Beyond the *Flesh*: Rethinking the Body through Phenomenology in Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* and Waltz's *Körper* and *noBody*

Hadeel Ramez Endewy
Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest, Hungary)
hadeel.andewe@gmail.com

Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework of embodied perception, this paper examines Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* (2000) and Sasha Waltz's *Körper* and *noBody* (early 2000s), focusing on how they destabilise the body's ontological boundaries. By employing Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the *lived body*, the study explores how both works challenge conventional binaries between self/world and subject/object. Kane's text reconfigures psychosis as an alternative mode of being-in-the-world, where hallucinatory visions intensify the body–world dialectic rather than rupturing it. In contrast, Waltz's choreography dissolves corporeal boundaries, revealing the reversibility of perception and the intersubjective nature of embodiment. Despite their divergent media – text-based theatre and movement-based dance – both Kane and Waltz converge on a foundational proposition: perception is inherently participatory, perpetually entangled with the world's Becoming. The paper also integrates Drew Leder's concept of the *absent body* to analyse how both artists explore the ecstatic dissolution of the body, where disappearance becomes a mode of transcendence and reconfiguration. Through phenomenological analysis, this study demonstrates how theatre and dance enact phenomenological principles, blurring the boundaries between physicality and abstraction to redefine corporeal experience.

Keywords: phenomenology, vision–movement, the lived body, ecstatic body, intersubjectivity

1 Introduction

This paper investigates complementary modes of text-based and movement-based performance through two case studies: Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* (2000) and Sasha Waltz's choreographic works *Körper*[1] (2000) and *noBody*[2] (early 2002). While Kane's

[1] "*Körper* means body in German" (Waltz 2018). Waltz explains in an interview on the work's focus: "[t]he piece examines the material body, dissecting the physical human body into systems, like the nervous system, the bone or the skeleton" (2018).

[2] The title *noBody* (written as one word with a lowercase 'n' and an internal capital 'B') was intentionally

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work centres on written dialogue and narrative structure, Waltz embraces dance as a dynamic, embodied art form that "always opens up new ways of interpretation as it is a live art" (Waltz 2018). By its very nature, dance, in its essence, is an embodied art that communicates through movement.

Through a phenomenological approach[3] informed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's insights on perception[4] and embodied subjectivity as well as his concepts of the *lived body* (Leib)[5] and *flesh* (la chair),[6] this study investigates how the works under study destabilise conventional ontological binaries. It focuses particularly on the distinctions between self and world and between subject and object, exploring how these are challenged through the distinctive performative methods of Kane and Waltz. Merleau-Ponty's framework positions the *lived body* as the fundamental site of meaning-making, making it especially relevant for analysing both theatrical text and embodied dance. The paper argues that psychosis in Kane's text is not

crafted to reflect the work's core exploration of the body's paradoxical presence-in-absence. As Waltz clarifies, "it was the idea of visualising emptiness, as something was there and is gone" (2011, 01:19–28). "In *noBody* the choreographer and 25 dancers take on the challenge of visualizing the non-material and the idea of the spiritual beyond the body, thus questioning the mystery of human existence and death" (videotanz n.d.). As documented on the same website, the piece "was last performed on a Berlin stage in September 2008 at the Schaubühne Berlin. The production was invited to the renowned Festival d'Avignon in 2002 […]. The filmic version of *noBody*, the third and last part of Sasha Waltz's famous *Körper – Trilogy*, was produced in 2000 by nachtaktivfilm, commissioned by ZDF/ARTE."

3 Phenomenology as defined in the preface of *Phenomenology of Perception* as "[t]he study of essences, and it holds that all problems amount to defining essences, such as the essence of perception or the essence of consciousness. And yet phenomenology is also a philosophy that places essences back within existence and thinks that the only way to understand man and the world is by beginning from their 'facticity.' […] Phenomenology is also a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' prior to reflection – like an inalienable presence – and whose entire effort is to rediscover this naïve contact with the world in order to finally raise it to a philosophical status" (Landes 2012, lxx).

4 Merleau-Ponty redefines perception as an embodied, lived experience, rejecting the mind–body dualism of traditional philosophy. Taylor Carman asserts in the foreword to *Phenomenology of Perception*: "[p]erception is both intentional and bodily, both sensory and motor, and so neither merely subjective nor objective, inner nor outer, spiritual nor mechanical" (2012, xiii).

5 Merleau-Ponty stands apart in phenomenology for centring the body as the locus of subjective experience, which he terms the 'lived body.' As translator Donald A. Landes clarifies in his introduction to *Phenomenology of Perception*: "The lived body is not an object among others in the world – it is my body, experienced as the very condition of my being. Yet this 'ownness' does not imply possession, as if the body were separable from existence itself" (2012, xlviii). Based on this, the 'lived body' is the pre-reflective ground through which one perceives, acts, and interprets the world.

6 Merleau-Ponty states: "The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an 'element' of Being" (1968, 139).

a form of disembodiment but rather an alternative mode of being-in-the-world, where hallucinatory visions reconfigure the body-world relationship. In contrast, Waltz's choreography dissolves corporeal boundaries to reveal perception's inherent reversibility. Despite operating through opposing principles – the written form versus kinaesthetic experience[7] – both Kane and Waltz converge on the same insight: to perceive is always to participate in the world's Becoming.

Both artists emerged from parallel artistic revolutions in 1990s European theatre and dance, each using radical formal experimentation to interrogate the boundaries of human consciousness. Through its fragmented structure and elliptical language, *4.48 Psychosis* engages in a phenomenological inquiry into the body's perceptual limits, revealing how the mental and physical intersect in the lived experience of the self. Kane's publisher observes the text's ambiguous form: "On the page, the piece looks like a poem. No characters are named, and even their number is unspecified. It could be a journey through one person's mind, or an interview between a doctor and his patient" (Kane 2000, front matter). Similarly, Waltz's *Körper* and *noBody* explore the material and perceptual limits of the body as described in the program notes for Waltz's *Körper*, this work marks a pivotal moment in her exploration of the human body: "In *Körper* […] she investigates the anatomy and the physical appearance of the human being, relating her dancers' bodies to architecture, science, and history. […]. *noBody* asks about the metaphysical existence of humanity" (Arthaus Musik). The present paper examines two pivotal moments from Waltz's *Körper* that materialise Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the *flesh*: the nude duet separated by glass in *Körper* and the cloud sequence in *noBody*. These scenes reveal how Waltz stages the body's material and perceptual limits.

By integrating textual analysis with phenomenological interpretation of recorded performances and staging, this paper highlights how theatre and dance, as distinct yet complementary mediums, illuminate shared phenomenological concerns. Key concepts such as presence, absence, materiality, and embodiment frame this analysis, demonstrating how Kane and Waltz enact phenomenology through their art, blurring boundaries between physicality and abstraction to redefine corporeal experience.

[7] Kinaesthetic experience refers to the sensory perception of bodily movement, position, and physical interaction with the environment, emphasising the role of touch, motion, and proprioception in shaping understanding or engagement.

2 The Body–World Enigma: 4.48 Chiasm[8] in Kane's Theatre of Reversible *Flesh*

4.48 Psychosis was written during Kane's final months; as the publisher's description notes, "throughout the autumn and winter of 1998–99 as Kane battled with one of her recurrent bouts of depression. On February 20, 1999, aged 28, the playwright committed suicide" (Kane 2000, front matter). Critics such as Michael Billington have interpreted Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* as a "sombre, poetic meditation on suicide," emphasising its portrayal of "sheer disconnectedness" (2000). However, Kane's agent offered a contrasting view, stating: "I do not think she was depressed, I think it was deeper than that. I think she felt something more like existential despair – which is what makes many artists tick" (qtd. in Gentleman 1999). The second perspective reframes Kane's writing not as a symptom of illness, but as an artistic confrontation with the void, suggesting that her work is a deliberate philosophical inquiry into the nature of existence. Accordingly, moving beyond the limitations imposed by her suicide or her struggles with depression, this paper examines Kane's work divorced from biographical assumptions about her mental health. This analytical shift from reading Kane through the lens of pathology to viewing her work through embodiment signals an intentional focus on the lived, visceral aspects of being, highlighting the significance of physical interaction and presence in shaping meaning and identity. Through this insight, what initially appears as despair transforms into a profound meditation on existence itself. To expand this view, this part first argues that Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* can be read as dramatising psychosis in terms of Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic *flesh* – the reversible entanglement of body and world. Building on this, psychosis, in this reading, operates as hyper-embodied reality-construction, where the speaker[9] does not dissolve into their surroundings but engages with them

[8] The concept of the chiasm is defined as a "new conception of the body, as a *chiasm* or crossing-over (the term comes from the Greek letter chi) which combines subjective experience and objective existence. The term for this new conception of the body is *flesh*, an ultimate notion; a concrete emblem of a general manner of being; which provides access both to subjective experience and objective existence" (Baldwin 2004, 2). "The chiasm, then, is an image describing how this overlapping and encroachment takes place between a pair that nevertheless retains a divergence – touching and being touched being plainly nonidentical" (Reynolds 2000, 68). In this paper, I engage with both Merleau-Ponty's early phenomenology of embodied perception (*Phénoménologie de la perception*, 1945; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1962) and his later ontology of *flesh* and intertwining (*Le Visible et l'invisible*, 1964; *The Visible and the Invisible*, 1968), tracing his shift from analysing bodily subjectivity to exploring the primordial, chiasmic structure of Being itself.

[9] The text provides no character names, gender markers, or speaker attributions, shifting unpredictably between *I*, *you*, *we*, and *she*. With no stage directions assigning lines, the voices remain deliberately ambiguous. Following Kane's intentional indeterminacy, I will refer to all vocalisations collectively as *the speaker*, using singular *they* for pronoun reference.

through amplified sensory immediacy. Finally, the study exposes perception as an inherently kinetic and reversible process, reframing mental breakdown as a distinct mode of being-in-the-world.

This intensified being-in-the-world manifests in the speaker's hallucinations, which are not a rupture from reality but an alternative mode of embodied perception. As the speaker declares, "I'm seeing things/ I'm hearing things/ I don't know who I am" (Kane 2000, 18). This state dramatises Merleau-Ponty's premise that "the body is our general medium for having a world" (1962, 169). For Merleau-Ponty, the *lived body* is not a passive object but a dynamic "nexus of living meanings" (175) engaged in a constant, "pre-reflective dialogue of corporeal existence" (2004, 39) with its environment. Kane's speaker embodies this principle literally: their perceptions actively reshape their reality. The play's visceral imagery demonstrates that the body's materiality is the primary site where meaning is constituted and renegotiated through raw, corporeal immediacy. Thus, psychosis in Kane's text is not a disembodiment but a different way of being a body-in-the-world, where the perceived world is intensely and unsettlingly enacted through the *flesh*. It is this embodied grounding that is the basis for Merleau-Ponty's claim that "we need neither to measure nor to calculate in order to gain access to this world" (2004, 39). This claim is vividly enacted by Kane's speaker, for whom hallucination collapses the internal and external binary, constituting a reality where, crucially, perception is never passive observation but always active embodiment. The speaker's sensory crises – "seeing things" – are enactments of Merleau-Ponty's core thesis: that all perception resists intellectual abstraction, manifesting instead through what he describes as the simple, yet profound act of "opening one's eyes" (2004, 39). Thus, the speaker's very existence becomes entangled with their perceptions, continuously remaking world boundaries through corporeal experience.

Contrary to traditional medical models that frame the psychotic body as disembodied or incoherent, this analysis contends that psychosis in Kane's text does not fracture embodied subjectivity but rewires its dialogue with reality. Psychosis is revealed as actively reconstituting reality, precisely through the collapse of subject–world distinctions. Here lies the enigma of embodiment in which the body exists as a material entity within the world, while the world simultaneously manifests within the body through sensation and lived experience. This reciprocity dissolves the illusion of separation, exposing existence as an entangled phenomenon where neither body nor world can be defined without the other. The psychotic body, then, does not retreat from reality but reconfigures it, becoming a mode of 'writing' oneself into existence. When the speaker declares, "I don't know who I am" (Kane 2000, 18) – emerging from their earlier sensory openness to the world, as expressed in "I'm seeing things/I'm hearing things" (18) – this shift signals an ontological transformation in their mode

of Being. Their access to reality is altered, and what they see/hear become their truth. The body, in this state, is but the ground of a new way of knowing, simultaneously reflecting and shaping perception through lived experience.

This enigma, where the body and world merge through perception, manifests most strikingly in the speaker's connection to their own physical self. The speaker's knowledge and perception of their body relate directly to their vision, exposing a profound connection between self-awareness and physical existence. This is vividly captured in the lines later when the speaker states: "I am here/I can see myself" (Kane 2000, 21) or in the lines "I know myself/I see myself" (23). This repeated visual self-recognition suggests that the speaker's understanding of the world emerges primarily through bodily experience. Like Merleau-Ponty's *flesh*, their physical forms become the essential ground for negotiating identity and place within the world. Here, Kane and Merleau-Ponty converge: the philosopher argues that perception is irrevocably tied to bodily existence, and the play dramatises this principle. The speaker's primary encounter with their own form occurs through looking, as in "I can see myself or I know myself" (Kane 2000, 23), a phenomenological act that simultaneously reveals the self and opens toward the world. Merleau-Ponty characterises this openness or dynamic as a mystical intertwining, where body and perception merge into a single phenomenological fabric. His meditation on chromatic experience illustrates this vividly:

> As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not set over against it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it "thinks itself within me," I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue. (1962, 249)

This passage epitomises the chiasmic dialogue he calls the *flesh*: perception is not a subject–object encounter but a reversible exchange where the sky's blueness "thinks itself within me" (249). To see is to be visible; to touch is to be touched. The gaze becomes immersion – a surrender that erases boundaries between seer/seen, revealing perception as the very process through which body and world co-emerge. In Kane's play, psychosis literalises this intertwining: the speaker's hallucinations are hyper-embodied reconstructions, where the flesh of the world and the flesh of the body ceaselessly reconfigure one another.

In Kane's work, reversibility extends not only between the body and the world but within the body itself – organs become both subjects and objects of perception. The speaker literalises this reversibility – their body is at once perceiving and perceived by their own vision, as in "[h]ere I am and there is my body" (Kane 2000, 21). The body is both 'seen' and 'seeing'; moreover, the *I* that observes is the same *I* that is observed,

each aspect rendered alien to the other through the very act of perception. Crucially, this alienation does not signify dissolution; both the observing and observed aspects remain undeniably of the same flesh, revealing the body's fundamental paradox – it is at once intimately familiar and profoundly foreign. Through this dynamic, the body becomes simultaneously alien and hyper-self-aware through intensified looking. Additionally, Kane's deliberate erasure of speaker identity – the unassigned shifts between *I*, *you*, *we*, and *she* – performs Merleau-Ponty's chiasm at the linguistic level. This pronominal instability is an embodied reversibility made textual, where the speaking body exists simultaneously as perceiver (*I* who sees/hears), perceived (*you* addressed as object) and collective *flesh* (*we* as shared embodiment).

Psychosis in Kane's work exposes the way the body and world co-constitute one another through vision and the ceaseless exchange of being-in-the-world. Her theatre becomes a phenomenological experiment, revealing what normative perception obscures: that to exist as a body is to be perpetually undone and remade in the act of perception itself. As Merleau-Ponty asserts in his essay, "Eye and Mind," "vision is attached to movement" (1964, 162) – a claim Kane's visceral imagery literalises, depicting bodies that dissolve and re-cohere within their environments. For instance, the recurring lines "[h]atch opens/Stark light/and Nothing/Nothing/see Nothing/What am I like?" (Kane 2000, 28) frame the body as an unstable interplay of movement and vision. The speaker in *4.48 Psychosis* experiences their body as a mobile entity – one that moves within the world yet exists in a state of flux. The phrase "hatch opens" (28) signifies both action and emergence, suggesting a perpetual recreation of being. Appearing four times in the play, this refrain marks moments of transition, signalling rebirth or rupture for the speaker. Here, Kane reveals the body as something called into being through motion. It mirrors Merleau-Ponty's idea of the body, as the nexus of vision and movement, engages with the world through looking and motion. In "Eye and Mind" (1964; "L'Œil et l'esprit," 1961), Merleau-Ponty asserts this interdependence: "[t]he visible world and the world of my motor projects are both total parts of the same Being" (162). For him, the body and its movements are the primary agents of perceptual experience, anchoring the subject in the world. Crucially, movement depends on the body – it unfolds through the body, which in turn shapes perception. Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, the body as a "mobile object" can "interpret perceptual appearance and construct the object as it truly is" (1962, 236). Thus, movement, body, and world are inextricably linked in the construction of meaning.

Kane's speaker exists in a liminal state of becoming. The "hatch opens" (Kane 2000, 28) motif evokes both birth and disintegration, exposing the body's dependence on movement and spatial negotiation. Yet this instability is fraught with violence. In one passage, the speaker describes a clinical space where their medicated bodies

feel alien: "the child of negation/out of one torture chamber into another/a vile succession of errors without remission/every step of the way I've fallen" (28). The hospital becomes another "torture chamber" (28), a site where the body is rendered strange, even monstrous, by external forces.

This disintegration of bodily autonomy escalates as the speaker's identity dissolves into collective historical trauma. They occupy multiple spaces and temporalities, their visions merging with global atrocities, as in: "I gassed the Jews, I killed the Kurds, I bombed the Arabs, I fucked small children while they begged for mercy, the killing fields are mine, everyone left the party because of me" (Kane 2000, 19). The body, here, is no longer a discrete entity or confined to individual experience, but expands into a vessel of shared violence – a post-apocalyptic world where the *I* collapses into a *we*. The speaker's flesh becomes collective flesh, absorbing the weight of historical horrors. Kane's work, then, does not merely depict psychosis but enacts it, destabilising the boundaries between body and world, self and history, perception and reality.

Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* dismantles the illusion of a stable self, revealing existence as a chiasmic entanglement, where body and world, vision and movement, collapse into a single, reversible *flesh*. The psychotic body does not retreat from reality but rewrites it, becoming both the site and the architect of its own hyper-embodied truth. In this phenomenological reading, despair transforms into a defiant act of perception: to hallucinate is not to lose the world, but to remake it, pulse by pulse, in the body's unending dialogue with itself.

3 The Reversibility Theory: Waltz through the Looking-*Flesh*

While *4.48 Psychosis* explores the embodied reciprocity between body and world, Waltz's *Körper* interrogates the body's relationship to the Other. This section argues that *Körper* materialises Merleau-Ponty's concept of *flesh*: the chiasmic intertwining of self and world. Drawing on his theory of reversibility, where vision, touch, and movement collapse the subject–object divide, Waltz stages embodiment as a dialectical process: perception and existence co-constituted through the mutual exchange between bodies. Having established vision and movement as the foundational axes of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology where seeing is always already a form of bodily participation, this framework raises an important question: if perception binds the corporeal self and the world, how does it mediate the encounter with the Other? Waltz explores this question most notably in *Körper*. In a seminal moment, a nude female and male dancer confront each other, separated only by a transparent pane

of glass (2000, 55:00–30). By analysing Waltz's choreographic use of the glass pane as a performative chiasm, the study demonstrates how artistic practice materialises Merleau-Ponty's claim that the body is neither purely subject nor object, but a reversible *flesh* that simultaneously sees and is seen. The glass, functioning as both barrier and conduit, stages the paradox of intersubjectivity. In dismantling the illusion of autonomous selfhood, reversibility theory ultimately proposes that to perceive is always already to be perceived, and to encounter the Other is to recognise oneself as Other-to-the-Other.

This striking composition, the glass pane segment, creates three simultaneous layers of visibility. First, the literal exposure: the glass's transparency forces complete visual access to both bodies, eliminating any possibility of concealment and creating a raw confrontation with physical vulnerability. Second, the gaze as active connection: the dancers maintain direct eye contact, transforming looking from passive observation into reciprocal engagement. Their locked gaze becomes the primary medium of connection despite physical separation. Third, the glass as phenomenological threshold: the transparent barrier serves as both divider and unifier – materially separating the bodies while enabling their visual intertwining. The dancers' mutual gaze creates intersubjective validation, for this perceptual exchange reveals how presence emerges through being seen, balancing vulnerability with social connection. The sequence reveals perception's active role in shaping intersubjective understanding. Through this minimalist configuration – naked bodies, glass, and sustained eye contact – Waltz demonstrates how performance can articulate the fundamental dynamics of perception: that sight is never neutral, that presence is co-constituted through visibility, and that human connection persists even across divides.

This performative interplay of seeing and being seen is best understood through Merleau-Ponty's concept of the glance-vision, which reframes sight as embodied movement rather than passive observation. Central to his philosophy is the body as the "intertwining of vision and movement" (1964, 162). This means "the gaze is merely a modality of its [the body's] movement" (1962, 78) which reveals how perception actively constructs reality through kinetic engagement. This is why the glance requires bodily movement to render the invisible visible, making the body both perceiver and gateway to the world. Merleau-Ponty captures this body's dual role perfectly, noting that while "[v]isible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world," it is precisely "because it moves itself and sees" that it actively shapes its reality and "holds things in a circle around itself" (1964, 163).

This theoretical framework provides the key to analysing how the dancers in Waltz's work negotiate visibility and connection, not as static observers, but as moving, perceiving subjects actively inscribing themselves into a shared space. Waltz materialises this philosophy, choreographing the very process through which, as Merleau-Ponty

argues, the moving subject inscribes itself into the world and becomes visible to others. The body comes to know the Other through its moving towards it, since "vision is attached to movement" (1964, 162). In this respect, the body moves only towards what it looks at, as shown in Waltz's *Körper*, where the two dancers' approach to each other is linked to their sight. Therefore, vision triggers many questions regarding the existence of the Other. Whereas, finding answers and obtaining knowledge are reached through the body, since it is a mobile thing that moves and opens itself towards the Other, "the vision is the question, and the movement is the answer" (Di Fazio 2015, 151). Respectively, in *Körper* the act of looking opens the two dancers towards speculating a totally different body's formulation and conception from their own bodies. Hence, vision draws questions towards exposing the enigma of the self–body system and of the Other's body. This exploration is evident in how the two dancers examine each other's bodies with scrutinizing gazes, reflecting their quest to uncover the essence of the anonymous Other.

Moreover, the body through its movement initiates intermingling reflections of its image on both the female dancer's face and the male dancer's face, which is exposed in the transparent glass situated between them. This fusion and hybridity between these two images makes it impossible to determine which one is looking at the other and which one is the Other. "A woman and a man face each other, separated only by a pane of glass that reflects something our eyes have trouble focusing on; sometimes we see the man, sometimes the woman, and sometimes a hybrid of both" (Werner 2002). This fusion shows that the two dancers mirror each other's bodies to reveal that their body is similar and identical to all people. By this, the body of the woman and that of the man form one unit and are thus a completion of one system. The *lived body*[10] is open, reflexive and interactive, it shifts perspectives between itself and the Other. The two performers exchange the role between either (looking) or (looked at). Gradually, the body is exposed as a (perceiver) and a (perceived) at the same time. As Merleau-Ponty states, "[t]he enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen" (1964, 162). Significantly, the body as a mobile thing is an intertwining between the self and the Other. The body reflects the man's face on the woman's and vice versa, demonstrating that the body possesses a quality of reversibility. On this basis, I will be drawing on Merleau-Ponty's theory of reversibility and alterity

[10] The terms the *lived body* or *the phenomenal body* have the same meaning, which is the body as it experiences the world from within, and they are used alternatively by Merleau-Ponty as he certainly focuses on the subjective and embodied way in living the experience. Merleau-Ponty's *lived body* has both subjective and objective presence and they both overlap at certain occasions. Sometimes the body is viewed regarding its physical appearance as *a body among other bodies*, and sometimes it is lived subjectively, from the inside, with no regard to its objective presence, "I am not in front of my body, I am in it or rather I am it" (1962, 173).

for the purpose of explaining the enigma of the body in its relation to the self and to the Other in this scene.

Merleau-Ponty's reversibility theory emerges from the vision–movement system, where perception operates through intersubjective exchange. This framework positions the Other not as separate but as understood "by analogy with my own" existence (1962, 406). In this dynamic, the perceiver and perceived become reciprocal; the Other functions as an extension of myself, forming what Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* calls the *we-subject*. This fundamental reversibility dissolves traditional subject–object distinctions, creating an intersubjective continuum where self and Other co-constitute one another through embodied perception. Merleau-Ponty's model of intersubjectivity is founded on this principle of internal alterity, arguing that "because I can always transcend myself, be another for myself, or experience Otherness within myself, I can be open to the Otherness of another person" (Ware 509). This foundational capacity for self-transcendence is precisely what is illustrated by the reflection of the woman's face on the man's, demonstrating how her body escapes its own boundaries. The reflection of the woman's face on the man's shows that the woman's body transcends itself to be located in the man's, while the man's body, in return, transcends itself to emerge in the woman's body. This openness allows for the alterity of the Other to coordinate with the self. Merleau-Ponty explains the reversibility or intersubjective theory through a simple example of one hand touching another's:

> When I touch my right hand with my left, my right hand, as an object, has the strange property of being able to feel too. We have just seen that the two hands are never simultaneously in the relationship of touched and touching to each other. When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of 'touching' and being 'touched'. What was meant by talking about 'double sensations' is that, in passing from one role to the other, I can identify the hand touched as the same one which will in a moment be touching. In other words, in this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the integument or incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile. (1962, 106)

This reversibility discards the pure and radical subjectivity possessed in either the tangibility of the body or the touching. This is because it is impossible for a person to touch somebody without being touched in return, which reveals that the body is both a subject and object at the same time. Based on this, reversibility defines the relationship between one dichotomy and another as the Other is not merely an object, but it is of the same substance of the body. Dan Zahavi, accordingly, states, "I can only encounter the Other if I am beyond myself from the very beginning; thus, I can only experience the Other if I am already a possible Other in relation to

myself, and could always appear to myself as Other" (qtd. in Ware 509). Moreover, Levinas remarks, "the I–You relation […would be] transcended in the relation of the subject to the Other, who would be much more than a you, apparently. The Other would be alterity itself, and an unattainable alterity" (1999, 100). In this case, it shows that the scene of the female dancer and the male dancer is an example of blurring the boundaries between the non-subjective/objective split and between the self and the Other, and the body and the other's body.

The pane of glass, positioned between the two dancers, functions as a reflexive surface which reveals the reversal roles of both performers. Significantly, the glass embodies the chiasm, representing the intertwining of self and Other. While it resembles a mirror in its reflective capacity, Merleau-Ponty clarifies that a mirror's reflexivity arises only through the presence of a visible observer: "[t]he mirror appears because I am seeing–visible [*voyant–visible*], because there is a reflexivity of the sensible; the mirror translates and reproduces that reflexivity" (1964, 168). Thus, the glass challenges the false dichotomy between the self and the Other, blurring the distinctions that typically separate them. Rather than acting solely as a reflective surface, the glass operates as a transparent medium through which the self and Other can engage directly, revealing their interdependence. In this way, the performance enacts Merleau-Ponty's concept of perception as inherently relational, where self and Other are intertwined rather than strictly separated. Merleau-Ponty remarks:

> The mirror's ghost lies outside my body, and by the same token my own body's "invisibility" can invest the other bodies I see. Hence my body can assume segments derived from the body of another, just as my substance passes into them; man is mirror for man. The mirror itself is the instrument of a universal magic that changes things into a spectacle, spectacles into things, myself into another, and another into myself. (1964, 168)

Based on this, the mirror works as a gap and a reflexive surface of the self–Other relationship which gradually reveals the enigma of the body as it is a subject and an object at the same time. Moreover, the mirror manifests two levels of the body's existence, starting by projecting it as a physicality and moving towards revealing it as a lived one: "the Other is first of all perceived as a body, but this body is not the objective body or the body of biology that consists of bones, cells and flesh, but it is the lived body, the body that moves and sees" (Ware 507). Merleau-Ponty concludes in *Phenomenology of Perception* that my body and the Other's body are both subject and object simultaneously characterised by reversibility; "[b]etween this phenomenal body of mine and that of another as I see it from the outside, there exists an internal relation which causes the other to appear as the completion of the system" (1962, 410). The mirror thus epitomises Merleau-Ponty's reversible body: a liminal space where physical reflection gives way to lived intersubjectivity. In framing the Other as

both object and completion of the self, it proves that perception is never solitary – it is a dialogue where seeing and being seen collapse into one *flesh*.

Waltz's choreography materialises perception's fundamental paradox; the body is never merely subject or object, but always both, caught in an endless exchange where touching and being touched, seeing and being seen, are one intertwined movement. Dance transcends representation, it does not depict reversibility but becomes it, proving that to move, to perceive, is always already to be undone and remade in the presence of the Other.

4 The *Ecstatic Body* in Kane and Waltz

"The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself."
(Merleau-Ponty 1962, 474)

The *ecstatic body* – as defined by Drew Leder through Heidegger's *ek-stasis* – describes a mode of embodiment where the body vanishes from explicit awareness to merge with the world. This paradoxical state, in which absence enables a deeper spatial and perceptual immersion, is dramatised in Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* and Waltz's *noBody*, where fragmented and disappearing bodies challenge the boundaries between self and environment. In this way, ecstatic absence is revealed as a condition of transcendent embodiment.

Similarly to Merleau-Ponty, Leder believes that "it is through the bodily surface that I first engage with the world. Only because my eyes and ears lie on the surface of my body are they capable of disclosing the events taking place around me" (1990, 11). However, the latter radicalises this by examining the body's paradoxical disappearance in acts of absorption. From that perspective, the body is the object of perception, yet the body, conversely, changes to be the structure of appearance. Thus, it recedes from awareness precisely when it is most functionally engaged. Therefore, this process is not a negation of embodiment but its ecstatic culmination: a Heideggerian *standing-outside-oneself* (*ek-stasis*) that reveals the *lived body*'s capacity for self-transcendence. Leder develops his notion of the *absent body* into that of the *ecstatic body*, clarifying:

> The lived body, as ecstatic in nature, is that which is away from itself. Yet this absence is not equivalent to a simple void, a mere lack of being. The notion of being is after all present in the very word absence. The body could not be away, stand outside, unless it had a being and stance to being with. It is thus never fully eradicated from the experiential world. Otherwise I would not even know I had a body. (22)

Leder defines the meaning of absence by returning to its Latin root, "the word *absence* comes from the Latin *esse*, or *being*, and *ab*, meaning *away*. An absence is the being-away of something" (22). In this mode, the body disappears from attention and become invisible and delves into the background, causing a bodily self-effacement, which consequently causes the appearance of the natural world. Based on this, the body is defined by its dynamic oscillation between presence and absence. These two bodily modes, presence and absence, are fleshed out from the body's relationship to the environment, as "the body could not be away, stand outside, unless it had a being and stance to begin with" (22). Bodily absence can be understood as a functional withdrawal: when the body–mind unity is absorbed in an activity, the body recedes from thematic awareness, becoming absent precisely because it is actively participating in the world. Conversely, the body returns to presence when made an object of conscious reflection, like focusing on one's breath during meditation. Therefore, the body's absence is not a lack but a mode of ecological attunement – a necessary vanishing that enables immersive experience while always retaining latent capacity for reappearance. The body is not a thematic object, and it does not think of its motion or location in space anymore, but it is spatially an extended entity.

This functional disappearance is vividly illustrated in the middle of an action, whether as complicated as driving a car or as simple as turning on a light switch. In such moments, the body is not the object of attention but the transparent medium of action. For example, the hand flipping a switch becomes experientially transparent; consciousness is focused on the goal (illuminating the room), not on the bodily mechanics required to achieve it, this is why Leder terms it the *absent body*. The healthy body enacts a flight from itself, as the subject becomes wholly caught up in the world of engagement. As Leder observes, synthesizing Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology: "[w]e can understand neither the origin, orientation, nor texture of the perceptual field without reference to the absent presence of the perceiving body" (1990, 13). In this framework, bodily absence is the very condition that enables a deeper engagement with the world.

This framework of bodily disappearance and ecstatic absence provides a powerful lens for analysing the corporeal imagery in Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*. The play makes this dissolution of the self-world boundary tangible:

> A consolidated consciousness resides in a darkened banqueting hall near the ceiling of a mind whose floor shifts as ten thousand cockroaches when a shaft of light enters as all thoughts unite in an instant of accord body no longer expellent as the cockroaches comprise a truth which no one ever utters. (Kane 2000, 3)

Here, the speaker's body merges with the environment where spatial dimensions become extensions of corporeal experience, as seen in Kane's physicalised metaphors "ceiling of a mind" and "floor shifts" (3). The external world is no longer separate but is instead rendered as bodily space. This is not mere metaphor but a phenomenological collapse. In this interplay, space becomes physicalised, while the body extends itself spatially, blurring the boundaries between the two. According to Liu Shengli:

> The process of communication between body and world is simultaneously that of mutual constitution between body and space […]. It is not 'a body in space,' but a body 'inhabits space' or 'of space' they act as the necessary condition of constitution for each other and become correlated in this constitution. (2009, 136)

In this state, the body recedes into the background to allow the visual field to emerge. Leder terms this phenomenon *background disappearance*, which he defines as the process whereby "[b]odily regions can disappear because they are not the focal origin of our sensorimotor engagements but are backgrounded in the corporeal gestalt: that is they are for the moment relegated to a supportive role, involved in irrelevant movement, or simply put out of play" (1990, 26). As the body transcends its materiality, it becomes weightless, almost floating – rendering itself transparent, a medium through which everything comes into being. This is echoed in the lines, "watch me vanish, watch me" (Kane 2000, 34). The act of "vanishing" here is a transformation – a theme Kane herself articulates when defining madness as "a split between one's consciousness and one's physical being" (qtd. in Saunders 2002, 113). This schism between self and body recurs throughout the text, most strikingly in the lines, "here I am, and there is my body" (Kane 2000, 31). The speaker's body, no longer felt as an integrated part of their being, becomes an alien object – something observed at a distance rather than inhabited. Yet this detachment does not erase bodily existence entirely; rather, it signals a profound reconfiguration of embodiment itself.

The body transforms into a liminal space, a threshold where the boundaries between self and world dissolve. In *4.48 Psychosis*, this ontological instability surfaces in the speaker's desperate questioning, "where do I start? Where do I stop?" (Kane 2000, 18). The lines between internal and external, subject and object, blur until even basic distinctions collapse. Kane's personal notes underscore this intentional disintegration of boundaries: "if I was psychotic I would literally not know the difference between myself, this table, and Dan" (qtd. in Saunders 2002, 112). Here, the body ceases to operate as a container for identity and instead becomes a site of psychotic entanglement – where the self emerges into the world, and the world invades the self. Therefore, the speaker's body in Kane's text does not vanish but dissolves into the world, challenging the very distinction between inner and outer.

The play's formal experimentation performs the very bodily disappearance it describes. Kane's fragmented language enacts this vanishing; for instance, the imperative "watch me vanish" (Kane 2000, 34) is scattered across the page, its words broken into separate lines and isolated by negative space. In effect, this visual dispersal performs the speaker's corporeal dissolution. This culminates in the ultimate textual vanishing: a blank page that paradoxically affirms emergence rather than annihilation. As Leder observes through Merleau-Ponty: "to be situated within a certain point of view necessarily involves not seeing that point of view" (qtd. in Leder 1990, 12). This explains the speaker's ontological paradox – the body cannot appear to itself as an object precisely because it is the condition for appearing. Thus, *4.48 Psychosis* does not depict a mere loss of body but a paradoxical hyper-embodiment – where the self, unmoored from fixed boundaries, merges with the world in a fluid, pre-reflective state. The play's true tension lies not in the absence of the body but in its unbounded presence, where vanishing becomes a mode of becoming.

Unlike *4.48 Psychosis*, where the body–world relationship unfolds through language, Waltz's *noBody* articulates this dynamic through movement. At the heart of this articulation is her use of a white blanket, which billows into a large, cloud-like structure on stage (Waltz [2002] 2014, 1:14:23–22:32). This blanket divides the space into two distinct dimensions. First, there is the internal sphere, where the dancers are enveloped within the blanket, their bodies invisible to the audience except for fleeting shadows. In contrast, the external dimension consists of the empty stage, where the only visible element is the cloud itself – its shifting surface offering glimpses of the dancers' movements inside. Reflecting on the existential themes in Waltz's work, composer Hans Peter Kuhn observes:

> The performance addresses the absence of the body, and it confronts the viewer with feelings aroused by the realisation of being mortal. What does being human mean beyond having a body? Which part of us is immortal? In *noBody*, the choreographer, accompanied by dancers, faces the challenge of rendering the non-physical visible through the physical body itself. (2000)

These existential tensions between being and non-being find their choreographic expression through the central device, the cloud. The cloud functions as a transcendental gate, blurring the line between inside and outside, presence and absence. The dancers' bodies appear and disappear, depending on their movement and the audience's perspective. When inside, they dissolve into ghostly, weightless forms, as if freed from physical limits. Yet when they emerge, their bodies regain solidity, becoming fully visible and tangible.

This constant oscillation between disappearance and appearance challenges rigid notions of presence and absence. Instead, the body occupies a liminal state – merging with its environment at one moment, then asserting itself in the material world the

next. This mirrors Leder's notion of the *ecstatic body* – where the body steps out of itself through perceptual immersion. In Waltz's work, ecstasy is not escape but radical entanglement: the dancers' bodies vanish only to re-emerge as extensions of the cloud's fabric, their agency distributed across material and ethereal realms. Waltz "magically, renders the non-physical visible through the physical body itself" (Arthaus Musik), transforming the cloud into a curtain that alternately conceals and reveals, turning the dancers into spirits one moment and human beings the next. The performance creates a space where the line between living and non-living dissolves. David Gere captures this ambiguity perfectly:

> Here we are on the other side of life, sensing the life inside the so-called inanimate. Waltz leaves us with a delicious ambiguity: the floating dancer could represent someone who has again found levity after a long period of being weighted down by grief. Alternatively, she could herself be the phantom, freed from terrestrial gravity and suffering. (qtd. in Shaw 2015, 8)

This ethereal quality extends to the dancers' very presence—as Caitlin Sidney observes, "in the piece we get the feeling of another world behind the dancers like they are not present in this particular world, like they are connected with the spiritual world" (2002). This duality is encapsulated in the title *noBody* – a paradox that rejects literal disembodiment to instead explore how the body immerses itself in the world. Self-awareness fades as the body opens outward; transcendence here is not an escape from the body but a throwing of the corporeal self into the world. The 'I' no longer resides within the body but emerges through its interaction with the world. It is a dialectical dance where the body oscillates between ecstasy and absence. In its flight toward the world, the body's disappearance does not signal negation but a deeper form of embodiment: a merging with the very fabric of perception. Thus, the world reveals itself to the body, just as the body opens itself to the world through sight. This reciprocity positions the body as a bridge, fluidly transitioning between physical and metaphysical realms.

The performance fundamentally challenges static modes of perception. It shows that phenomena are not static images but continuous processes of becoming. Ultimately, Waltz reflects on the significance of the corporeal body within her performance, emphasising that the body is not a static entity; rather, it is engaged in a continuous dialogue with its environment. In short, Kane and Waltz dismantle the illusion of bodily autonomy, showing how disappearance – whether through psychotic fragmentation or choreographic dissolution – becomes an ecstatic mode of embodiment. Their works do not stage absence, but the body's infinite capacity for reconfiguration within the perceptual field.

5 Conclusion

This paper highlights the profound connection between vision and movement as explored by Sarah Kane and Sasha Waltz, each offering unique and complementary insights into the phenomenological body. Kane's exploration of psychosis presents a compelling framework for examining the intricacies of embodied existence within the world. Conversely, in Waltz's choreographic cycles, the dynamic relationship between the corporeal self and the Other is revealed, allowing for a deeper understanding of the intersubjective nature of corporeal existence. Moreover, the paper tackles two main ideas in the aforementioned works: the idea of the body's absence and the idea of the ecstatic floating body, both of which are explored through Drew Leder's theory. Weaving together these perspectives fosters a richer understanding of the *lived body* while embracing the transformative potential of corporeal awareness in both art and life. Ultimately, the works of Kane and Waltz serve as powerful reminders of the intricate dance between mind, body, and world, inspiring us to engage more deeply with the essence of what it means to be human. This exploration, in turn, questions the very limits of physical being, challenging conventional understandings of boundaries and the ways in which individuals engage with their surroundings.

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