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# Plot structure over character and drama: a new aesthetics for art research

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## ABSTRACT

Relativistic aesthetics have had a major impact on the development of art research- and practice-based doctoral programmes in the arts. This paper explores research capabilities of arts practice for more propositional knowledge based on more formalist aesthetic qualities in artefacts, as opposed to more relativistic and non-formalist aesthetic qualities. It does so by tracing notions of formal aesthetics from Kant's natural sublime to Aristotle's notion of *mimesis* and *catharsis* in a number of research works. The examples show how formal aesthetics qualities in the results of art practice are able to demonstrate universal knowledge such as foundational principles, through consideration of a more formal logic in the artwork itself. Together, these works suggest a more formal research agenda based on the capabilities of artistic practices where formal knowledge proposed is rather relative – an aim that has purposiveness but without having purpose, as in Kant's natural sublime, rather than having a wider social or historic context. Here, non-formalist aesthetic quality of art practice points rather to the applied qualities of a work: that is, to the range of possible applications of the formal aesthetic qualities.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## 1. Art research: contemplation, interpretation and insight

Aesthetics is often understood as forms of social constructions, much in the conception of the socially relativistic aesthetics of Benjamin (1968) and Adorno (1970) – notions that furthermore have been the base many more scholars emphasising anti-formalist aesthetics (e.g. Derrida 1978; Bourriaud 2002; Eco 2004; Deleuze 2004; Danto 2013). Following this tradition, the artefact (artwork) also in art research is commonly taken as a point for of departure in a more or less archaeological sense in gradually increasing our understanding of the art or design space through culturally constructed and relativistic aesthetics (cf. Korvenmaa 1999; Biggs 2002; Barone and Eisener 2011; Borgdorff 2012; Elkins 2014; Leavy 2009). In simple terms it means that art research has broadly come to focus on contextualisation and historical aspects in relation to the 'practical' artwork. Still, recognising that there may be an unavoidable relativity for artefacts in relation to particular situations such as psychological, social, political and economic ones, when one turns to concrete examples, as Baghranian and Carter (2016) notes, extreme relativistic claims are often not at all true to experience. Similarly, even Bricmont and Sokal (1998)

manages to find that Deleuze and Guattari allude vaguely to the philosophy of science, in terms of the endeavour to systematically develop knowledge in a field: ‘Perspectivism, or scientific relativism, is never relative to a subject: it constitutes not a relativity of truth but, on the contrary, a truth of the relative’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 129–131). In other words, what may the more formal and research capabilities of art practices be? Or in Deleuze’s terms: what is the possibility of art practices developing such a truth of the relative in art?

## 2. Baumgarten: aesthetic idea and aesthetic judgment

To explore these question I would like to start in the perhaps least expected place, in Baumgarten’s aesthetic judgment (2007). Because, while this concept in Baumgarten often has come to be discussed as a critique of taste, or aesthetic dignity – where ‘Der Zweck der Ästhetik ist die Vollkommenheit der sinnlichen Erkenntnis als solcher. Dies aber ist die Schönheit. Und zu meiden ist die Unvollkommenheit derselben als solcher. Dies aber ist die Hässlichkeit’ (Baumgarten 2007, 21). –it still ‘only’ belongs to an aesthetic magnitude as a part of the whole of a work. As Guyer (2014) argues, Baumgarten recognises the perfection of sensible cognition and also the perfection of what is represented as a distinct source of pleasure in beauty, which gives him three different potential sources of beauty in an artwork. Firstly, it is the agreement of thoughts, as far as we abstract their order and their means of expression among themselves to unity. This is the beauty of things and thoughts, which should be distinguished from the beauty of the knowledge itself, but with which (according to Baumgarten) it is erroneously confused – because of the generally accepted meaning of thing (e.g. object/perception). Thus, ugly things can be thought of as beautiful and beautiful things can be thought of as ugly. Secondly, it is the agreement of the order in which we think about the beautiful thought content with itself and with the matter, that is, the beauty of the order and disposition. Thirdly, it is the agreement of the signs (means of expression) among themselves in relation to the order of the matter and the matter itself, in so far makes the appearance (Baumgarten 2007). In so doing, Guyer continues to argue, Baumgarten imports traditional rhetorical concepts such as *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio*, which would mean that Baumgarten’s aesthetics is not merely a critique of taste more or less linked to socio-cultural moral structures, which is often recognised in Baumgarten’s aesthetics (Tolstoy 1995; Lopes and Gaut 2001).

Hence, it seems like Askin et al. (2014, 13) also notes, that Baumgarten ‘strives to establish a science of sensuous cognition from within the bounds of rationalist thought’, referring to Baumgarten’s section XXXIV about ‘The Absolute Aesthetic Striving for Truth’ (Baumgarten 2007, 539, 543; translated by Askin et al. 2014):

For what is this abstraction but loss? By the same token, you cannot bring a marble sphere out of an irregular piece of marble without losing at least as much material as the higher value of roundness demands. [...] ‘Above all, the aesthetic horizon delights in those particular objects that exhibit the greatest material perfection of aestheticological truth, in the individuals and the most specific of objects. These are its woods, its chaos, its matter [sua silva, Chaos et materia] out of which it chisels the aesthetic truth into a form that is not entirely perfect yet beautiful, always in the attempt to lose as little materially perfect truth as possible and rub off as little of it for the sake of tastefulness’.

In Baumgarten's aesthetics, there are therefore still elements of autonomous qualities in the work of art, despite its 'must have' moral quality, but where the aesthetic truth may be more or less sacrificed for the sake of taste. Or as Kaiser (2011, 1) puts it,

One pays for the beautiful round shape of the ball, its 'higher value' (ibidem), by losing a significant amount of material. This mutual dependence of the logical transparency of *noeta* and the obscure intransparency of *aistheta* – exemplified in the marble block turning marble ball – comes to bear on all levels of Baumgarten's sketch of aesthetics. Logical clarity comes about only by a decline in material richness or at the cost of dissecting the complex, multidimensional, rich impression of the whole. (Original emphasis.)

Let me now turn to a work of foundational character with the aim of 'exploring the expressive possibilities of moulding to redefine the human figure' to try Baumgarten's argument through two different forms of presentation of the same work. In the first disposition, Figure 1, four examples are presented, whereas in Figure 2 nine examples are used to present the same result. Both are arranged to demonstrate and argue for the possibilities of moulding to redefine the human figure. As one can see in Figure 1, there is a relatively greater expressive and functional distance between each example than between the examples in Figure 2. Moreover, whereas the first arrangement is more formal and contains a greater openness – difference – as a model for further application due to the greater distance between its examples, still held together by the aim, the second arrangement of nine examples builds instead on the moral qualities of fashion design as implied by the concept of collection. And where the first form of presentation argues from a more formal and structural point of view, the result in Figure 2 rather argues on the basis of a fashion-design-relative narrative based on the field's moral and applied aspects. Arguably, therefore, the form of presentation in Figure 2 may more likely be considered beautiful and tasteful – agreeable – from an applied fashion design point of view, taking into account the expression's rather mainstream fashion-design-moral (or poor fashion-design-moral if you so like), this moral quality of the work at the same time stands in front of the result's formal theoretical proposition. The work in Figure 2 has arguably also lost a significant amount of material (moulding) and declined in material richness. It is therefore also true that this agreeable beauty, as non-formalist aesthetics would point out, pertains to appearances as informed by our beliefs about the reality of things (cf. Zangwill 2001), and thus at the same time it runs the risk of limiting the work's possibility of convincing about the range of its formal proposition.

### 3. Kant: purposiveness without purpose

Although Baumgarten expands the idea of aesthetics towards morality and human conduct, it was arguable Kant who formalised the concept of aesthetics as the judgment of taste in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Here, Kant continues to elaborate on aesthetic judgment as the mediator between reason and morality. The judgment of taste, as Kant (2000) claims, is both subjective and universal because it is at the same time grounded in a subjective feeling as well as a universal *a priori* of taste that reflects a general transcendental adequacy (common sense), which gives it universal validity. That is to say, aesthetic judgment is not pure, but educated and tempered. Nevertheless, even though Kant links aesthetics to morality and life, he also argues that there are still art-related or aesthetic ideas without 'spirit'. For example, an aesthetic idea, or a work



**Figure 1.** Series of body experiments by Johan Nordberg (2014).

of art in agreement with aesthetic judgment, may be without moral content and without relationship-transcendental conditions of taste or social conventions and still be more than an artificial representation of a natural object. Even though an aesthetic idea is not possible to grasp in a concept, fine art for Kant is still first and foremost mimetic, holding semantic content or empirical predicates: ‘The perception of an object can be immediately combined with the concept of an object in general, for which the former contains the empirical predicates, for a judgment of cognition, and a judgment of experience can thereby be produced’ (Kant 2000, 168).



**Figure 2.** Series of body experiments by Johan Nordberg (2014).

This means that form (or the formal subjective faculties that make forms possible) opens up our access to the empirical material world. The difference between the rational idea and aesthetic idea, however, is that the latter cannot be presented directly in order to be beautiful, but has to promote the free play of the cognitive powers. With this Kant means, as Hughes argues (2007, 305), that ‘the judgment of taste are synthetic, since they go beyond the concept of the object, and even beyond the intuition of the object and adds something that is not even a cognition but a feeling of pleasure (or displeasure)’. In consequence, a work of art cannot present its idea to its audience directly and didactically. A work of art only succeeds when it strives towards a presentation that is beyond the bounds of experience and as such an approximation of the underlying reasoning (Kant 2000, 170):

If it is admitted that in a pure judgment of taste the satisfaction in the object is combined with the mere judging of its form, then it is nothing other than the subjective purposiveness of that form for the power of judgment that we sense as combined with the representation of the object in the mind. Now since the power of judgment in regard to the formal rules of judging, without any matter (neither sensation nor concept), can be directed only to the subjective conditions of the use of the power of judgment in general (which is restricted neither to the particular kind of sense nor to a particular concept of understanding), and thus to that subjective element that one can presuppose in all human beings (as requisite for possible cognitions in general), the correspondence of a representation with these conditions of the power of judgment must be able to be assumed to be valid for everyone a priori.

Hence, in the work there must be a material given, that prevents Kant from falling into material idealism, and where the form of an object in his aesthetics, as Hughes (2007, 305) puts it:

... arises from our capacity for reflection, the understanding. The latter makes the unification of the affect under a concept possible. In aesthetic judgment there is no unification of the phenomenon, but the imagination nevertheless holds together the given in such a way that would under other circumstances prepare for determination, that is, cognition.

Paradoxically, however, while certainly intentional, beautiful art for Kant must moreover not seem intentional. A work of fine art, according to Kant, must be the product of *intention* and yet produce the *free* play of the mental powers seems like the paradox that ‘the purposiveness in the product of beautiful art, although it is certainly intentional, must nevertheless not seem intentional’ (Kant 2000, 185–186). This means that there has to be a kind of disinterested lawfulness in the composition of the artwork for being universal and communicable. For Kant, all art is intentional human production that requires skill or talent, yet fine or ‘beautiful’ (*schöne*) art is produced with the intention of doing what anything beautiful does, namely, promoting the free play of the cognitive powers (cf. Guyer 2014). From this idea of both intention and free play, Kant takes aesthetics into pure abstraction in the concept of the natural sublime. While the directness of beauty pleases us in an immediate and direct way through form, and the overwhelming vastness of the sublime presents us with the absolute freedom and totality of reason, the natural sublime goes even further to provide a pure instance of aesthetic judgment, since there is no artist and no intention of nature. In the natural sublime, the original intent is removed, since it was not produced to be meaningful for us as if it were meaningful (Kelly 1998).

In Figure 3, an example has been chosen that presents a suggestion that very loosely prepares for determination of something that could be related to dress, to architectural structure, the concept of interiority, etc., because of how the body is more or less encapsulated and sets two persons apparently interacting with each other. However, if presented in relation to ‘other circumstances’, in this case, a clearly defined aim ‘to explore the definitional boundaries of dress as an intermediary between body and space’ and only use one person, the work may prepare for determination to a much higher degree as we are presented with what glasses to look with and only one body with which we normally associate a garment. The work therefore prepares for cognitive definition of something related to dress but just about defined through the form and material itself, not in an articulated concept. If the work is then conducted as a series of experiments as in Figure 4, with only one person explicitly in relation to the circumstance (context) of the aim, the work



**Figure 3.** Sculpture by Andreas Eklöf (2014).

manages for itself even more so to explore and open up the definition of dress through the movements and positions of the body as the series reflects within itself between its examples. Thus, even though the inflated tube – ‘dress’ – manipulates the movement



**Figure 4.** Series of sculptures by Andreas Eklöf (2014).

and gestures into abstract sculptural shapes that form a kind of filter for otherwise recognisable movements and gestures, the circumstances around one experiment (one work), in terms of an explicit aim and a series of experiments, still prepare for a formal determination and a proposed definition such as of new boundaries for the aesthetic function and structure of dress. The work in [Figure 4](#) may also be interesting in relation to Kant's notion of the disinterested, as the work has the intention of exploring the definitional boundaries of dress but then completely without further interest in the sense of interest, meaning to be or to lie between something particular. As such, the work, as a possible example of Kant's natural sublime, demonstrates purposiveness without purpose – pure abstraction without concepts of utility or morality (Kant 2000).

#### 4. Poetics as formalist aesthetics and non-formalist aesthetics

Although Kant's aesthetics also has been understood as a judgment of taste – interested – Kant (1998, 156) once argued against Baumgarten in favour of a more scientific use of aesthetics:

The Germans are the only ones who now employ the word 'aesthetics' to designate that which others call the critique of taste. The ground for this is a failed hope, held by the excellent analyst Baumgarten, of bringing the critical estimation of the beautiful under principles of reason,<sup>d</sup> and elevating its rules to a science. But this effort is futile. For the putative rules or criteria are merely empirical as far as their sources are concerned, and can therefore never serve as *a priori* rules according to which our judgment of taste must be directed, rather the latter constitutes the genuine touchstone of the correctness of the former. For this reason it is advisable again to desist from the use of this term and to save it for that doctrine which is true science (whereby one would come closer to the language and the sense of the ancients, among whom the division of cognition into *ajisqhta kai nohta* was very well known.

What Kant seems to be looking for in 'the ancients' may be the material nature of aesthetics which Buck-Morss (1992) explains as a discourse of the body, a reality (corporeal conception, which has to do with how the bodily senses work in relation to reason and is unrelated to social constructs). Here, aesthetics is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, etc. However, from this way on, Kant has been understood by most to have taken a different way, so that what was once body and objective truth has now become subjective fiction. As Buck-Morss continues to argue, sensible experience, the empirical and the real, now refer to cultural forms, the imaginary and the illusory, which means a profound shift, even a reversal shift, from the formal epistemological quality that also Hughes (2007, 305) finds in Kant's aesthetics, and where 'form is not imposed on the world: it is the form of the world'.

If we are looking for a material nature of the artefact as something more constant and rigorous as a reality (corporeal conception, a science that deals with the bodily senses in relation to reason), let us follow Kant's pledge to look at the ancients. For this reason, Aristotle's conception of aesthetics through his *Poetics* – motivated by, somewhat ironically perhaps, the fact that *Poetics* is not understood as aesthetics in mainstream art criticism (cf. Marshall 1953) – seems a good starting point. While *Poetics* are widely dismissed in art criticism because they do not deal with the correspondence of artistic creation with reality, they do on the other hand, as Marshall notes, present us with critical methods

for how a good drama is produced and how to ascertain the literary value of poetic production. 'Poetics', as Marshall (1953, 228) declared, 'does not present us with an aesthetics, but with an analysis of poetic creation'. Now, this I would claim, is precisely at the core of epistemological problem of art research.

In presenting an alternative understanding of aesthetics to a non-formalist or socially constructed, Aristotle's *Poetics* is in many ways an answer to Plato's argument against art as cognitively useless, working only with images of particulars rather than universal truths. While Plato (1997) dismissed poetry because of it relying on inspiration rather than reason, and while poetry moreover disseminates untrue content because of it imitating appearance instead of reality, tragedy, in the meaning of *Poetics*, Aristotle (1984a) argued, is not primarily for entertainment but for intellectual purposes, arguing that it is precisely the arts, or more particularly poetry, that establishes universal truths in a freely graspable form – quite unlike, for example, history, which deals merely with particular facts. Thus, while Plato wanted to ban poetry if it could not be justified by reason, Aristotle answered by rooting his analyses of poetry – which in Greek means 'making' – in classic tragedy, demonstrating that tragedy is learning;

gathering the meaning of things, e.g. that the man there is so-and-so; for if one has not seen the thing before, one's pleasure will not be in the picture as an imitation of it, but will be due to the execution or colouring or some similar cause. (Aristotle 1984a, 2318)

In this way, by analysing the qualities of tragedy as a drama, Aristotle developed critical methods of how to make and determine formal value in poetic production.

To understand what an Aristotelian formal aesthetic might be, two of Aristotle's key concepts outlined in *Poetics* should be explored, *mimesis* and *catharsis*. But instead of trying to add to the debate about the meaning of these worlds, I will look at these concepts in a pragmatic and naïve way, also in relation to two examples of design research. The examples have been chosen because of their double aesthetic nature of being demonstrative for the wearer based on their interactive physical quality, and also persuasive to an audience. This in order to understand the fundamental possibilities of Aristotle's *Poetics* in relation to the rational possibilities of a demonstrative logic in artefacts in art research. It is also consistent with Aristotle's fundamental argument that the pleasure of *mimesis* is intellectual in terms of inference and education, in that it builds on methods and principles of the tragedy in relation to *catharsis* that generates a rational control of irrational emotions.

To explore some of the points above, also in relation to Baumgarten's notion of the ugly and the beautiful, but from a different point of view than in Figures 1 and 2, I would like to consider a research work that instead of exploring and developing an aesthetic function rather explore and develop the definition of 'wearing'. In relation to the body, wearing generally means the act of interacting with the worn, wearing the wear. Wearing may simply denote ways of using something, wholly or partially in relation to the body. Culturally and socially, there are also formal and informal rules for what to wear and how to wear it. The result is presented in Figure 5. Structurally, with a typical and educated idea of what wearing a garment means in different social situations, neither of the examples could be said to demonstrate a form of the mainstream definition of wearing. From a conventional commercial fashion design perspective, it is fair to say that the result does not qualify for a sellable outfit/garment to be picked



**Figure 5.** Ways of wearing, Alva Johansson (2015).

from the rack. However, at the same time the expression of the composition based on the act of getting dressed and undressed as fundamental to wearing garments alludes to a general attraction of the body. Thus, even though the composition is arguably not beautiful from industry standards as the common layering of garments is shifted, the use of a lining is questionable, the misplacement of functional objects and how things are ultimately placed on the body does not correspond to the idea of each particular garment or material; it still wants to persuade us rhetorically, based on a general (expected) attraction of the body that transcends the fashion field. Arguably, beauty is here more related to the demonstration and argumentation for the formal redefinition of wearing or a definition of a garment than to a field's mainstream idea of a beautifully dressed body (person) or a clearly conceivable application within fashion design. Drawing on Zangwill's (2001) recognition of Kant's distinction between free (formal) and dependent (non-formal) beauty, this points at the artwork's mixture of formal and non-formal aesthetic properties. Secondly, the possible drama perceived in the result is not for entertainment, but for intellectual purposes. The drama that may be perceived to unfold in the dressing and undressing of the body is secondary to the circumstances of the aim of the work as foundational development of a definition. However, the characteristics and drama do of course add to the poetic precision of the redefinition of wear. This precision may even increase if we add more examples with different character and drama, but not because of a historic narrative of particulars, but because the character eventually disappears in-between each experiment as the structure of the drama establishes universal truth – a proposition for a redefinition of wearing – in a freely graspable form relative to the aim.

### 5. Aristotle: mimesis and demonstration of body structures

The work in Figure 6 is an enquiry into the lines and structure of the body, presented in a basic scaled sculpture. It is a sculptural conception of body and dress based on a folded geometrical system. As a poetic figure, it does not imitate either of the two ways Plato understood mimesis as a form of imitation (see above). Firstly, the work does not impersonate anything; it is not a persona or a mask. Secondly, it does not produce a likeness of something; it does not imitate an appearance of any reality. For, even if a game of association could come with a number of more or less far-fetched masks and appearances, would they be anything but speculations?

With the aim of proposing an alternative structure of dress (Figure 6) extracted from analysing the human figure through drawing, the model is constructed by imitating certain bodylines that are articulated and expanded in an architectural structure. In this work, mimesis is, which Aristotle (1984a) argues, to follow the natural propensity of bodylines as a pleasant way of learning. The cognitive outcome is an alternative structure of the body (theory), developed from looking at the body in a different way than the predominant methods of garment design. However, as one can see, the work is not an imitation in the sense of a representation or an interpretation of the body. It does not passively represent the body or depict it in the way Plato considered poetic and dramatic imitation (Plato 1997). The work is a modulation of a known figure, a composition based on the body made into something different. For Aristotle, this is an example of when we engage in more complex and sophisticated forms of mimesis, where imitation is developed into modulation and composition. As such, mimesis in this work takes action as its own

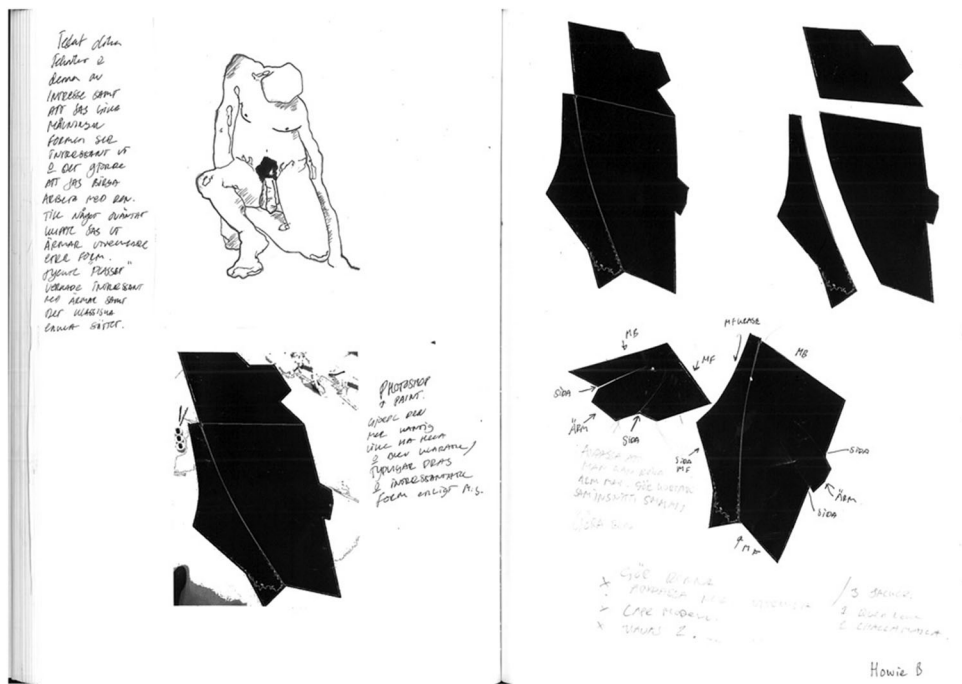


Figure 6. Body structures, Andreas Eklöf (2014).

object as an alternative structure of dress. Through the augmented structure in the prototype, the work communicates principal knowledge about an alternative structure for developing instead of being a passive representation of the body or a production of passive likeness of something already known.

In an Aristotelian sense, this research work is an exploration of what bodily structures might be, and a proposition of what structures there ought to be. The structural proposition of the model represents events instead of emotions, just as the casual principle in painting is more a matter of line than of colour, as Aristotle argues (1984a, 2321):

We maintain that tragedy is primarily an imitation of action, and that it is mainly for the sake of the action that it imitates the personal agents. [...] One must not confuse it with Character. Character in a play is that which reveals the moral purpose of the agents, i.e. the sort of thing they seek or avoid, where that is not obvious – hence there is no room for Character in a speech on a purely indifferent subject. Thought, on the other hand, is shown in all they say when proving or disproving some particular point, or enunciating some universal proposition.

As such, it presents plausible possibilities for new direction in wearable art, which is also more philosophical than narrative, since the work presents a universal principle, and not a history of particularities. The basic toile fabric, the simple rough cut, the clear seams and stitches, and the nude body are carefully selected to demonstrate a distinct structural model based on the aim of demonstrating new casual principles in designing dress. Mimesis is therefore a matter of an active process of selective composition and not a form of passive representation. And as such, the model formulates, proposes and makes conclusions about, just as Kant (2000) would argue, aesthetic evidence of an unknown universality based upon a set of given particularities.

For the sculptor or the fashion designer, through the vagueness of a garment, its clarity as a model, its fit with the body, and its referential space, it proposes and demonstrates a formal aesthetic principle that is an objective reality. The work does not narrate certain events or the appearance of events; nor may it be evaluated in degrees of truth. The artefact demonstrates a reasonable model and suggests possibilities for the discipline it seeks to evolve. The model may be cognitively perceived and imitated (learned) by those with the intention of developing, for example, new expression and functions in clothing, different performative aspects in costume design, and performance art – or alternative sculptural and special practices. From an epistemological point of view, the self-evident materiality of the model, the toile weave, not only reveals but also suggests ways of use and application. In relation to this aim, the artefact has a clear direction as a generic model of construction and bodily relationship for someone informed in the development of dress and sculpture. However, there is also something open and vague about it. But this kind of necessary balance between the recognisable and near, and the foreign and distant, is not to be confused with contemporary thoughts of art research being ‘unfinished thinking’ or ‘unfinished knowledge’ of art (Borgdorff 2010). On the contrary, this notion of the familiar and distant, a certain incompleteness, refers rather to an artwork’s function as a model to ‘hold Open the open of the world’, to borrow the words of Heidegger (1971, 46). It is this necessary openness of the work established in the work, its clearly formulated incompleteness, as Heidegger continues, that liberates the freedom of the model, its

universality, so that this universality can be established as aesthetic evidence of a proposed principle based upon a set of actively composed particularities.

Without given any information such as a title or aim, some viewers of a staged play including a person ‘dressed’ in the dark and relatively brutal forms in relation to the body would perhaps suggest the forms to articulate and embody the character and creature of a particular persona because of the notion associated to it. However, if this same dramatic form is set in relation to a context which is not a staged play in a theatre, but the circumstances of the aim to explore alternative structures of dress, the events made up by the interaction between body lines and structure may still claim supremacy over the ‘meaning’ and ‘identity’ of the fabric, or as Aristotle argues, supremacy over the character and the drama. The artwork is therefore not a case of singular knowledge that cannot be generally disseminated. Knowledge and knower converge in the act of looking, as Daston and Galison point out – not as a separate individual but as a member of a particular scientific field. Embedded in the model is the informed expression of the knowledge (science and theory of dress) that guided, constructed and formed the work in order for it to become understandable to the trained community. In this way, the model is an example of an atlas that shapes the subject as well as the object of science, as Daston and Galison (2007) further suggest. It simultaneously cultivates a discrete self wherein knowing and knower converge through an aesthetic process in which form and substance merge through the possibility of both entering and exiting the model also as a wearer.

The concrete theoretical proposition in the medium itself moreover supersedes its possible applications because of its distance, functionally and expressly, to anything familiar to applied works in dress and fashion design. In other words, concrete material experiments in a medium are built and constructed, at hand (Harman 2002), and cannot be exhausted by their physical relationships or deprived of the essential material quality and the definitions they materialise, which contrasts with social constructionist aesthetics. However, this also means, as Shields (2014, para 132) notes, that ‘although *mimêsis* is the root of simple imitation, as it comes to serve the goals of tragedy, it grows more sophisticated and powerful, especially in the hands of those poets able to deploy it to good effect’. Hence, as much as an audience is required to have certain knowledge of the media to understand formal aesthetic principles, a level of poetic precision to achieve the natural sublime of formal aesthetic that is relative to the sophistication of the formal principle explored is essential. That is, there is a certain poetic skill required in order to achieve the crucial condition for proper knowledge of a thing.

## 6. Aristotle: catharsis and argumentative body interactions

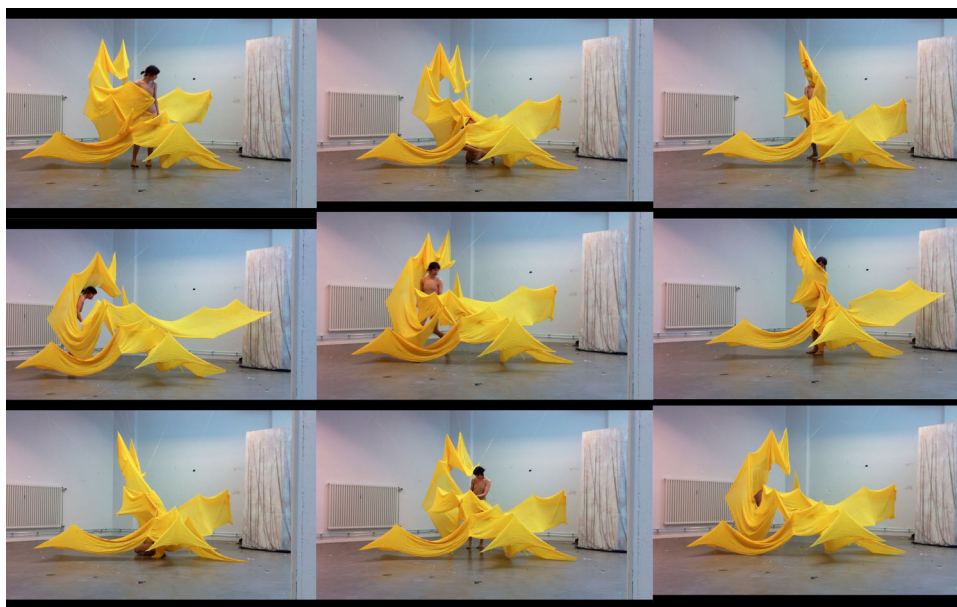
For the exploration of catharsis in Aristotelian terms, a final work will be considered. The aim of this work is to explore dress as an intermediary between body and space through a defined spatial element made of a textile material. The work is presented in a movie (Figure 7) and then analysed and concluded in a series of nine images (Figure 8) that define similarities and differences between the concept of dress and space through abstract bodily interactions with a spatial structure created by hanging/floating textile materials (the full set of experiments and test are presented in Figure 9).

Although the series may accurately involve elements of fear and pity in the way that the interaction captures the body, the series is not an emotional call against the alienation on

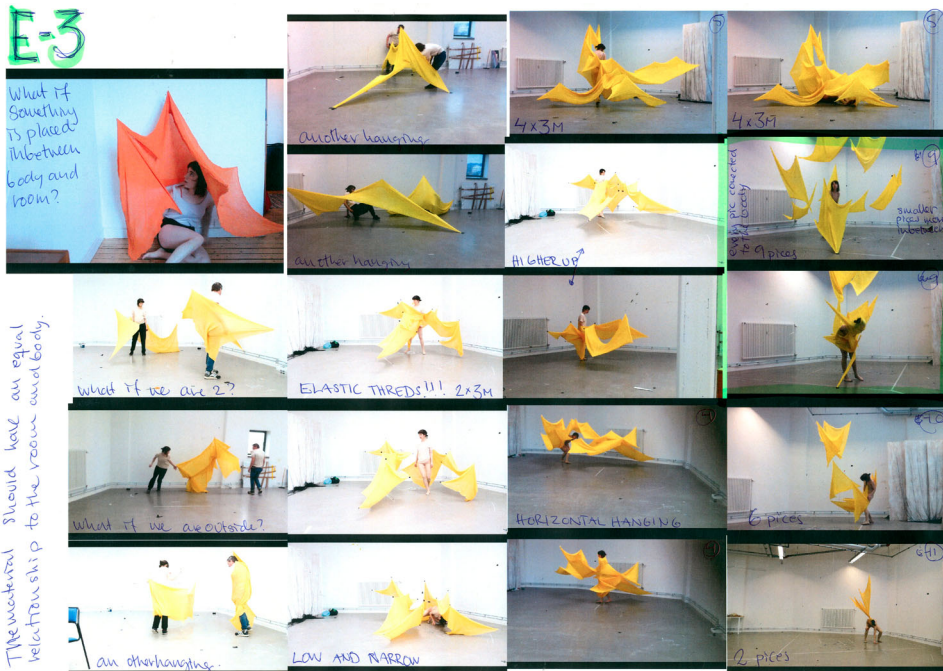


**Figure 7.** BODY(DRESS?)SPACE(ROOM?), Linnea Bågander (2015).

the social person performed by action of power and violence, but instead merely takes action as a propositional model for how the body may be perceived to relate to space through dress in a wider sense. Instead, aspects of wearing or interacting with garments as a form of plot in an Aristotelian sense, is made up by a series of occasions in an ongoing interactive action between a simple body and a simple material hardly distinguishable from the background elements that claim supremacy over character and drama. It is therefore not the characters in the tragedy that are the chief focus of tragedy, but the structure of the plot, the composition of the order of events. For the viewer as well as for the



**Figure 8.** BODY(DRESS?)SPACE(ROOM?), Linnea Bågander (2015).



**Figure 9.** BODY(DRESS?)SPACE(ROOM?), Linnea Bågander (2015).

wearer who enters through the same steps of the series, it may first present her with psychological amusement because of the paradox it embodies as both a wall and a dress, depriving the body of the functions and expressions that are normally understood as the act of wearing. While succumbing to the plot of the series as a viewer, the perhaps initial comic state induced by the seemingly trivial interactions with the fabric may then be followed by the plot sending the wearer into anxiety through the arrested action, which after another while ends in a state of indifference, a calibration of the emotions, a catharsis (Aristotle 1984a, 2320):

A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.

In a philosophical sense, this means that the work achieves an intellectual clarification through its at the same time comic and tragic structure, where passing through ‘pity and fear’ will achieve a purgation of these emotions, something that makes the soul settle down (Aristotle 1984b, 2128–2129). Because a tragedy is not simply made by copying what is the case, as Aristotle argues, it does not, like history, deal with certain facts that have happened and which are dependent, but rather deals with what might be, could have been, or ought to be in order to ‘to engage universal themes in a philosophical manner, and to enlighten an audience by their depiction’ (Shields 2014, para 185).

Hence, tragedy is not only an imitation of action, but of events inspiring fear or pity, which achieves at the end of the tragedy as a whole, the catharsis, a purgation of emotions, or the wonder of tragedy, as Aristotle also names it, which sends the viewer into an

intellectual state where only the logic of the plot, the arrangement of incidents, remains in its abstract form. Put differently, this is to say that one has reached the bland in Confucianism and Daoism, what Jullien (2004) refers to as being the undifferentiated blandness of all things, whose very essence is change, as it comprises access to the unnameable union of all potential values where different flavours no longer stand in opposition to tendencies and preconceptions. By enlightening the inner principles of things, one is brought to virtue and becomes unconditioned.

Through a variety of interactions, but all based on the same principal structure, the expression of each experiment clearly elaborates and declares its formal logic of construction as well as its principal aesthetic function. As in a good plot according to Aristotle, as mention above, the materialisation of the experiments points back to their physical function, by restricting itself to a unified action – but imitating a complete action. As such, the series of experiments in a medium defines rather than narrates its result, even if the action involves different characters and their development, since the unity of plot is derived from the fact that it is a single action constructed by the concrete response in the interactive events (parameters) set to interact and respond to each other. If this is so, it means for Aristotle that the series of experiments has been constructed so that the connections of the parts of a plot form a unity where each event follows the other, either by necessity or probability (Aristotle 1984a).

As a philosophical concept, the tragic wonder or intellectual clarification, *catharsis* as purification, is therefore, as Beardsley notes (1966, 65),

not something that takes place in the spectator at all, but something that takes place in the *play*. It is carried out by the plot itself, in virtue of the fact that the plot consists of events of a certain sort (original emphasis)

In this particular case, the events are made up of the incidents that compose the interaction between the body and fabric. Together, they make a plot that is both tragic and comic, but above all emotionally disinterested, which is, in fact, the result of research with an aim but without intention. As such, the tragic wonder, as a result of the above, or the full cycle of nature's tragic evolution of a particular circular ecosystem is also a case of Kant's natural sublime: it demonstrates purposiveness without purpose, as it is only an abstraction without concepts of utility or morality, and it strives towards a presentation that is beyond the bounds of experience – and as such is an approximation of the underlying reasoning (Kant 2000). It is also this causal theory that makes the story plausible and contains not the tragedy's general statement, but the formal principle of the proposed structural model of dress in-between the body and space. Ultimately, it means that such physical experimentation is self-informed by and self-referential to its own constructed principle, and it shows, as Zangwill (2001) points out, that at least some artworks may have only formal aesthetic properties.

## 7. Conclusion

I have tried to demonstrate the possibilities of formal research capabilities in arts practice as an alternative to non-formalist and relational aesthetic perspectives. As the examples indicate, that while the character and drama, the tone and texture of a work may alludes to a beholder's particular experience and thus may suggest different possible

uses (e.g. applications and questions), there are in these cases more important formal theoretical content (principles and model) that is expressed. As such, the examples clearly point to formal theoretical capabilities of arts practice results, being able to demonstrate and argue for universal knowledge in the form of aesthetic functions and definitions where relational aesthetic qualities of the artwork rather indicate applied and practical qualities of a research result. However, the rigour of the formal aesthetic content of a work depends on its expressional structure in relation to its aim, the circumstance that prepares for determination, and where the precision of the aim, according to Kant, is fundamental to the poetic precision of the formal proposition of the work. The function of its relational aesthetic content, the range of its practical applicability, on the other hand depends on the circumstances under which the formal content can be applied (associated to). In respect to these notions, however, there are also some critical points that have been brought forward in this analysis.

The first point relates to what Aristotle calls plot supremacy of character and drama. Hence, while there might be a demand for character and drama in commercial and conceptual practices of art and design, there is on the other hand a demand for a formal aesthetics built on the plot structure to achieve an abstraction of logical principles so that character and drama do not set themselves in front of the fundamental achievement, and so to say soften the clarity of the plot in favour of dramatic associations. Nevertheless, in achieving this intellectual distillation, it means that experimental results of casual principles in art are monumental and fundamentally independent from external qualities that may be associated with them at any specific spatio-temporal location. Thus, formal aesthetics represents itself essentially as a concrete definition or function and not as a secondary story, tied to a particular culture, ideology, style, gender, gallery space, site or situation – or any other drama.

The second critical point refers to the understanding of the field in relation to mimesis, popularised in expressions such as *dance for dance* or *a designer's designer*, indicate that the aim and expression of the work may be obscure to the general public and only graspable by other professional dancers and designers with a certain level of insight and knowledge in the field. What it formally means is that for poetic mimesis to have an impact, it must have a real understanding of the field, as Beardsley (1966) argues, while stating that one needs a real understanding of human nature in order to construct a good play (tragedy).

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