

It's a kind of magic: Choreography as an Occult Practice

Abstract

This practice-as-research project explores the artistic, philosophical and political dimensions of dance as a kind of magic. Forging new conversations between dance research, philosophies of the occult, and Marxist theories of late capitalism, I theorise the occult as that which is hidden, asking how experimental choreography since the 1960s has engaged with the unseen, producing alternative rationalities to those of the capitalist present. The project moves between artistic and theoretical enquiry to trace how 'scores' — compositional frameworks that shape improvisational dances, pioneered in the countercultural explosion of the 1960s and resurgent in dance today — provoke dialogue between the known and the unknown, the possible and the impossible, the real and the magical. Affirming magic as a tool for tuning in to dance's subversive potential, it develops choreographic processes of spell-casting and tarot as experiments in imagining alternatives to capitalist rationality.

Introduction

This project proceeds from the provocation that dance is a kind of magic. In the past decade, art and popular culture in the Global North has turned towards magic and the occult as sources of alternative knowledge and power in a climate of intensifying social and political uncertainty. In the aftershocks of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016, amid the fracturing of liberal capitalist rationality, a Facebook event 'spell to bind Donald Trump' saw a mass spell-casting performed by thousands of self-identified witches internationally (BBC: 2017), the viral nature of which heralded a new level of cultural significance for the occult. A flurry of protest movements ensued, linking feminist anti-capitalist resistance with the historical persecution of witches and their magical practices, forming the backdrop for a sudden merging of magical, political and artistic practice in the UK, Europe and United States in the late 2010s. This surge of interest in the occult has continued into the 2020s, prompting the recent establishment of an MA in Magic and Occult Science at Exeter University.

This practice-as-research project takes choreography as a site for examining this turn to the occult, defining 'choreography' as the artistic practice of making dances and 'the occult' in both the philosophical sense as that which is hidden, and in the cultural-historical sense as a set of practices encompassing witchcraft, tarot and divination. Offering a reconsideration of

choreography's ontology, the project explores dances as phenomena containing hidden dimensions, possibilities and powers, as well as drawing on magic as a choreographic tool which attunes both dancers and audiences to altered states of being in and envisioning the world.

Research background and question

This project traces, for the first time, a history of occult practice in experimental dance. Understanding magic as a collective, creative re-imagining of reality, found in movements of resistance to capitalist modernity such as the feminist witchcraft activism of the late 1960s, I highlight dance practices in the US and Europe pioneered in the revolutionary fervour and artistic experimentation of this period. The 1960s were a historical turning point for the inclusion of improvisation scores in dance - instructions responded to live by dancers - making space for unprecedented levels of spontaneity, altered consciousness and collective transformation. I trace the institutionalisation of these practices during the neoliberalism of the 1980s and 90s, when they became codified into somatic techniques for the improvement of the individual. Finally, I consider the recent re-emergence of scores in avant-garde choreography of the late 2010s, as fresh waves of capitalist crisis fuel a renewed concern with the collective, the transformative and the mystical. Drawing these enquiries through recent Marxist engagements with magic, the project explores the becoming-occult of choreography through its troubling of reality, rationality and possibility.

Two sets of questions unfold across both practical and written enquiry:

1) What happens when dance is approached as a kind of magic? What does this do to how dance is both practised and perceived? Through the generation of scores - imaginative frameworks entered into by dancers and/ or audiences, engaging with alternative realities and rationalities - I consider how improvisation-based dance practices engage speculatively with parameters and forces that extend beyond human perception and agency.

2) In what ways can choreographic practice be considered prophetic? Through both analogy with and incorporation of divinatory methods such as tarot reading, I ask how choreography might be understood as generating visions of, or from, the future, suspending the divide between the real and the imaginary and engaging nonlinear notions of time and causality.

I will develop a framework that forges new interstices between: occult philosophies and histories; Marxist and Marxist-feminist approaches to magic; choreographic practices of

scoring; and occult practices in dance. Philosophers Eugene Thacker (2011) and Timothy Morton (2013) will provide a way into thinking phenomena as always-already hidden from understanding. Federico Campagna's work on magic (2018) will likewise be key to thinking how the occult presents alternative realities, latent within capitalist modernity. His notion of prophecy (2021) will be crucial in distinguishing it from capitalist prediction. Mark Fisher's notion of 'capitalist realism' (2009) and its stifling of the utopian cultural imaginaries of the 1960s and 70s, will inform my attention to choreographic practices in the latter half of the 20th Century, in order to trace their counter-hegemonic potential. Fisher's use of hauntology (2014), which thinks through the spectral quality of unrealised futures, as well as writers building on Fisher's 'Gothic Marxism' such as Andy Merrifield (2011) and Jon Greenaway (2020, 2024) will further establish links between occult philosophies and the alternative political imaginaries latent within them. Further, the Marxist feminism of Silvia Federici (2004) and Laboria Cuboniks (2018) will help me think through the subversive potential of what we might call 'alter-rationality', resisting the relegation of feminised subjectivity to an essentialised irrationality so often attributed to embodied, occulted ways of knowing. I will also employ historical and anthropological work on the occult (Hanegraaff, 2012; Kapferer, 2002), opening new ground between dance and occult history.

This project distinguishes itself from writing about spirituality in phenomenological accounts of body-based practices (Batson, Weber, Whatley & Williamson, 2014), as well as anthropological research into ritual dances of Global South and indigenous cultures (Grau, 2001; Brown, 2003). While this project follows that scholarship's affirmation of embodied knowledge against Eurocentric, mind-centric ways of knowing, it draws on occult studies to further affirm the creative and subversive possibilities of understanding dance as a kind of magic. The integration of Marxist thought also enables a shift from the transcendent qualities of dance onto its particular material capacities at this sociohistorical juncture.

This project also intervenes in dance studies' dominant understanding of the score as notation, or archival document (Watts, 2010), and its attendant notion of choreography as a set of fixed movements. I will read Campagna's notion of magic as the ineffable (2018) alongside Miriam Van Imschoot's writing on scores (2014) to re-think scores as live, time-based, experimental practices, akin to magic spells in their emergence between word and action, and choreography as the conditions and processes that both create and result from them. By shifting attention beyond the immediately sensible aspects of dance, I will unearth an ontology of choreography that is itself occulted within existing scholarship, by virtue of its existence on the artistic fringes, providing tools for understanding emerging forms of dance in ways more strongly attuned to their political contexts.

Locating the score historically, I will engage the work of dance artists Lisa Nelson and Deborah Hay, whose influence connects the improvisation-based practices of the 1960s and 70s with experimental dance today. I will also consider recent works which mobilise scores as occult practices, such as Florence Peake's 'Voicings' (2015) and Project O's 'Voodoo' (2019), alongside my own works 'Banishing Dance' (2018) and 'spells' (2019), as well as occult tendencies in visual and live art, for example in the work of Tai Shani and Linda Stupart.

Methods

I will use a practice-as-research methodology (Thomson, 2003), moving between studio practice and theoretical enquiry, creating space for the alternative, embodied ways of knowing which dance-as-magic gives rise to. The project itself enacts an alter-rational, non-linear approach to practice-as-research, engaging dance practice and theoretical enquiry in a mutual, non-hierarchical dialogue, unfolding new modes of thinking with and towards a magical sensibility.

The practice will form two key strands:

The Magical: I will create "spell-scores", dance performance practices, rooted in improvisation, which draw performer and audience into a speculative understanding of dance as a kind of magic. This will culminate in a lecture performance, enacting and contextualising those practices.

The Prophetic: I will explore tarot as a way of both 'reading' and devising dances, discerning and building as-yet unseen choreographic futures. This will culminate in the creation of a tarot deck of choreographic practices, made available online and as a physical deck of cards, with accompanying critical-creative texts.

The written thesis will lay the conceptual ground of the occult in its first chapter, 'The Hidden', connecting dance, magic and late capitalist crises. The following two chapters 'The Magical' and 'The Prophetic' will integrate further philosophical enquiry and analysis of contextual practices into an articulation of the two branches of my own practice.

Schedule

Year 1

Practice: researching “spell-scores”; studio sharings to test, in dialogue with audiences, ways of enacting dance-as-magic.

Writing: literature review on dance scores, occult philosophies and Gothic Marxist/Marxist-feminist thought; draft first chapter: 'The Hidden'.

Year 2

Practice: researching 'choreography-as-prophecy'; development of tarot deck of choreographic practices.

Writing: second and third chapters: 'The Magical' and 'The Prophetic'.

Year 3

Practice: final development and presentation of lecture-performance; publication of tarot deck.

Writing: full draft of thesis; edit thesis for submission.

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