worth considering the divergent modes of audience reception in a theatre space compared with a gallery space. In a gallery, an audience operates in a different temporal place that has a reflective intimacy at times, in opposition to the passive observational conditioning view of the theatre and cinema screen. It also isn't necessarily a rejection of the symbolic, as with Tanning, that would typify materiality in a performance costume, as dress and costume are generally deeply codified and symbolic by matter of fact. The costumes symbolic or material presence is never read in isolation, only usually privileged, one over the other. Determining the impact of a textile materiality requires more exploration, and an issue with this is that an interaction of tactile, visual and in other cases the symbolic, the experience of a material reality is within the subconscious and so audiences, as a rule, feel it but aren't aware of it, which is a hard thing to qualify.

Another consideration is that for some a connection with the infantile gaze or kinetic empathy may be greater than for others, we cannot readily assume we are all wired and develop in the same way. Equally, it should be considered that craft practitioners likely have an innate bias for connecting with and deriving pleasure from material or materialised form, that might not be shared by an audience en masse. It is not to be assumed universal to have a biological impulse for material consciousness.

'It is never we who affirm or deny something of a thing, it is the thing itself that affirms or denies something of itself in us' Baruch Spinoza, Short Treatise II (cited in Vibrant Matter:1)

Equus serves to highlight the multi-application materiality has, not only to abet in suspending disbelief, by making the horse metaphysical and present rather than so much performing a mask in an un-oriented space but also in bridging what could be a jarring homoerotic relationship between man and horse with physical honesty and open masculine sensuality. The materiality is score factor in the production, embodying the issues of sexuality at the core of the play whilst also placating our disbelief at the simulacrum of the stage, materialising instead and ethereal embodied real rather than a theatrical mimesis of the literalist real.

Whereas Cave's sound suits perform a hyper materiality, employing the astonishing sense of pleasure spectacle, to disguise the psyche and the political body, gender, sexuality and race, as oppose to Tanning who materialises it and Equus who transmogrifies it, orientate freedom in materiality. The potential of materiality is extremely exciting. Invoking the second skin transformative skin, providing catharsis and phenomenon, creating intervention in the public spaces they appear, re-orientating the space around their own transgressive awe and wonder.

Further research is certainly required, and for my own specific interest, I plan to look into the liminality of various performed materiality, as well as developing a materiality minded practice model to explore the body as a state of being and a considered material context that orientates or situates it. There is also a complicated interconnected relationship to decipher in the semiotic and an experiencing of materiality, and remembering the kaleidoscope analogy from the beginning of this paper, we can understand why. The band how does materiality supersede our compulsive semiotic reading of costume? This is something I intend to expound in the future.

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