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# Body, the Scrivener

The Somagrammatical Alphabet of *Deep*

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*When you are dancing you are both the pencil and the draughtsman.*

*Dance is always a temporary drawing, it disappears when the movement ends. So the drawing can be written over, or rewritten at any time.*

*Each performance has to be drawn again the next evening*

– Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui

## **Introduction**

The last encounter between the attorney and Bartleby in Herman Melville's short story 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' (1853) – as described by the attorney – takes place in the following way: "I paused; then went close up to him; stooped over, and saw that his dim eyes were open; otherwise he seemed profoundly sleeping. Something prompted me to touch him. I felt his hand, when a tingling shiver ran up my arm and down my spine to my feet" (Melville, 2007: 38).

This intensive image of the emergence of corporeal vibration, the two bodies entering the unlikely zone of intimacy and closeness, becomes a scenery of something flowing through the characters – not so much a depiction of the two bodies, but rather an event taking place in-between-them, an event of a life

passing through. As Gilles Deleuze has written on the capturing image of a particular life turning outside facing its inside at the moment of death-to-come: "This indefinite life does not itself have moments, close as they may be one to another, but only between-times, between-moments" (2001, 29). Here Deleuze's point of reference is *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) written by Charles Dickens. The hero of the novel prompts Deleuze to connect the indefinite with the impersonal: "The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life" (2001, 28).

An impersonal and yet singular life is also something the lawyer of Melville's story had to deal with many times before the 'final' encounter between Bartleby and himself. Nevertheless, as Branka Arsić argues: "It is not clear that Bartleby dies" (2007, 107). This ambiguity between life and death comes to be called the "impersonal," which is one of the perspectives referring to the entire problematic of Bartleby as discussed by Arsić. Furthermore, in the quote above, the contact between Bartleby and the attorney is a document of the existence of life as an affective energy. According to Arsić: "That is why the narrative ends with this trembling and as this trembling, with a life that comes from 'death' and so negates it; the narrative ends with a touch that touches the infinite" (2007, 107).

Let this be a preface to our discussion about two things: a concept (*somagram*) and a solo performance piece called *Deep* by a Finnish contemporary dance group, Alpo Aaltokoski Company (choreography and performance by Aaltokoski himself). What follows proceeds from a will to create a new concept in connection to this enigmatic dance performance and a wish to find a platform for the corporeal and conceptual vibrations in-between various immanent planes of thought and bodily encounters. During the last five-minutes of *Deep*, a video by Milla Moilanen, a Finnish animator and new media artist, is projected. Whether intentionally or not, the combination of the live dancer and the screened audiovisuals vividly recreates the scenery from the story of Bartleby. The video shows fragments of life projected on the white wall – powerfully present both as colour and form in Melville's story-world itself. The immobile dancer becomes

the impersonal Bartleby as he 'sleeps' on the floor in front of the screen illuminated by the beam of the video projector.

### **The Impersonal Trembling**

The striking concept here is impersonality; the self without self or subject without subjectivity – paradoxically embodied here in the form of Bartleby (in Melville's story) and the dancer (in *Deep*). In a sense – as the title of her book indicates – Arsić's seven and a half times Bartleby are different attempts at dealing with the problematic of impersonality. We would argue that *Deep* does the same with the means of the dancer's body-movements and the video arrangements, or rather, audiovisual continuations, extensions, even protuberances attached to the movements of the muscles and bones. The way the dancer moves can be described as entering the aesthetic and philosophical realm of Japanese Butoh, but performed in combinations of accelerated speed and varying slownesses. This connection with Butoh also relates to the problematic of impersonality. One of the leading figures of the butoh tradition, Kazuo Ono, has stated that the butoh-dancer must separate herself from the personal, physical and social self to such an extreme that the basis for butoh-dancing lies in 'a dead body'. The butoh-dancer is constantly deconstructing corporeality through transformations, metamorphoses as becoming (Parviainen 1994, 66). Yet, rather than following Arsić, to mystify the force of touch by speaking about it as touching 'the infinite,' we would say that 'impersonal trembling' could be thought of as yet another mode of a *somagram*. This concept refers at this point to the impersonal and therefore invisible body-movement made visible by the means of image and sound technologies.

The concept of the somagram itself, however, needs to be re-opened and re-contextualized because of the particular functions and histories it already has. Furthermore, the important thing in our understanding of the concept is not the distinct components but the overlapping *relationships*: visible-invisible, inside-outside, live-recorded, movement-stasis. These double-bindings can be related

directly to a particular way of understanding the body. According to Bruce Baugh, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a body is 'an intensive reality': "A body is not defined by either simple materiality, by its occupying space ('extension'), or by organic structure. It is defined by the relations of its parts (relations of relative motion and rest, speed and slowness), and by its actions and reactions with respect both to its environment or milieu and to its internal milieu" (Baugh 2005, 31).

The dancing body, appearing in its materiality – with different parts of the body, or 'particles', as Deleuze would say, acting together while simultaneously stretching away from each other – is positioned at a chiasmic meeting point, "a complex relation between differential velocities" (Deleuze 1988, 123), between the inside and the outside. When Deleuze writes about "a composition of speeds and slownesses on a plane of immanence" (1988, 123), he is not only referring to a Spinozan understanding of the body, but to life as a way of taking up or laying down rhythms. Understood this way, the somagram of the dancing body relates not only to the apparent rhythmic movements of the body but also to a life in its heterogenetic singularity: the somagram has to be (re)drawn again.

### **The Conceptual Landscape**

The history of the somagram can be covered at this point from three perspectives: the medico-, the psycho- and the semio-technological, illustrated successively by the examples of ultrasound in diagnostic medicine; a method in somatic psychotherapy; and Gertrude Stein.

(1) The first connection refers to the technological history of diagnostic medicine in the early 1950s. In 1952 Rod Bliss and Douglass Howry published an article in which they presented a series of images. They named these images "somagrams". According to Edward Yoxen, Howry and Bliss:

built an oscillator that would work at higher frequencies and a system for scanning a tissue specimen by moving the acoustic beam

through an arc. They called this equipment a Somascope. In other words, the beam was swept through a narrow angle, creating a two-dimensional pattern of echoes. By timing the echoes electronically, they could build up a representation of a slice through an insonated object (1999, 291).

In this context a couple of details are worth mentioning. Laboratory research on ultrasound was heavily subsidized in the United States right after the Second World War until the mid-1950s, especially by the United States military forces. On the one hand, the research focused on developing technologies capable of detecting underwater military vehicles such as submarines. On the other hand, the research concentrated on studying living organisms, especially the human brain, attempting to diagnose tumours growing inside such living tissue, for example. All this research was based on the idea of an *echo* and the question of how to record these sonic echoes into a visible form. The model of this technique is fairly simple: the image becomes visible with the help of sonic beams reflecting back from a structure that is inside a bigger entity. In other words, the echoes that are reflected from the invisible inside 'draw' the image to be seen and sensed.

(2) The second connection refers to the work of an American psychotherapist Stanley Keleman who originated the "How" exercise as a method for emotional re-education in his Somatic Therapy, a variation of the well-known Alexander technique. With the general aim to reconnect mind to body, it is based on the volitional ability of the brain to modify muscle tension and emotional gestures. The "How" exercise is simply a practice of self-exploration and self-knowing. The idea is to learn how to use, or organize, the self in a given situation. In the "How" exercise we learn to manage ourselves through the dialogue between brain and muscle. It is based on five steps explored and exemplified here with the management of depression and panic.

The first step is to identify the somatic attitude, the body-emotional stance, i.e. how the body reacts 'automatically' in relation to a threatening situation. In the

case of the depressive, the person asks herself whether she is organizing her depression in any particular way. In this case she is compacting and compressing herself both physically and emotionally. In steps two and three the participant chooses to intensify the former pattern, to compress the self a little more, and to step back to compress a little less. One can go back and forth between these steps. The experiment of compressing a little more and a little less plays like an accordion. Step four is simply a moment of waiting and allowing the feelings and associations to arise. Keleman refers to this as a stage of emotional incubation. This is the creative space of the middle ground: "It is a pause in which you feel elements of something about to happen. The attitude of openness is one of containment. [...] You are between what has ended and what has not yet arrived, in a pregnant place" (Keleman 1987, 15).

Finally, step five is the moment of reflection on what was experienced, and how to practice ways of using the self as a new kind of mind-body compound. This final step, the level of self-reflection based on the preceding somatic experience-experiment, can be called a somagram - a new consciousness of potentials to organize somatic forms as a kind of recording.

(3) And lastly, we could point to a third - and in this case already a closer - dimension where the concept has been used: literary criticism. Catharine Stimpson writes about Gertrude Stein in referring to her body as seen (or written) by either herself or others with the somagram. The beginning of Stimpson's text is worth quoting as it stands:

"Behind thoughts and feelings, my brother," wrote Nietzsche in "The Despisers of the Body" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "there is a might lord, an unknown sage - it is called Self; it dwelleth in thy body, it is thy body." But when we represent the body, we must transmute our dwelling into a ghost-ridden, ghost-written language. Soma must become a somagram (1985, 67).

Whereas Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, quoted at the beginning of this text, talks about drawing, Stimpson and Stein are thinking about writing. Interestingly the Greek

root of both verbs is *graphein* (γράφειν). According to Stimpson, images of Stein's body, such as her written poems, and others of her, such as the famous portrait painted by Picasso, attempt "to fix monstrous qualities." Nevertheless, these monstrous somagrams, "like all monstrosities", adds Stimpson, become desired as fixed and stabilized: "We often toil in vain" (1985, 67). To consider the written image of the body monstrous both because it is a fixed image and a mode of writing indicates a desire to load a lot of meaning into the somagram as a representation. However, as the earlier examples from biotechnology and psychotherapy have already indicated, rather than representations, somagrams are sensations – and in adding a Steinian emphasis, even ghostly ones.

From all of these backgrounds something can be and has been taken with into our understanding of the concept somagram: the *echo* from the medical function, the *reflection* from the therapeutic function, and the *ghost* from the literary and critical function. The argument is that the live performance in *Deep* works as a kind of ultrasonic image and the video screen presents an invisible world as the imaginary tissue generating the bodily echoes. This world of imaginary tissue, however, can have only a ghostly embodiment because there is no direct link to it. It hangs in the air as it were the roots of a tree in a mangrove forest growing upside down.

## Deep Somagrams

We assembled the concept in order to understand the cartographies of a dancing body. Somagram is the map of the body of which José Gil speaks as "body consciousness" while discussing Merce Cunningham's art of negating old languages of dance (2003, 122). Somagram is meant to outline the prevailing doubleness of the dancing body: the actual and virtual body at work at the same time. The actual movements, the dancing body as a body that dances (presenting itself in this manner), are intertwined with the articulations of the virtual body-to-become, the virtuality of movements. To quote Gil on the virtual body: "the nexus of positions of bodily parts is no longer that of an organic body [...] This body prolongs gesture into virtuality, since what follows from gesture can no

longer be perceived by and in an empirical, actual body” (2003, 123). The somagrammatical echo takes place on this double-movement between the actual and virtual body: the actual gestures and steps of the visible organic body travel through the landscape of the echo to create a new sensation no longer locatable anywhere else than in-between, as an intensity.

In *Deep*, the somagram seems to indicate a tension between various doubles. The doubles-couple of actuality and virtuality can be seen on the metamorphosing body of the dancer that appears as a human, as an animal (worm, lizard, bird, cat, etc.), as a flower, and in a state-in-between them. This monstrous or ghostlike quality underlines the body as extending beyond ‘the human regime’ and even into a transhuman(ist) understanding of physical expression. Here dancing is not limited to an expression of an intentional human mind. Rather, it searches for its expression not just from the flora and fauna of nature but from the language of machines as well. In fact, as we have argued, the somagram, here understood as a form of expression, solely depends on (audiovisual) machines. In other words, the transhuman(ist) nature of the mutating body positions it paradoxically and simultaneously as post- and pre-human in the broad sense of not focusing on the skills of a human body to perform and represent animals or plants, for example. Instead the idea is to present dance as an expression of sensation.

*Deep* is a physiological study of the origin of movements. It shows how various living organisms – not just human bodies, but also trees, birds etc. – follow the same principles of moving. The included media artwork of the same name by Milla Moilanen [originally made in 1994] especially intensifies this idea. This computer-animated video constitutes the central element in the final part of the choreography, and the male dancer on the video screen is juxtaposed with Aaltokoski performing live on stage. In the first part of the piece, the live-dancer, Aaltokoski, moves across the stage in a butoh-like manner. Attention focuses on his upper body, his arms and his amazingly loose shoulder blades, moving and re-moving the motions of some kind of a lizard-bird into human exposure.

Aaltokoski's brilliant movement is ungraceful, grotesque but soft, and flows in changing rhythms. By taking off his shirt and thus exposing his upper body, Aaltokoski lets the spectator see under his skin, even inside his muscles. This echoes the way in which Deleuze writes about the 'acrobatics of the flesh' in Francis Bacon's paintings: "Well beyond the apparent sadism, the bones are like a trapeze apparatus (the carcass) upon which the flesh is the acrobat" (2003, 23). The acrobatic yet tiny movements achieved by the co-operation between the shoulder blades and muscles make visible the way in which the surface of the body becomes a kind of ultrasound image as a recording of echoes that come from far away in the past.

The double nature of *Deep* relates not only to the pair of surface/depth (or skin/deep), but also to dimensions both in space and in movement itself. The dancing body is constantly moving in horizontal axis, from left to right and back again as following a geometrical path. The spatiality of *Deep* follows two-dimensional directions as is conventional for moving images projected on flat screens. On the other hand, the movements of the dancing body, its somagram, also emphasize the intensities of the body-as-weight. The dancer never jumps, never attempts to lift the body into air. On the contrary, the movements are directed either to bodily levels (lines that are reachable by the body and its limbs 'naturally') or they take place on the floor, they are grounded. The horizontality and spatiality of the movements focus on the weight of the body, materialized also by the bent knees and floppy arms. These are the forces that 'glue' the body to the ground. Again they are signs of an invisible and underground magnetic field that draws the body towards itself. This can be experienced clearly in the form of the birds referred to at several occasions during the performance: these creatures cannot fly, they are chickens bound to stay on the ground. The body is static, heavy and impaired. Nevertheless it includes several kinds of interesting movements, as it were, the somagrammatical alphabets.

The invisible, underground magnetic field, however, is not just spatial but maybe is even more so a *temporal* force-field. The first part of Moilanen's video is a

direct allusion to 19th century French scientist Étienne-Jules Marey, whose breakthrough creation, chronophotography, anticipated the motion picture. Marey was particularly interested in the origins of motion and how motion could be drawn and measured. The connection between Marey, the video by Moilanen, and the totality of Aaltokoski's choreography also takes place on the wider plane of visualizing metamorphosis. Scott Bukatman has drawn a line from Marey's chronophotographs to morphing in film. Bukatman states how morphing in film shares something with time-lapse photography: images that record change over time (daguerrotypes and serial exposures by Marey) precede the cinematic developments (2000, 227). Furthermore, in connection to Marey, Erin Manning emphasizes the role of machines as generating new modes of thinking and perception: "Marey's process of repetition and difference leads to transductions where movement machines become movements of thought, which in turn become machinic perceptions" (2009, 110). Moilanen has edited Aaltokoski's otherwise smooth movements into a proliferating series of spasms. The first part of the video is composed of jerky clips reminiscent of Marey, displaying Aaltokoski executing similar movements as on stage. References to Marey are references to a previous moment in time when new technologies of movement studies generated not just machinic thoughts and perceptions but also a visualized imagination of an inner, i.e. deep, reality beneath the skin.

The video then becomes a collage, with a male figure in front of colour-manipulated X-ray images of different plants and bones, echoing in this way the somagrams of medical diagnostics. Rapidly changing footage also includes techniques of image manipulation when Aaltokoski's face is morphed into a green lizard. Both Marey with his chronophotographic rifle and Moilanen with her video equipment attempt to show how movement functions, as it were, by trying to find a way underneath the skin. Yet, in *Deep* this attempt is challenged by the performance since the 'live performer' just stays on the floor without moving whereas the images and rhythms on the screen are pulsing full of life. Even though the performer is live (yet immobile) and the images are recorded and manipulated (yet highly mobile), both of these players, as Deleuze would point out, 'take up and lay down rhythms,' however different in quality, scale,

and expression they might be.

Perhaps even more than being seen, this pulse becomes heard in *Deep*: the soundtrack is based on a rhythmic pulse of an electronic chord that sounds like a breathing or heartbeat of a machine, with about 20 beats a minute in a very low D-minor even. Almost the only moments of synchronisation between image and sound take place when the human figure (whether on stage or on the screen) opens his mouth, from which an electronically manipulated 'roar' of some animal comes out.

### **A Pack of Grams**

Finally we want to – however briefly – relate the somagram to two other 'grams' that we see more or less as belonging to the same family of concepts: the *diagram* and the *biogram*.

The notion of the diagram comes from Deleuze and Guattari. They conceptualize it as describing a piloting role in steering the multiplicity of potential relations between elements. The diagram "does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality" (1988, 142). According to Anna Munster: "Located at the other pole is the assemblage, in which the process of machinism is concretized; its elements are given substance; and its functions are expressed within a particular form. As assemblage, as the term suggests, is a composition of elements – matter, technologies, socialities – whose diagrammatic dimensions have been organized into particular relations" (2006, 35).

The biogram, on the other hand, as elaborated by Erin Manning on Brian Massumi's notion, comes close to Deleuze and Guattari's diagram, but Manning's concept concentrates on the technogenesis of a becoming-body, i.e. "the techniques of appearance and disappearance of a becoming-body" (2009, 124). For Manning, the biogram cannot be seen but its force can be felt: "it is a

force through which the imperceptible appears as a feltness of time spacing” (2009, 127). As the somagram takes from the diagram the energy to construct something real, it takes from the biogram its emphasis on the “feltness of time spacing”.

In this way the somagram comes close to how Deleuze writes on the diagram in *The Logic of Sensation*, a study on Francis Bacon’s paintings. According to Deleuze, diagrams consist of manual traits that are nonrepresentative, nonillustrative, nonnarrative, they are a-signifying traits: “This is what Bacon calls a ‘graph’ or a *diagram*: it is as if a Sahara, a zone of the Sahara, were suddenly inserted into the head; it is as if a piece of rhinoceros skin, viewed under a microscope, were stretched over it” (2003, 100). Like diagrams, somagrams are ‘manual traits’ in their visible materiality, but their visibility has to be produced. Yet, as such, the somagram emerges as an impersonal face of the biogram. This impersonality is the hand that throws us back from where we began: the ‘not particular’ Bartleby at sleep and dreaming in front of a white wall whereas the narrator is faced with but ‘confused sensations’: “It is as if the hand assumed an independence and began to be guided by other forces, making marks that no longer depend on either our will or our sight” (Deleuze 2003, 100-101).

The three alphabets of *Deep* reconstruct a ‘proposition’ that can be expressed in the following way: dance (D) emerges (E) from/with/as an emergence (E) of a pulse (P). The prepositions (from, with, as) are all there as guides for potential emphasis on particular somagrammatical folds: ‘from’ as a reference to an echo, ‘with’ as a reference to reflection, and ‘as’ as a reference to the ghost. The concept that ties the somagram to the diagram is *emergence*. According to Deleuze: “The essential point about the diagram is that it is made in order for something to *emerge* from it, and if nothing emerges from it, it fails” (2003, 159). The movements of the live performance in *Deep* emerge from the video screen as the ‘tingling shiver’ from Bartleby, and the dancer on stage is like his hand

making us, the audience, feel this tingling.

## **Deep**

Choreography and Dance: Alpo Aaltokoski. Lighting Design: Matti Jyväskylä.  
Video: Script and direction: Milla Moilanen; dancer: Alpo Aaltokoski; editing:  
Raimo Uunila; animation: Milla Moilanen; photography: Keijo Kivioja, Milla  
Moilanen; music: Miikka Kari, Epa Tamminen. Duration: 15 min. Premiere:  
22.2.2000 Washington, USA .

Clips used by permission. *Deep*, together with other pieces by Alpo Aaltokoski  
Co. can be viewed in the near future at the website: HYPERLINK  
"http://www.vimeo.com/aaltokoski"<http://www.vimeo.com/aaltokoski>

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