

POWER AND BEAUTY IN SALLA TYKKÄ'S *GIANT*

■ Riikka Niemelä
■ University of Turku
■ Finland

ABSTRACT

Cultural imagery subsumes elusive signs of power, which affect the way we perceive the world. This article approaches the subtle workings of visual significations by offering a reading of the power relations involved in the pursuit of beauty and perfection, addressed by Finnish artist Salla Tykkä in her video *Giant* (2014). In its elegant shots, we encounter young Romanian practitioners of artistic gymnastics and the milieus of modernist sports architecture of the communist era, providing a stage for girls' highly trained skills. By briefly discussing what Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) conceived as 'docile bodies', my analysis will focus on the idea of power imposed upon the operations of the body. According to Foucault, the mechanisms of power regulate the body by moulding and training it, in order to increase its capacities, strength and obedience. Physical training and sports assumed a central role in the building of communist societies as well. With these insights, my aim is to suggest that Tykkä's film, with its constant interplay between the imagery of the past and the present, illustrates the intertwining of bodies and power.

KEYWORDS

Salla Tykkä, Video Art, Gymnastics, Body, Power.

The close-ups display the slim, muscular legs of young gymnasts entering into acrobatic moves on the balance beam, and focus on the strong grip of their hands while their bodies swing and circle around the bar. Slow motion highlights the impeccable beauty of their skillful movements. This article approaches the single channel film *Giant* (2014) by Finnish visual artist Salla Tykkä (b. 1973), a short film depicting the prominent young practitioners of artistic gymnastics at the celebrated boarding school of Deva in Romania. *Giant* also completes the film trilogy *The*

*Palace*¹, and could, in certain respects, be considered a key that ties the parts together into a body of work elegantly pointing towards the entanglements of bodies and power.

Tykkä has worked with film and photography since the mid-1990s. The female body and gender roles, power structures and popular culture have been recurring themes in her oeuvre, which she has worked through topics such as sports, celebrities and genre cinema. Her films often involve psychologically charged audiovisual narration and can also be characterised by an oneiric style, referred to, for example, by Antti Alanen as their dreamlike quality or even hallucinatory mode comparable to the films by Fritz Lang, Luis Buñuel, Alfred Hitchcock or David Lynch (Alanen, s.a.: 5). In *The Palace* the resemblance to dreams might be ascribed to the hypnotic scenery in slow motion amplified by the temporal distortion of natural sounds. In the following, however, I will not go in-depth into the aesthetic aspects of the film, but will rather approach, given the pervasiveness of the critical insights in Tykkä's earlier works, the fabric of political allusions at work in the trilogy.

The Palace could be regarded as echoing what Hal Foster in 2004 defined as the 'archival impulse' in contemporary art, a tendency to inventory, sample or share historical information by means of art in order to disturb the canonised truths or to produce alternative knowledge or counter-memory (Foster, 2004: 3–4). In Tykkä's trilogy the urge to revisit the common past becomes most evident in *Giant*, combining archival footage with the material filmed by the artist herself. Approaching the film alongside historical studies on physical culture and education, allows one to read it while alluding to the power regulating the bodies. As a whole, Tykkä's trilogy seems to address power structures played out in the pursuit of beauty and perfection. To point out these connections, I will describe the first two films of the trilogy, *Victoria* (2008) and *Airs Above the Ground* (2010), before taking a closer look at the *Giant*.

THE SUBTLETY OF THE SIGNS

The 'palace' in the trilogy's title, a residence that has for centuries housed royalties, dignitaries and heads of states, can be read as a metaphor for the privileged and the powerful. Tykkä's trilogy indeed seems to offer a scene for celebrities of their own kind: talented bodies of the to become Romanian Olympic gymnastics team, a giant water lily, the world famous star of the botanic world, and the gallantly moving Lipizzaner, show horses famous from the Spanish Riding School of Vienna. However disparate in subject three films seem to be, they all share a story

¹ Tykkä has used a trilogy as a form or as a method of working in her other oeuvre as well. As in the *Cave* trilogy (2000–2003), the parts can be considered either separately or as a series (Gordon Nesbitt, 2002; McGee, 2004: 70–71; Haapala, 2011: 116–119; for a detailed description of the *Cave*, see Torp, 2004).

of growth; a lifetime commitment to attaining perfection and beauty. Considering the allusive and connotational potential of the subjects depicted, *The Palace* stages elusive signs of power.

Victoria, the first film in the trilogy, was shot at the Kaisaniemi Botanic Garden, where the artist captured the annual blossoming of the giant water lily *Victoria cruziana* at the peak of its beauty. The peculiar tropical water platter, blooming for two nights only, is the protagonist of the film, which highlights the striking moment of its reaching perfection in its life cycle. Recorded in time-lapse, the film follows the silent dance of the foreign plant as its flower quietly bends over the water and changes in hue before closing. The encounter is constructed theatrically. Employing a reverent distance, like that of an admiring spectator, Tykkä's camerawork records its sophisticated ballet. With the musical score of Gustav Mahler's fifth symphony, she turns the filmed document into a dance film starring the exotic Other.

Beginning with a botanical classification by John Lindley from 1837, Tykkä's film enters into a dialogue with history. Unlike its famous precedents in art history, the homely water lilies in Monet's impressionistic paintings, the gigantic water platter in Tykkä's film originates from South America. The British explorers of the Victorian era collected the first specimens to bring to Europe in the 19th century, causing a craze among collectors (Vadon, 2008: 80–81). Since then its tamed beauty has been admired in the botanic gardens of the world. Named after Queen Victoria, this queen of the water lilies has expanded the spirit of her reign, just as the coins in Ancient Rome carried the portraits of its rulers to the margins of the empire. Behind the marvel and beauty of the blooming giant reverberates the imperial privileges and the power relations of the colonial past.

Refined symbolical allusions, likewise, are involved in the second film, *Airs Above the Ground*, which fills the screen with the trained bodies of the Lipizzaner, a horse breed developed by the Habsburg dynasty, the rulers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These light and fast horses served the military needs as well as the purposes of classical riding, reviving among the European nobles during the Renaissance. The exceptional skills of the Lipizzaners have been made famous particularly by the dancing white stallions performing at the Spanish Riding School, situated in the imposing milieu of the Imperial Palace in Vienna.

In Tykkä's film, the images of young stallions running free are juxtaposed with others depicting horses being trained in the movements of the classical dressage. 'Airs above the ground' are extremely difficult exercises the Lipizzaners are still physically capable of performing. Perceived in the matrix of beauty arising from the excellence of their motility, the origins of dressage in warfare become easily forgotten. The dressage movements were first aimed at increasing the competency of the war horses' behaviour on the battlefield.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Michel Foucault described a new 'political anatomy' discovered in the classical age, in which the body held a special place in the mechanisms of regulation. Understood as the object of power, the body was cultivated by manipulating, shaping and training it, in order to make it skilful, strong, responding and obedient, in other words, productive and serviceable. A 'docile body', in his account, can be subjected, used, transformed and improved by means of discipline. He maintained that coercions exercised upon the body, no longer treated as an indissociable unity, were subtle practices affecting the body at the level of movement, gesture and posture. (Foucault, 1995 [1975]: 136—139)

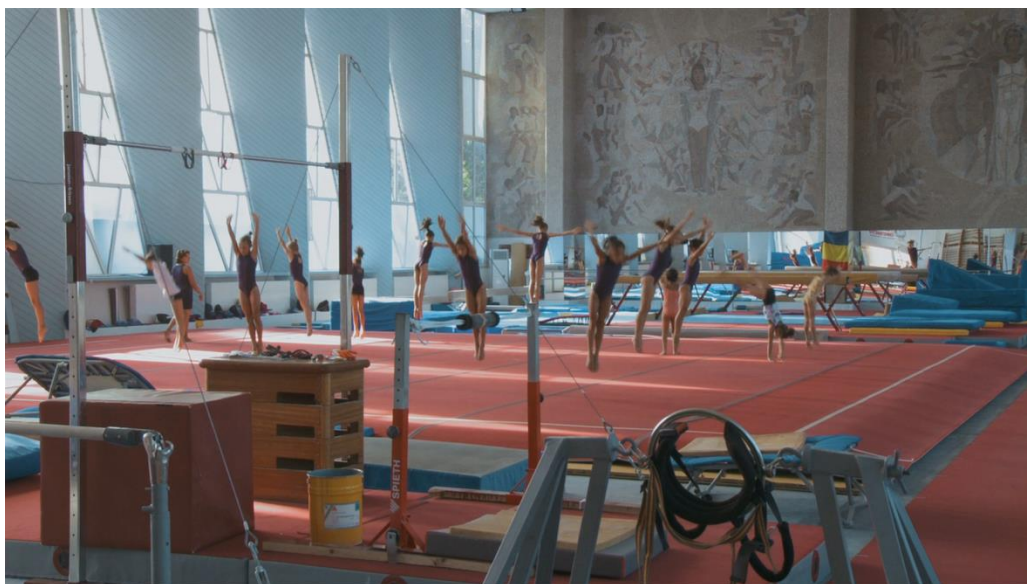
Undoubtedly, the movements of high school dressage, such as the Levade, the Courbette and the Capriole, requiring a great amount of strength and skills, also gave valuable support to the might and grandeur of the sovereigns. Like the embodied conduct of ideal soldiers of the 17th century in Foucault's description (Foucault, 1995 [1975]: 135–136), the movements and posture of the horses, too, could be supposed to have played a part in the bodily rhetoric of honour; bodies that were recognisable from afar, bearing signs of their strength and valour. Similar visual significations have evolved, over the centuries, in the theatrical events revolving around equestrian warfare, such as tournaments or carrousels, or in the brawny and graceful horses time and again encountered in art history's equestrian statues or ruler portraiture.

Both *Victoria* and *Airs Above the Ground* stage an enduring play of power veiled behind the pursuit of beauty. The protagonists, bred and moulded into the mirror images of power, accentuate rulers' authority with their dashing figures. The following chapters focus on the third film, *Giant*, which has in common with the previous ones the power imposed upon the operations of the body, as well as the endless quest for perfection.

THE BODY AND THE HEROIC

A careful choice of architectural settings has been argued to play an important role in Tykkä's works. This is the case with *Giant* as well, in which the training halls of the communist era provide a stage for young girls' highly trained skills. *Giant* starts by introducing with archival footage and texts two Romanian schools specialised in artistic gymnastics, a boarding school that opened in Onești in 1969 and the Romanian Gymnastics School that opened in Deva in 1978. The school in Deva was a long-term base for the national gymnastics team, and is still the place where the junior squad trains. The school building dates back to the 18th century, when it served as a military barracks, and during the 20th century it also housed art and engineering schools. In 1978 it was turned into the General School no. 7, 'the medal factory' where many of the greatest Romanian gymnasts were trained and educated.

In *Giant*, the austerity of the modernist architecture of the training halls in Onești, built during the 1960s, and of the Olympic centre in Deva, inaugurated at the end of the 1970s, resembles the discipline practised on bodies during the communist regime. The colours in the gymnasium's interior repeat the colours of the Romanian flag, and the posters on the walls celebrate the previous victories of Romanian gymnasts; seemingly innocent, yet contagious, means of orienting the behaviour and aims of the actions performed inside these walls. The achievements in artistic gymnastics were also admired worldwide, particularly after the brilliant success Nadia Comăneci achieved in the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montreal. This incomparable series of successes was followed by the achievements of gymnasts such as Ecaterina Szabo, Daniela Silivas, Aurelia Dobre, Camelia Voinea and many others².



Salla Tykkä: *Giant*, video (2013-2014)

The accomplishments in sports by communist countries provided competition with the former West, in the end symbolising the confrontation between communism and capitalism (See, e.g. Itkonen; Ilmanen, 2008: 19, 21). In an article on the relations between communist policies and sport, James Riordan points out the central role physical training (in rus. *fizitșeskaja kultura*) assumed in the building of communist societies. Along with the symbolical values involved in gaining international recognition and prestige, physical training was employed for utilitarian aims in a modernising community: to advance health and hygiene, to improve labour productivity, to serve the needs of national defence and to ease the

² Romania had achieved its first medals in the European and World Artistic Gymnastics Championships during the 1950s, so by the 1970s the country already had a long tradition at the top level of gymnastics.

integration of variety ethnicities into a unified nation. (Riordan, 1999: 48–49.) It could well be presumed that in Romania as well, gymnastics favoured the aims of the party by raising patriotic feelings and increasing solidarity in a country inhabited by many ethnicities and historically influenced by a variety of cultures.

Giant displays among its very first shots a monumental painting reminiscent of these ideological aims. The heroic representation, echoing the official style of soviet realism, of the bodies of a male and a female athlete dominate the interior of one of the training halls, as if still encouraging the ideal of the strong and healthy body of the ‘new man’, a labourer constantly ready to work and defend. The emphasis on physical culture in the communist states could be regarded as a form of what Foucault defined as ‘biopower’: the regulation of the subjects by disciplining the body, optimising its capabilities, extorting its force, increasing its usefulness and docility, and integrating it into systems of economic control. This was maintained with the mechanisms of power that characterised the ‘anatomopolitics’ of the human body. The power exercised by institutions such as schools and the army subjugated the body by controlling its actions. (Foucault, 1990 [1976]: 139–140.)³

According to Simona Petracovschi the Marxist-Leninist concepts of improving physical education to advance the workers’ interests were applied also in Romania, where the educational system from 1948 to 1989 was subsumed by communist ideology and the model offered by the Soviet Union. Physical activities pervaded education beyond sports, and the body was also controlled and moulded through exercises in unproductive times during teaching. Sport events were a central part of life beyond education. (Petracovschi, 2015: 105–106.) Gymnastics held a special place in the education system, which devoted, as the gymnastics chief coach Adrian Goreac explained in a documentary filmed in the late 1980, specific hours to training every day (*The Romanian Dream*, 1987).

In *Giant* the girls at times appear in matching leotards, marching and stretching in groups, counting out loud to keep the rhythmic integrity of the warming up process. Curiously, as in *Airs Above the Ground*, the actions played out in *Giant* have a historical relation to military training, a connotation unarticulated in the films themselves, but hardly insignificant for the readings they allow. According to Petracovschi, physical education in communist Romania assumed ideological and military characteristics, including the authority of the teacher and the comprehension of the student groups as a place to learn commands and the ability

³ It is, of course, to be remarked, that in outlining his notion of biopower, Foucault traced the changes that had occurred in the western world during the modern age at the dawn of capitalism, and applying the concept in an analysis of other times and contexts might deviate from the scheme. Yet, it also provides a more general conception of the political and cultural construction of the body within different discourses of utility, which has been widely applied as an analytical model.

to react. Like other state institutions, schooling prepared students for national defence and for the military style of orders and discipline. The relationship of the teacher and students became equated with that of the officer and troops (Petracovschi, 2015: 102-103, 105-106; on the militarisation of sports, see also Riordan, 1999: 51-52).

At the individual level, engaging in sport and physical training with the aim of national defence meant maintaining a physically capable, strong body (Itkonen; Ilmanen, 2008: 19). As in *Airs Above the Ground*, the movements performed in *Giant* require extreme bodily agility. Both titles refer to exercises that call for plenty of strength and ability. ‘Giant’, in gymnastics means the circling skill of rotating fully extended around the bar, and was chosen by the artist as the subject of another film, *The Palace* (2015), also shot in Romania. Attaining such skill is a matter of devotion and determination, even pain and sacrifice, as illustrated by documentaries such as Anca Miruna Lazarescu’s *The Secret of Deva* (2007), which unveils the harsh reality of the everyday life of the small girls who are carrying out their families’ ambitions in the strenuous training programs that select a few lucky ones reaching the top level of the Olympic team.

Without a definite narrative, *Giant* concentrates on illustrating the strong, docile bodies of the girls performing the exercises, reaching the limits of bodily agility, and repeating the embodied routines to attain perfection. The images of gymnasts alternate with frames emphasising their surroundings. Perhaps the most well-known conception in *Discipline and Punish* is the account of how the behaviour and actions of individual bodies were managed by regulating the organisation of space and time (see Foucault, 1995/1975: 141–151). In *Giant*, the graceful movements of the able-bodied gymnasts are portrayed together with the architecture they are surrounded by, spaces designed to produce new champions, or with the blocks, boulevards and medieval ruins of Deva, the city famous for medallists.



Salla Tykkä: *Giant*, video (2013-2014)

PARALLEL WORLDS

The inclusion of archival materials and interviews further affiliates *Giant* with the 'archival impulse' in contemporary art. Juxtaposed with the historical film clips and found footage from an old feature film *Campioana* (1990) by Elisabeta Bostan, the material shot by Tykkä in 2013 triggers an interplay between the past and the present. In an interview she explained that one of her aims in *Giant* was to explore gymnastics as a cultural relic surviving from the communist past to the present day, as 'an icon that remains through images and creates new ones' (Travis, 2013). With the elaborate cuts, the images depicting past generations training in the same severe halls as the young girls more than two decades later, carrying out the same exercises, seem to suggest continuities and parallel worlds, rather than change and adjustment.

With this temporal structure, the constant shift between 'now' and 'then', *Giant* undertakes the task of unveiling power structures in a manner similar to *Victoria* and *Airs above the ground*. Presenting the historical information in an indeterminate fashion that Foster characterised as 'promissory notes for further elaboration' or 'prompts for future scenarios' (Foster, 2004: 5), it calls out for interpretation. Yet the persistence of the past does not simply arise from the archival footage, but resonates in the editing as well.

The interviews, which make up part of the soundscape, entwine the life stories, memories and dreams of the young gymnasts with the narration of the film. Unlike many of Tykkä's preceding films (See, e.g. Haapala, 2011: 16), *Giant* does not seem to evoke the inner states of the characters, but depicts the girls from a distance. Neither the acousmatic sound of the interviews; the off-screen voiceover of the childish voices of the girls narrating their congruous life stories, nor the visual aspect of the film allow much space for personal style. Instead, the girls appear blurred in backgrounds and in mirror reflections, or become represented from behind. There are frequent cuts to close-ups of body parts, framing out their faces, and focusing on the details, the limbs and the performed movements or poses, rather than the individuals themselves. Despite the certain fragility of their vocal presence in the film, the girls in the images remain inaccessible, silently concentrating on their rehearsals, almost never paying attention to the gaze of the camera.

The manner in which the young gymnasts are portrayed in *Giant*, occupies the blurred boundary between strength and frailty, between maturity and childhood and between power and powerlessness. The aestheticised, dream-like visions of *Giant* provokingly create a contrast with the tough and demanding quotidian life of the young girls enrolled on the disciplined training programs, easily idealised, as in the film by Bostan. Only occasionally, the taped muscles, wrists and ankles allude to the more laborious side. The lightness and ease of performing the acrobatic routines, conversely pretends to negate the very corporeality of gymnastics. The

pain and physical effort become concealed behind the excellence, beauty and perfection.

Considered as a whole, Tykkä's trilogy is suggestive of the subtlety by which power and politics are spread out among cultural imagery. In the three films we encounter attenuated allusions, implied significances or more straightforward cultural imagery; a variety of visual signs of power that mirror the might, in this case of the Victorian empire, the Habsburg monarchy or the Communist regime. Prevalent in each film, in my view, is the exercising of power on bodies, which has been my intention to indicate in this text. James Rondeau has pointed out the awareness of physicality expressed by Tykkä's early works (Rondeau, 2002: 11). Inside the sophisticated halls of *The Palace*, this interest in corporeality still seems alive.

REFERENCES

- Alanen, A. (2006), 'Lucid Dreams. The Films of Salla Tykkä', in *Salla Tykkä. Cave / Zoo*, [De Appel Center for Contemporary Art Amsterdam, June 24-July 9, 2006: Museum Het Domein Sittard, June 24-August 20, 2006: S.M.A.K. Museum of Contemporary Art Gent, July 8-October 1, 2006], pp. 4–10.
- Foster, H. (2004), 'An Archival Impulse', in *OCTOBER*, 110, pp. 3–22.
- Foucault, M. (1995 / [1975]), *Discipline and Punish*. Trans. by Alan Sheridan. Vintage Books, New York. Originally published as *Surveiller et punir* by Éditions Galimard.
- Foucault, M. (1990 / [1976]), *The History of Sexuality*, vol 1: An Introduction. Vintage Books, New York. Originally published as *La volonté de savoir* by Editions Galimard.
- Gordon Nesbitt, R. (2002), 'Salla Tykkä. Thriller', in *Kontti, Kiasma Nykytaiteen museo, 8.11.2002 - 5.1.2003*. Nykytaiteen museo, Helsinki.
- Haapala, L. (2011), *Tiedostumaton nykytaiteessa. Katse, ääni ja aika vuosituhannen taitteen suomalaisessa nykytaiteessa*. Valtion taidemuseo/Kuvataiteen keskusarkisto, Helsinki.
- Mckee, F. (2004), 'If You Close Your Eyes', *Framework. The Finnish Art Review* 2/2004, pp. 70–73.
- Petracovschi, S. (2015), 'Teaching and touching in physical education in Pre- and post-communist Romania', in Heather Piper (ed.) *Touch in Sports Coaching and Physical Education. Fear, Risk and Moral Panic*, Routledge, New York & London, pp. 102–117.
- Rondeau, J. (2002) 'Power + Play', *Salla Tykkä*, Kunsthalle Bern, pp. 10–15.
- Riordan, J. (1999), 'The impact of communism on sport', in Riordan, James & Arndt Krüger (eds.) *The International politics of Sport in the Twentieth Century*, Taylor & Francis, London & New York, pp. 48–66.

- Torp, M. (2004), 'Dual Positions. Salla Tykkä's Film Trilogy Cave', in Sven Bjerkhof (ed.), *Salla Tykkä. Cave*. Statens Museum för Kunst, [København], pp. 26–43.
- Travis, R. (2013), 'A Dream of Beauty. From gymnasts to showponies, Finnish artist Salla Tykkä creates images of illusive power', *Dazed*, available at <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/17993/1/a-dream-of-beauty-salla-tykka-interview>. [20th December 2015].
- Vadon, C. (2008), 'Les chasseurs de plantes au XIXe siècle', in Henri Bancaud (ed.), *Passions botaniques. Naturalistes voyageurs au temps des grandes découvertes*, Editions Ouest-France, Rennes.

VIDEOS BY SALLA TYKKÄ

- Airs Above the Ground* (2010). Installation, 7:20 min. AV-arkki archive, Helsinki.
- Giant* (2014). Single channel, 12:47 min. AV-arkki archive, Helsinki.
- Victoria* (2008). Single channel, 9 min. AV-arkki archive, Helsinki.

AUDIOVISUAL SOURCES

- Campioana* (1990). A feature film by Elisabeta Bostan. <http://www.anuntulvideo.ro/filme/27530-campioana-romania-1990-dramasport97-minute> [4th January 2016].
- The Romanian dream (c. 1987), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCofibcaeKs> [1st January 2016].
- The Secret of Deva* (2007). TV Documentary by Anca Miruna Lazarescu. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V42r2J7LfaQ>. [20th December 2015].