Intertwining Threads: Possible Axes of Dramaturgy in Contemporary Dance

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In the Alfa 2014 season, Akram Khan will present Desh, a solo performance danced by the choreographer himself, praised as the most timely and beautiful work of his career. His Desh solo debuted in 2011 in New York, and examines the stories he was told in his childhood, but from the perspective of an adult man. The show successfully incorporates the Kathak storytelling tradition. The artist transforms himself to interpret several roles with technical resources from Western dramaturgy (TEATRO ALFA, 2014).

The text above, available on the website of Teatro Alfa, in the city of São Paulo, refers to the show Desh by British choreographer Akram Khan. Although the text is short, it highlights some useful issues to stimulate a reflection on contemporary dance in a number of ways. For example, by stating that the artist in question "[...] transforms himself to interpret several roles with technical resources from Western dramaturgy," it creates an opportunity to explore aspects related to dramaturgy in contemporary dance. How should we consider dramaturgy in this case and what is Western dramaturgy? Furthermore, this excerpt leads to an important question currently at issue in contemporary dance: "What do we mean when we speak of dramaturgy in contemporary dance?" Although the point here is not to seek a definition of Western dramaturgy, i.e. to define a status that encompasses that notion, whether related to dance, to theater, or to hybrid or borderline genres such as dance theater, physical theater, and so on, the intention is to perceive how the word dramaturgy continues to be used, often in a generic and indiscriminate manner, consistently associated to or even confused with the notion of theatricality. Hence the urgency of further exploring the concept.

Dramaturgy is often understood as theatrical devices that imply the existence of characters, whether fictional or not, and the construction of plots, whether linear or not. In this regard, it is worth reexamining for a moment the notion of theatricality, a topic that in turn also requires a diversity of approaches to keep from falling into the trap of quick and generic definitions. If for Barthes (apud Pavis, 2007, p. 372) theatricality is related to "theater-minus-text," Cornago (2005) considers that "the notion of theatricality easily leaps, legitimately or not, to other fields that are not specifically theatrical, hence the difficulty in reaching a consensus regarding its delimitation." Fernandes (2010), on the other hand, points out the need to remain attentive to the polysemic nature of the notion of theatricality. When referring to the concept, the author attempts to define two vectors to read it. According to the researcher, the first vector is that of "denied theatricality," which is based on naturalist figuration and the effects of the "real", supported by a credible construction of the action, the

characters, the dialogue (Fernandes, 2010, p. 116). The second vector is directly opposed to the first: in this case, it is a "theatricality of conscious convention," a vector that avoids the real and seeks a reconstruction of the scenographic space as an abstract, fleeing, and sometimes ritual space. These vectors of theatricality can be useful in this case, in the sense that they help us perceive, especially the second vector, how dramaturgy is not constrained to the realm of theater, and can also be present in contemporary dance.

Regarding the notions of dramaturgy, it is possible to perceive that many of them are intertwined. Cibele Sastre, for example, in a brief and introductory monograph in 1999, raised some interesting issues on that topic. Although her research only raised those issues without deeply exploring them, Sastre brings to light the problem of the differences between dance dramaturgy and body dramaturgy, and discusses the idea of the existence of two types of dramaturgy that divide dance dramaturgy. Based on the proposals set forth by Kerkhoven (1997), Sastre suggests that there are two main and dichotomous axes: process dramaturgy and concept dramaturgy (Kerkhoven, 1997).

As the names suggest, for Kerkhoven, concept dramaturgy is related to previously elaborated dramaturgical constructions, i.e. when there is an underlying text, whether in the form of a poem, a script, music, or other, that provides a structure for the work with a prior, intentional construction, even before rehearsals begin. By process dramaturgy, Kerkhoven means those works that "start from scratch," whose materials are developed through improvisation and are only defined at the end of rehearsals (Kerkhoven, 1997). In parallel, Sastre (1999) defines "dance dramaturgy" as a dramaturgy that can make use of a body dramaturgy, but that necessarily implies the theatricality of the stage. On the other hand, "body dramaturgy" would be essentially antitheatrical and would be based on somatic movement and contemporary dance techniques (Sastre, 1999).

In more recent literature on dramaturgy in dance in Brazil, it is worth highlighting the issues raised by Paixão, who perceives dramaturgy as a "powerful neologism" (Paixão, 2011, p. 209). According to the author, the idea might have arisen "[...] to reinforce, make evident, and facilitate a reading of the projections of subjectivity that corporeal action casts on the audience, since dramaturgy can be associated to a dramatic plot" (p. 209). Although Paixão acknowledges that the practice of dramaturgy associated to dance makes sense in countries like Germany and Belgium, since in those regions that activity is related to the tradition of professionals in theaters that aided theater directors, the author questions the meaning and function of that work sector in Brazilian dance (Paixão, 2010, p. 208).

The author suggests that the existence of a dramaturge for dance in Brazil has more to do with an attempt to add value to a poorly funded market that is increasingly dependent on government incentives, rather than a real need. That activity in turn often ends up delegated to people who do not understand the scope of the concept and oftentimes do not go beyond the work of a director's assistant.

For Katz (2010), dramaturgy in dance is associated to choreography, since "[...] in the case of dance, that action is directly related to steps and gestures and the way they are performed" (Katz, 2010, p. 167). Regarding this obser-

vation by Katz, a critique can be made of the presumed "association" as well as "the way they are performed." Movement cannot be isolated from space, and certainly the context and configurations chosen to compose a choreographic work, whether a spectacular event at a large theater or a small performance in a park or plaza, are essential for the construction of their specificity. It is therefore necessary to go beyond the statement that choreography is dance dramaturgy, as Adolphe also suggests when he states: "[...] choreography is intrinsically dance dramaturgy" (Adolphe, 1997, p. 32).

Likewise, more than a simple sum of the elements of the stage — i.e. more than the conjunction of a soundtrack, costumes, a scenario, lighting, and, finally, a sequence of movements or choreography — dramaturgy has to do with choices that can be intuitive or rational, logical or aleatory. Choices that are often invisible to the audience, but that nonetheless are present and compose the show. Pais (2004) considers dramaturgy to be an invisible practice, since "[...] it is a set of technical procedures (variable from case to case) that, by nature, take place in actions internal to the creative process and dilute themselves in the ephemerality of the final process" (Pais, 2004, p. 22).

For Charmatz and Launay, "[...] dramaturgy emerges from within the work itself, without forcing itself like an arrow unto a choreographic Picture to control its direction" (Charmatz and Launay, 2011, p. 228). It is therefore irrelevant whether those choices are made by the choreographer, the director, or de dramaturge. They are in fact dramaturgical choices and are inherent to all dances. As Cerbino (apud Tourinho, 2009, p. 161) points out, "[...] dances of all times had their own dramaturgy, which gave meaning to and organized the ways of moving and understanding movement for each time period." Tourinho (2009) explains that, for Cerbino, pantomime in ballet portrays the idea of "[...] explaining the plot through movement" (Tourinho, 2009, p. 161).

After making the above observations, it is important to mention that the notion of dramaturgy has expanded well beyond dance. At the Twentieth Performance Studies International (PSi) Conference, held in Shanghai, China, in 2014, researchers from various areas and countries met in a study group on dramaturgy to debate the growing dissemination of that notion. During the encounter, it was pointed out that events related to architecture, cinema, gastronomy, art exhibits (in galleries or museums) are increasingly making use of elements related to dramaturgy. This demonstrates that the notion today is not restricted to performing arts, and not even to the artistic world.

On the other hand, while the term dramaturgy is used by many, even indiscriminately, it is often vehemently ignored and even unknown. An example among many of the distance from that notion was when, after contacting Wendy Perrom, an editor at the renowned US periodical Dance Magazine, to inquire about a possible interview related to the topic of "dramaturgy in dance," her response was: "I don't know anything about dance dramaturgy. It is more common in Europe, not in the United States."

In fact, when associated with dance, dramaturgy is related to choreographic experiments made especially in Europe, more specifically in Germany by Tanztheater

Wuppertal Pina Bausch since the 1970s. However, contrary to what common sense would lead us to believe, i.e. that dramaturgy is only present when there is someone appointed to elaborate it, this paper's implicit assumption aims at stressing precisely the opposite: that dramaturgy is present in dance even if it is not named as such and even if no one is engaged in thinking about and constructing it. It certainly does not happen with the same consistency in all dance shows. It is not a sine qua non condition of dance; but as long as there is attention and a collective or individual direction involving choices, whether conscious or aleatory — such as in Merce Cunningham's works, for example — there is always a dramaturgical construction. That dramaturgy is sometimes descriptive; at other times, it is evocative; and at other times, it gives rise to states or presence.

Based on the above problematization, this paper, derived from my Ph.D. dissertation,¹ proposes the definition of three dramaturgical axes that can be associated to dance: 1) descriptive dramaturgy, 2) evocative dramaturgy, and 3) process-enabling dramaturgy or dramaturgy of presence. These axes are not intended to systematize in a restrictive and arbitrary manner a notion as broad and elusive as dramaturgy in dance, nor to constrain the work of each of the choreographers analyzed here to a given axis. On the contrary, these axes are porous and malleable, and can help us understand possible constitutive aspects of dance dramaturgy.

Before starting to describe those three axes, it should be noted that they are not fixed, stationary, and isolated; those divisions can work in couples or trios, blending into each other and overlapping, with varying emphases on the characteristics of one or another. It is also important to stress that this choice arises out of a personal need to organize structures that can help artists, choreographers, and researchers to work consciously with composition, or decomposition, of dramaturgy, as well as the production of meaning in their choreographic works.

1. Descriptive Dramaturgy

The first division is related to descriptive dramaturgy, an axis that presupposes a dramaturgy related to works, whether fictional or not, whose narratives imply the existence of a plot with a dramatic situation and with specific characters and situations.

While that axis could be perceived in a more restrictive manner, imposing a specific situation to be described, it is important to mention that it is not circumscribed to certain styles or periods of dance. This axis can make use of any defined movement language, whether it is classical ballet (both through its more traditional vocabulary and through neoclassical forms) or modern dance, street

¹DORIA, G. (de). Composição e produção de sentido: Dramaturgias na dança contemporânea. Ph.D. dissertation, Institute of Arts, Unicamp, 2015.

dance, folkloric dance, among others. In this axis, movement languages contribute to reinforce aspects of the narrative, as well as characteristics of its characters, and can thus encompass different historic periods.

Present even in contemporary dance, descriptive dramaturgy, as can be observed in Nijinsky's work L'Aprés-midi d'un faune, is associated to what Bernard defines as a "semantic approach" (Bernard, 2001). Summing up what the French author proposes, this approach is associated to an apprehension of the text, whether through the sensations it provokes or the meaning it delivers. This variation can lead to a broad range of situations, even reaching that which will later be defined as evocative dramaturgy (Bernard, 2001).

By dialoguing with Bernard's propositions, we can see that descriptive dramaturgy is also associated with "Aesthetic Reading" (Bernard, 2001), which involves translations or intersemiotic transpositions, and which emerges from textual matrixes or what Navas (2000) defines as "original text," the material that drives the work being created.

This dramaturgy can also be associated to what Kerkhoven (1997) defines as "content dramaturgy," whose original proposal tends to be previously established. However, there are no restrictions for the use of improvisation in a work understood as descriptive.

In modern ballet, as well as in modern dance, it is also possible to identify choreographies with a predominance of descriptive dramaturgy. Restaged at the Opera in Paris in March 2014, Miss Julie, choreographed in 1950 by Brigit Cullberg (1908-1999) for the Swedish Dance Theatre, can be an interesting example of a descriptive dramaturgy of the first genre. Inspired in the homonymous text by Auguste Strindberg, Fröken Julie, the Swedish choreographer's ballet belongs to a transition phase from the magic and sometimes surreal productions of Diaghlev's Ballets Russes to more physical and abstract twentieth-century works. In search of a more realistic approach, with well-defined characters and well-delimited and illustrative scenarios, Cullberg (1950) made use of classical ballet's vocabulary, allowing space for eventual poetic licenses, not only with a freer use of arms and legs, but also with the use of strong psychological characterizations and moments of reverie in the narrative. Hence, using only the language of classical and neoclassical ballet, together with pantomimes, Cullberg reconstructs Strindberg's nar-

rative, transforming a theater piece into a dance show.

As in classical ballet or modern dance, descriptive dramaturgy can also be found, albeit more rarely, in contemporary dance works. One example is the choreography Tatyana (2011) by Deborah Colker. Inspired in Pushkin's renowned play Eugene Onegin, Colker proposes a realist dramatic choreography that, while using poetic license such as putting Pushkin himself onstage dialoguing with his four protagonists, draws on descriptive resources in several scenes.

At this point it is worth stressing that, as Santaella (2009) points out, descriptive processes are not constrained to an objectifying gaze; descriptions can erase the borders of objectivity, and, the more detailed they are, the more subjective or evocative they can become. This is in fact the case with both Fauno and Miss Julie, the latter with traits that border on expressionism. In both, however, description and evocation are profoundly intertwined.

2. Evocative Dramaturgy

Regarding a dramaturgy that could be denominated as evocative, it is possible to associate aspects related to the third mode of reading elaborated by Bernard, i.e. a poetic or fictional reading, when the text serves as "[...] a catalyzer of images" (Bernard, 2001, p. 128, emphasis by the author).² A poetic or fictional reading creates space and promotes the emergence of expressive metaphorical aspects derived not only from reading written texts, but also from reading a broad range of stimuli, whether pictorial, sonorous, sensorial, poetic, and so on.

In this paper, the best examples of this dramaturgical structure are in the work of Sandro Borelli. His Kafka trilogy, for example, is not a literal transposition of the Czech author's text to dance. Borelli's choices, though frequently oriented by references to Kafka, are often subliminal, perceived in various ways by the audience, with references to Kafka's universe that are sometimes subtler and sometimes more explicit. Borelli (2002, 2003, 2006) does not define specific characters in his work, nor does he offer specific stage references that clarify or relate to specific situations in the original works. All his choices are evocative and allow for multiple readings, which approach or distance the audience from Kafka's universe, depend-

ing on the spectators' particular perceptions.

Also in this category is work such as May B by choreographer Maguy Marin. Created in 1981, May B is a homage to Samuel Beckett's universe. In that piece, the French choreographer and former dancer in Maurice Bejart's Mudra Company leaves aside her classical training and bets on a highly theatrical creation that does not attempt to reproduce the material from the Irish author's theater of the absurd, but rather resignifies it through dance. In a collage, where it is impossible to recognize any specific character from Beckett, Marin (1981) uses her dancers' bodies to evoke matters such as solitude, silence, absence, optimism, and pessimism, topics that are often found in the writer's works.

In the two examples cited above, the first evidence is that in both cases the research on body language and the resulting movement are the protagonists. Although the characterizations and the choice of makeup, costumes, and accessories are important, what characterizes them are not the stories they tell, especially since the point here is not to tell stories, but the specificities of their movement constructions and the metaphors that emerge from such constructions.

Another good example of works that can be understood based on an evocative logic is in some of the works of Martha Graham. In many of her shows, the US choreographer went beyond what at first sight could refer to dramaturgy's first axis. While at first, in her mythological phase,³ she brought forth literal aspects of the narratives represented, a more attentive analysis points to the fact that Graham constructed psychological metaphors whose purpose was much more related to creating sensory stimuli than a purely intellectual reading of her works. In Errand into the Maze, dated 1947, much more than simply narrating the adventures of Ariadne and the Minotaur, Graham metaphorizes the labyrinth, evoking her doubts and choices, transforming Ariadne into a contemporary woman of her time, whose labyrinth is her own life with her doubts, difficulties, and choices.

As was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the point here is not to locate purities nor to define absolute contours. When analyzed, perhaps not even the great repertory ballets⁴ could be categorized in a single axis such as the ones proposed here. A ballet from the romantic era no doubt has descriptive aspects — it has a

² In the original: "un catalyseur d'images."

³Martha Graham had a long and prolific career as choreographer and dancer, and, like Trisha Brown and other choreographers, her trajectory can be divided into phases.

script and it is organized according to a linear narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end. But when considering a second act, of a ballet blanc, for example, nothing could be more evocative than sylphs, nymphs, or wills floating on the tips of their toes with their white tutus in the midst of smoke clouds, in entirely phantasmagoric and surreal situations.

Just like with descriptive dramaturgy, it is therefore possible to state that there are no limits in evocative dramaturgy regarding the choice of a specific dance language. There are references to evocative dramaturgy in ballets of the world's romantic repertoire as well as in modern dance from the 1940s, the new French dance of the 1980s, or today's contemporary dance.

However, it is possible to perceive that there is a predominance of that axis in many contemporary works, which seem to make use of both evocative dramaturgy and another dramaturgical style, which we shall call here a state-enabling dramaturgy or dramaturgy of presence.

3. Emotional State-Enabling Dramaturgy or Dramaturgy of Presence

Regarding dramaturgy's third axis proposed in this paper, the works by the choreographer Trisha Brown are a good example to begin with. Reinforcing her contemporaries' idea, experimented in encounters, jams, and performances by the Judson Dance Group, Brown explored a non-interpretative dance that did not try to tell stories or even evoke them. Through radical experimentation, which included defying gravity, erasing the limits between the artist and the audience, and dissolving the borders between life and art, Brown and some of her contemporaries inaugurated a dramaturgy that could be considered abstract in a way and that goes beyond an intellectual understanding, establishing emotional states that stimulated

⁴Great Repertory Ballets are classical ballet's historic works, which continue to be staged around the world by renowned companies throughout the centuries, such as The Nutcracker, Swan Lake, Don Quixote, Giselle, among others.

⁵ According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Ballet (Oxford University Press, 1987), Ballet Blanc "is the name given to the classical style where the dancers wear white tulle tutus, introduced by Taglioni in La Sylphide in 1832. Typical examples are the second acts of Giselle and Les Sylphides" KOEGLER, H., 1987, p. 33).

⁶ Mythical figures often present in the second acts of the great romantic ballets.

an awakening of the senses that varied immensely from spectator to spectator. This way, choreography sought to develop an art not as imitation or metaphorization of reality, but as reality itself, subjective and self-referent, here and now.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the research on emotional states and their relationship to cognitive processes, it is important to digress here for a brief contextualization of the topic. Emotion and cognition are phenomena that are usually considered through two different conceptions. According to Victoria and Soares, "[...] a first conception proposes the presence of two separate systems. An emotional system that differs from the cognitive system, which would deal with affective information and would influence behavior independently of cognitive processes" (Victoria; Soares, 2007, p. 15). However, there is a second conception, which points to the existence of a single system for emotion and cognition. That conception assumes that "[...] a cognitive assessment always precedes any affective reaction and that the former does not necessarily involve a conscious process" (Victoria; Soares, 2007, p. 16). Hence, we should not overlook the fact that, although many of the artists associated to this axis of dramaturgy base their work on principles that do not foresee interpretations in their creations, the cognitive process can take place in various ways and involuntarily.

Regarding the notion of presence, based on what Gumbrecht (2010) defines as a Culture of Presence, that axis is associated to a complete departure from pre-established notions of the body, time, space, and intentionality. In accordance with what Sastre (1999) defines as dramaturgy of the body, this axis is related to anti-theatrical aesthetics and body languages whose movements are closer to every-day gestures and actions than to the execution of sophisticated and virtuous movement techniques. This dramaturgy is close to sensory explorations that, although they can evoke sensations and can even be translated and described intellectually, are associated to the establishment of emotional states and the materialization of a presence unmediated by concepts, thoughts, or culture. It is therefore not hermeneutical and abstract a *priori*.

As Bonfitto suggests, the notion of presence "[...] is perceived by most directors in generic and abstract terms; they associate it to aspects such as aura, charisma, state of grace, sacred fire, magnetism, animal nature, etc." (Bonfitto, 2013, p. 159, emphasis by the author). In fact, few theater directors, and even fewer dance

directors, have elaborated on the artist's presence on stage. According to Barba, presence can be the result of a rigorous training with the author. In Canoa de Papel, he recognizes and elaborates some principles that he denominates "principles that return." For the Italian director:

...those principles, applied to weight, balance, the use of the spinal column and the eyes, produce pre-expressive physical tensions. It is an extra-quotidian quality of energy that makes the body theatrically decisive, alive, believable; this way, the actor's presence, his stage bios, manages to keep the spectator's attention before transmitting any message. It is a logical, not a chronological before. (Barba, 2009, p. 22).

Although this is the first citation in this case, Brown is certainly not the only example that can be used to develop a definition of what would be a state-enabling dramaturgy or a dramaturgy of presence. As previously mentioned, all the works developed by her colleagues during the period of experimentation at Judson Church, as well as those of some important choreographers who preceded them and several others who came after, could also be included in this axis.

Among the artists who preceded Brown and the Judson Dance Group, it is impossible to overlook Merce Cunningham. He can be considered one of the precursors of abstract choreography. Although differently from Brown, since it is possible to identify in the US choreographer's works an aesthetic relation that does not entirely deny forms and resources from both classical ballet and modern dance, Cunningham broke away from the narrative structures of the time, adhering to experimentations based on notions of Zen Buddhism, through his partner's influence, since 1942, together with composer John Cage. By exploring the fortuitous, Cunningham/Cage inaugurated a new way of organizing the stage, by allowing the various elements — costumes, music, setting, and choreography — to be separately built and to be brought together only the day before the debut, or even during the debut itself. The couple created a space for the spectator to witness more than one show - a process, a choreographic becoming whose elements had not been previously articulated. There was no interest on the part of the creators in ensuring that those elements were synchronized when brought together; on the contrary, those artistic creations were confronted and their specificities were to remain separate. For Cage,

They are already there. I'm interested in the fact that they are there before the composer's will. Their meaning does not interest me. With a music-process there is no meaning anywhere (...) They are there, and that's enough for them. And forme as well. (Cage apud Entler, 2000, p.44).

Hence, meaning did not necessarily interest Brown and her US contemporaries, nor did it interest Cage or Cunningham. Those artists' works were sources of sensory stimuli, and therefore established emotional states, which in turn were not free to promote and generate cognitive associations, albeit unconsciously, as noted above.

It is important to mention that many of Brown's works and those of her Judson contemporaries, as well as Cunningham's works, which are sometimes considered abstract, can paradoxically be placed on the axis defined by Kerkhoven (1997) as concept dramaturgy, and not as process dramaturgy. This has to do with the fact that abstraction is not necessarily associated to a procedural dramaturgic structure. Although fortuitousness particularized Cunningham's works and endowed them with a certain procedural quality, most of his works were previously choreographed. Even when there was room for improvisation, they obeyed specific rules, which would locate them in the realm of concept dramaturgy (Brown in Huhyn, 2014).

Going back in time, returning to the early twentieth century, we can also think US dancer and choreographer Loie Fuller. Considered one of the "mothers of modern dance," Fuller created often improvised, abstract choreographies, using materials such as wooden sticks hidden in the sleeves of ethereal silk dresses, which extended their arms and created very interesting effects of abstract forms under colorful lighting, which was also one of her choreographies' trademarks.

It is therefore important to note that the association between a state-enabling dramaturgy and concept dramaturgy is not a rule. Flamenco dance, for example, can illustrate a process dramaturgy associated to a state-enabling dramaturgy. Although Flamenco dance is structured according to the lyrics and rhythms of songs, the dialogue established between the dancers and the musicians on stage does not occur in a representative manner. The songs provoke emotional states in the audience, which is not likely to be concerned about understanding what happens in the scene, and enjoys it for the pleasure of it.

The examples cited therefore demonstrate that, as is the case with the other axes proposed above, this one does not have restrictions regarding the body language and techniques chosen. In all three axes described, it is possible to recognize styles and languages that differ greatly from dance.

What can be perceived by seeking an understanding of dance dramaturgy according to these three broad and permeable axes is that, in fact, many works are traversed by different axes. If we were to divide the axes here in slices that can be seen horizontally, i.e. descriptive, evocative, and state-enabling, the axes proposed by Kerkhoven (1997) could be understood as vertical slices, which can traverse one or more horizontal axes. In that diagram, we could include the axes proposed by Sastre (1999) — body dramaturgy and dance dramaturgy — as transversal slices that traverse both vertical and horizontal slices. In order to illustrate these intersections more clearly, we can resort to Trisha Brown's example in her initial choreographies. We can identify a phase of her works that fits in the category I have proposed of Emotional State-Enabling Dramaturgy or Dramaturgy of Presence, but we can also identify signs of an Evocative Dramaturgy. On the other hand, we can also perceive that these works fit quite well in what Kerkhoven defines as Process Dramaturgy, as well as the category defined by Sastre as Body Dramaturgy.

Thus, these intersections allow us to understand dance dramaturgy as a particular phenomenon, a live and procedural organism, whose dynamics reveal the movement of our own existence, through the emergence and dissolution of senses.

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