

The Body as a Metaphor for Thought: Nonverbal Dialogue in Pina Bausch's Müller's Café

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Abstract

Pina Bausch is a landmark figure in the history of modern dance in the world. As a master of German expressionist dance, her pioneering and globally promoted dance theater and brand-new dance aesthetics have become an important object of study in the world of dance and even in the world of theater. “Café Müller” is one of Bausch's masterpieces, and the birth of this work is not only another innovation of dance language, but also another manifestation of Bausch's profound revelation of human nature. This paper takes “body metaphor” as the core research perspective, focusing on the non-verbal expressions of “fragmented movement, touch and resistance” in the work, which are not only the core carriers of Bausch's construction of body metaphor, but also the key variables of this paper's analysis. They are both the central vehicle for Bausch's construction of body metaphors and the key variables analyzed in this paper. Through analyzing the specific use of these non-verbal expressions, we will sort out the paths through which the work constructs metaphors based on them, and then further explain how Bausch uses these variables as the medium to realize his critique of social power relations, emotional dilemmas, and social structures through the use of body language and metaphorical expressions. The study aims to provide a new research perspective for a deeper understanding of the social critical dimension of Bausch's Dance Theater, as well as a reference for the study of non-verbal expression in related art works.

Keywords: Pina Bausch; Café Müller; Bodily Metaphor; Nonverbal Dialogue; Dance Theater

1. Introduction

Since the 20th century, with the dissipation of logocentrism, the long-suppressed “body” has become an important medium for carrying ideas and conveying meaning. This shift is particularly evident in the field of art, where the “awakening of the body” in dance has broken the traditional aesthetic discipline of the body. Pina Bausch is precisely the practitioner who pushes “body expression” to a deeper level of innovation. Her masterpiece “Café Müller” completely jumps out of the narrative framework of traditional dance, letting broken movements, repetitive touches, and tension-filled resistance become the “language” itself. At present, most of the research on Pina Bausch's dance theater focuses on its aesthetic form or emotional expression, while the exploration of the non-verbal dialogues in the work and the social critical significance it implies is still relatively weak. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the non-verbal dialogues in the works—which refer to the metaphorical interactions constructed through body movements, touch, and resistance—to reveal how the body becomes a metaphor for thought, and to further explore its interventions and reflections on social reality. This study will start from the metaphorical nature of the body to interpret the psychological and social meanings carried by the broken movements and resistant touches in “Café Müller”; then explore how the presentation of non-verbal dialogues, including the interaction between the violence of silence and the relationship between the spectator and the performer, participates in the construction of meanings; and finally, in the light of feminist theories, analyze the body metaphor's critique of the social norms of gender, and explain the revolutionary impact of Pina Bausch's Dance Theater on contemporary art. and the impact of Pina Bausch Dance Theater's innovations on contemporary art.

2. The Metaphorical Nature of the Body

2.1 Fragmented Movements and Their Metaphors

When Merleau-Ponty pointed out in “Phenomenology of perception” that the body serves as the fundamental medium through which humans engage with the world, he revealed that bodily movements themselves constitute a form of cognition—a philosophical insight that finds dramatic embodiment in the fragmented movement vocabulary of “Café Müller”. The bodily movements in the play transcend the realm of “daily actions,” carrying more complex expressive functions. Through unnatural postures and fragmented dynamics, the dancers transform indescribable psychological states

and existential dilemmas into perceptible stage signals. This method of conveying abstract meanings through concrete bodily language is the core feature of the work's metaphorical expression: using visible actions and scenes as a “bridge” to allow the audience to perceive the invisible emotions and thoughts behind them.

The first character to appear in the work is played by Bausch herself, and her fragmented entrance sets the metaphorical tone for the entire play. In the dimly lit café, a frail woman hesitantly pushes open the door. With her eyes tightly closed and her hands stiff, she moves forward in an unnatural posture, clinging to the left wall, exuding a sense of restraint, conservatism, tension, and even a hint of fear. Even when she trips over a chair along the way, it does not stop her from continuing to move forward mechanically. These unnatural and disjointed bodily movements have long transcended mere physical expression. As the only character in the entire play without any physical interaction, her stiff, almost fearful movements not only created a visual sense of alienation but also, through her marginalized position in space and the abnormal nature of her actions, hinted at self-isolation and communication barriers in modern interpersonal relationships, making this “broken body” the first vivid metaphorical symbol in the entire work.

Next to appear was a woman wearing a white dress, whose role contrasted with Bausch's in terms of more expressive physicality and emotional depth. If Bausch's role can be interpreted as a personification of numbness and anxiety, then the woman in white conveyed more complex emotional changes through more intense physical expression and greater stage movement. She begins with tentative movements, such as repeatedly taking small steps to confirm whether there are tables or chairs blocking her path, and eventually evolves into intense, repetitive back-and-forth running, seemingly intent on breaking through the “chair” obstacle. This dynamic creates a powerful visual impact, with the discontinuity, repetition, and sense of obstruction in her movements externalizing the conflict between internal struggle and external constraints.

As the white-clad woman frantically ran back and forth, a man wearing glasses constantly followed her movements, repeatedly moving the black tables and chairs that obstructed her path. This action seemed to be helping her clear obstacles and avoid colliding with the furniture. However, after moving and pushing the tables and chairs out of her way, he repeatedly attempted to return them to their original positions, effectively maintaining an invisible order. Throughout the movement, the man in glasses remained close to the woman in white, with the physical distance between them so close it felt suffocating, creating a sense of immense pressure. This sequence forms a cycle of “running-being obstructed” and “moving-repositioning” within the theater, constituting a highly charged physical political space.

David explicitly states in his analysis of “Café Müller”: “The tables and chairs on stage serve as a metaphor for all public places where men and women meet.” As Anne Ubersfeld noted, “metaphors can continuously metaphorize” (Price, Li Chao, 2017, p. 106)^[1]. Here, the tables and chairs transcend their physical attributes, metaphorically representing a rigid social order within the “coffee house.” The man in glasses' behavior reveals the duality of power: while he appears to be protecting the woman in white from harm, he stubbornly maintains the order, constantly resetting the black tables and chairs. These numb, interrupted, obstructed, yet regenerating fragmented actions and their interactive relationships carry Bausch's profound metaphor for the pervasive discipline, contradictions, and struggles inherent in the individual's existential condition.

2.2 Nonverbal dialogue involving touch and resistance

The most iconic “three-person” entanglement sequence in “Café Müller” is the most frequently repeated and most characteristic representative dance segment in the entire work. Ma Chunliang mentioned in her research on the physicality of Pina Bausch's dance theater that this “three-person” dance segment conveys a life experience driven by the pursuit of love^[2], with one pair of the men and women being lovers in a romantic relationship. This interpretation keenly captures the intimate elements and emotional appeals present in the dance segment. However, upon closer examination of the specific dynamics of the “three-person” physical interactions in the segment, defining the relationship between the man and woman as simply 'lovers' and attributing the segment's theme to “love” does not align with the theme Pina Bausch intended to present in this segment.

In this classic scene, the “three people” are the “woman in white” who appears second, the man in the shirt who constantly entangles her, and the man in the suit who controls their relationship. Throughout the dance sequence, the “white-clad woman's” body is almost entirely under the suit-clad man's control. He constantly directs her movements, manipulating her limbs to repeatedly perform the physical actions of “letting go,” “kissing,” and “lifting” with the shirt-clad man. Only the “sliding” and ‘hugging’ are actions she initiates. However, this “initiative” to embrace the shirt-clad man occurs within the context of the suit-clad man's powerful control, resembling an instinctive search for security or a habitual reliance on the established relationship rather than a pure expression of affection. The “active touch” (the suit-clad man's physical intervention) and “passive resistance” (the white-clad woman's struggle) between the three repeatedly tug at each other,

playing out a cycle of power dynamics. The suit-clad man's presence and his dominant pattern of actions push the relationship between the other two into a complex realm beyond binary love, revealing sharp issues of control, dependency, objectification, and the loss of individual autonomy. This physical interaction does not simply celebrate love but instead reveals the power structures inherent in interpersonal relationships, the vulnerable position of individuals within them, and the silent struggle for existence itself.

The complex relationship between the three characters remains unexplained in this dance segment. As the performance unfolds, the café space fractures dreamlike into two zones. The one being suppressed is no longer the woman in white, but shifts to the man in the shirt. He struggles and runs frantically in the front area of the stage, while the man in glasses persistently maintains the order of the tables and chairs, repeating the action of “moving and resetting.” The man in the suit patrols the entire stage with a straight, rigid trajectory, silently asserting his control. The third woman in the play—the red-haired woman—hurries in quick steps, closely following the movements of the man in the shirt, her gaze intertwining concern and curiosity. At this moment, only the white-clad woman remains alone in the quiet rear area.

The suit-clad man's figure drifts between the front and rear areas, continuing to forcefully intervene in the relationship between the white-clad woman and the shirt-clad man. The white-clad woman, portrayed by Bausch, seems like an invisible boundary marker, quietly dividing the café into two distinct states through her presence. Later, the man in the shirt collapses on the ground, exhausted, and the crowd disperses like receding tide. Now, only the man in the shirt and the woman in white remain in the café. At the table in the back area, the woman in white lies half-naked, her movements of picking up clothes and gasping for breath drenched in fatigue. She lies motionless on the table. Meanwhile, the character played by Bausch clearly forms a psychological contrast with the white-clad woman. Bausch frantically runs back and forth inside the revolving glass door, his state of struggle and numbness mirroring the inner turmoil of the white-clad woman at that moment.

As the man in the shirt slowly stood up and walked toward the woman in white once more, an illusion of “freedom” emerged within the café. He embraced and kissed the woman in white again, this time without the interference or manipulation of the man in the suit. However, the man in the shirt's body betrayed this sense of freedom. He instinctively placed the woman in white on the ground, repeating the same actions he had always done, even without external interference. The shirt-clad man's actions confirmed Foucault's notion of “internalized discipline.” Even when given the right to choose, the bodily memories repeatedly imprinted by power still guide us toward predetermined paths. The shirt-clad man's “habitual” action of placing the woman on the ground is precisely evidence of power transforming from external coercion into internal bodily memory.

3. The Generation of Non-Verbal Dialogue

3.1 The Violence of Silence

In “Café Müller,” “violence” serves as a key medium for non-verbal dialogue. Dancers convey both direct and indirect acts of violence through vivid expressions such as intense physical conflict and the indifference of bystanders. In the latter part of the work, the man in the shirt and the woman in white take turns violently pushing each other against the wall, repeating this sequence three times. This highlights a gender relationship filled with violence. The recurring narrative of violence in Bausch's works prompts reflection on the impactful and confrontational physical dialogue in her work, which is closely tied to her upbringing.

The inspiration for Bausch's creation of “Café Müller” stemmed from her post-war traumatic experiences. Born in 1940, she personally experienced the horrors of World War II. Her parents ran a restaurant at the time, and in multiple interviews, Bausch recalled hiding under a table to secretly observe the expressions of people in the restaurant. As part of the first generation to grow up during the post-war reconstruction period, Bausch confronted the raw pain brought by war and brought this violence and terror to the stage. In her other work, “Bluebeard,” violence and fear are even more pronounced. The main character, Duke Bluebeard, demonstrates suffocating control over his wife from the outset, constantly dragging her by the hand to change her posture, and even forcing her to walk on the ground while holding her down. This “suppression” through physical expression highlights sexual violence. In “Café Müller,” violence is not only manifested in physical language but also in the bystanders who tacitly allow it to occur. In full view of everyone, the white-clad woman and the shirt-clad man engage in a struggle and conflict, repeatedly throwing each other against the wall. Yet no one in the café attempts to stop this violent act. The man in glasses and the red-haired woman choose to observe the violence from a distance. As a closed space, the café naturally amplifies the bystander effect.

This silent bystander behavior constitutes a deeper form of violence for the victim. “When multiple individuals are present, each tends to assume that others will take action, diluting the sense of responsibility for individual intervention, ultimately leading to inaction.” As silent accomplices, the bystanders' inaction and tacit approval enable violent behavior to persist and intensify. Every person in the coffee shop, including those seemingly innocent bystanders, has to some extent become an agent of violence. Their silence is not only a tolerance of violence but also a silent abandonment of the victim. This collective silence forms an invisible force that oppresses the victim and also oppresses everyone present, preventing them from escaping this cycle of violence.

Through this scene in “Café Müller,” Bausch reveals the pervasiveness and hidden nature of violence in modern society. Violence is not only present in physical conflict, but also lurks in people's silence and complicity. This silent violence is often more enduring and profound than physical violence, eroding people's souls and disrupting social harmony.

3.2 The participatory nature of the audience-performance relationship

The non-verbal dialogue style of “Café Müller” is further reflected in the significant transformation of the audience-performance relationship. The emergence of dance theater shattered the one-dimensional dynamic of traditional ballet, in which the “audience passively receives beauty.” Rather than positioning viewers as recipients of entertainment, Pina Bausch deliberately employed alienation techniques—unnatural postures of dancers, melancholic background music, fragmented narratives—to disrupt the conventional expectation of immersive storytelling. In her work, beauty is no longer a finished product delivered unilaterally by the performers; instead, it becomes a form of reflection that grows, through non-verbal dialogue, between the audience and the dancer.

In the 19th century, classical ballet served as a means to provide an aesthetic utopia that transcended reality, offering a highly idealized vision of elegance, harmony, and certainty. Its rigid standards and complete narratives perfectly fulfilled the functions of entertaining audiences, educating the masses, and elevating the spirit. However, in post-World War II Europe, where Pina Bausch lived, society had undergone immense trauma and transformation, and traditional values and narrative structures were widely questioned. The dance theater no longer sought to provide illusions of beauty or definitive answers, but rather to confront the confusion of reality, the alienation of relationships, and the struggles of the individual, through revelation, questioning, and provoking critical reflection. Works like “Café Müller,” which subvert traditional ballet rules, are essentially a profound exploration of how art responds to the shifting spirit of the times.

Traditional ballet with fixed aesthetic standards and a complete narrative plot, bringing the audience a one-way aesthetic consumption mode. When watching ballet works, the viewer is usually a passive recipient of “beauty”, while the emergence of dance theater creates a dialogue mode between the dancers and the audience. From the perspective of aesthetic paradigm, ballet has only a set of solidified aesthetic standards, and all dancers take “open, taut, straight and upright” as the action requirements, pursuing the ultimate beauty, elegance, lightness, strength and control. Even the dancer's body also has a strict measure of demand, ballet has always been the pursuit of “three long, one small, one high”, requiring dancers to long hands, legs and neck, head small feet high, so in the aesthetic standards of ballet, only in line with such physical conditions of the dancers, in order to be worthy of ballet's "beauty and elegance! ". Bausch's Dance Theatre, on the other hand, completely abandons the programmed movement system of ballet, and most of the movements come from daily life, instinctive reactions, as well as repetitive and compulsive behaviors, which brings the audience an unusual and diversified aesthetic experience. Not only that, but the characters in Dance Theater are also closer to life and do not distance themselves from the viewer. “In order to make the daily behaviors of the work more real and rich, Bausch also boldly employs the bodies of non-professional dancers, so that real everydayized bodies intervene in the performance.”^[3] Ma Chunliang mentioned in “Body Language and Cultural Logic in Pina Bausch Dance Theater”. That's why you can see dancers of all sizes in this work, “Café Müller,” and their attire is not the flashy court costumes of the ballet, but basically simple shirts and dresses.

From the narrative plot, ballet is often based on myths, fairy tales, legends and romantic literature, to the viewer to recount the complete story, there is a clear beginning and end, the beginning of the development of the climax of the end, usually follow the “duo - variations - duo” core structure, interspersed with group dances, character dances, and other fixed passages, and most of the stories The content of the story revolves around the “love but not” tragic love triangle, in the 'Giselle', innocent Giselle and disguised as a peasant aristocrat Count Albert blazing love, but this love was crushed by his fiancée Batilde, class deception so that Giselle's heart broke and went crazy and died; the same classic ballet "Swan Lake In the same classic ballet “Swan Lake”, Prince Siegfried and the white swan princess Ojeta fall in love quickly, but when the prince is bewitched by the evil black swan Ogilia and betrays his oath in public, the desperate Ojeta finally chooses to free herself with death. On the contrary, Bausch's “Café Müller” has no storyline in the traditional sense, but is more like a

series of collages, repetitions and variations of emotional states, memory fragments, and mental pictures, presenting a non-linear, fragmented narrative structure. The props on stage are also no longer decorative objects; the tables, chairs and doors and even the costumes have strong symbolic meanings and metaphors. "During the dancers' performance, every contact with the 'objects' (props) enables the audience to realize the meaning expressed by the creators in a deeper and more complete way through the intentional space constituted by the dancers' body movements and the props presented."^[4] Through the fragmented narrative structure and the non-daily use of props, Dance Theatre leaves the audience with unlimited space for interpretation, emphasizes the subjective feelings and associations of the subject, and creates a silent dialogue between the dancer and the viewer.

It is precisely the diverse and critical aesthetic experience pioneered by dance theater that has broken the long-standing one-way aesthetic model dominated by classical ballet. The key to this "break" lies in its reconstruction of the logic of dialogue between performers and audience, with dancers and audience members both becoming mediators of dialogue.

4. From Body Metaphors to Social Criticism

4.1 Body Metaphors and Feminist Criticism

Pina Bausch's German Dance Theater was able to transcend the singularity of narrative and aesthetics precisely because she employed the purest, most primal bodily postures and everyday physical language to create bodily metaphors for individual emotions and existential states. These metaphors naturally extended into a profound examination of social issues, and feminist criticism is an inseparable component of her work. In her numerous works, the content and form of feminist expression are highly evident, which is closely tied to her early educational experiences in the United States. After graduating from the Folkwang University of the Arts in 1958, Bausch continued her studies at the Juilliard School in New York. "Bausch maintained a high degree of sensitivity toward various phenomena in American society at the time—whether environmental issues, the civil rights movement, women's status, minority issues, or the anti-nuclear movement—all of which sparked her profound reflections,"^[5] scholar Lloyd recorded in "The Pina Bausch Archive".

In "Café Müller," the red-haired woman's dance sequence vividly embodies Pina Bausch's feminist expression. Although she is wearing a depressing black coat, she is paired with a bright green dress and peach high heels on the inside. The constraints of the black coat contrast sharply with the brightly colored dress on the inside, and this external visual conflict also mirrors her inner conflict. It is not difficult to see that the red-haired woman always flows the whole scene in the form of small steps, and her rapid pace and numb walking path emphasize a sense of anxiety. In the process of walking she often casts a caring glance at the shirtboy, wanting to gain his attention, this behavior is precisely her desire for the pursuit of love. Unfortunately, the man in the shirt never stops for her, and there is only a brief kiss between them, but after that kiss, the redhead returns to her old anxieties. In the redhead's next solo, she voluntarily removes the black coat that binds her, revealing a bright green dress underneath, and then removes her uncomfortable high heels for a "dance of self-searching". In this section, her steps were no longer anxious or hurried, but rather relaxed, as if she was finally shedding the shell that bound her and revealing her long-hidden true self. However, this light-hearted solo is only a moment in which the redhead briefly escapes from the prison of the Other. The moment she removes her black dress and reveals her green skirt, ostensibly to attract the shirtless man's attention, but in fact exposing what Iris Young calls "the paradox of the female body." - their desire to stretch their charms while being conditioned to exist in dependence on the gaze of others^[6]. The subdued limbs on display in that brief solo are just the kind of freedom she steals in the gaps between male gazes. In this solo, Pina Bausch utilizes the body language of the red-haired woman to reveal the plight of women in reality, but also conveys a strong demand for love and the desire to be noticed. This kind of social exploration through body metaphors is undoubtedly a profound reflection and a powerful challenge to traditional concepts.

In "Café Müller," Bausch uses the "body" to present feminist ideas, which are not only vividly displayed in the red-haired woman's dance segment, but also strongly emphasized in the suit-clad man's control over the white-clad woman. The man in the suit constantly controls the movements of the woman in white, repeatedly intervening in the relationship between her and the man in the shirt. He picks her up with one hand, making her leap over the man in the shirt lying on the floor, and repeats this sequence endlessly. This series of actions is not only a physical manipulation of the woman's body but also a symbolic expression of women's passive and subordinate status in social relationships. The suit-clad man's forceful intervention seems like an invisible hand of social norms, placing women in a position of control and domination. The white-clad woman's leaping over the shirt-clad man may appear to be an attempt to transcend and break free from painful emotions, but in reality, it is a helpless dance within the suit-clad man's predetermined trajectory. Each leap deepens the imprint of her identity as an "other." The shirt-clad man lying on the ground symbolizes male powerlessness and passivity, while also revealing society's disregard and deprivation of women's autonomy. This interplay of bodily language

profoundly exposes the inequality and oppression within gender power dynamics, serving as a powerful echo of feminist critique.

If we analyze the feminist elements in all of Pina Bausch's works, the feminist expression in "Café Müller" is relatively subtle. In "The Rite of Spring," all the young women are portrayed as sacrificial offerings in a ritual, and under the gaze of a patriarchal society, their struggles appear futile. "The Rite of Spring" uses the form of collective violence to deeply reveal the stark disparity in the status of women and men, staging a silent collective violent sexual confrontation. Pina Bausch presents a more direct and intense feminist expression in this work. In "The Rite of Spring," the portrayal of feminism is more nuanced and detailed. In the dance segment before the conclusion, Bausch packages "violence" as a "spectacle." A woman in a pink evening gown stands on one side of the stage, her stiff body and helpless expression reflecting her inner anxiety. At this moment, a man in a suit holds a mouse and teases her constantly. He places the mouse on her head at times and throws it toward the direction she is about to move at others. Facing this disrespectful teasing, she does not resist but silently avoids him or curls up her body, as if begging for mercy. Eventually, he grows bored and leaves, leaving the woman in the pink evening gown alone on stage. She stands stiffly to the left front, while one after another, men in suits approach her. As their numbers grew, they tightly surrounded her, visually seeming to overwhelm her. Though these men appeared well-dressed, their behavior was crude. They played with her hair, gently stroked her ears, kissed her hands, even lifted her skirt, and sometimes picked her up and shook her, as if she were an object to be freely manipulated. As the number of men grew, their behavior became increasingly bold, yet the woman's body remained rigid, like a piece of wood. However, her expression betrayed deep pain, her brows furrowed and her eyelids lowered. However, when another elegant woman appeared from the side of the stage, the men's attention was immediately drawn to her. The woman in the pink evening gown was left behind, abandoned like a discarded toy. Through this scene, Bausch highlights the struggles and hardships women face in society. The men in suits, with their actions, not only violate the individual but also reflect a broader contempt and pressure toward the entire female population.

In "The Pina Bausch Archive," Lloyd points out that Bausch herself was not a feminist, but her works always feature female characters in pain, who seem to be eternal victims^[5]. Because Bausch always focused on the fate and liberation of women, she closely combined social issues with individual experiences, revealing a profound criticism that transcends dance itself. Bausch utilized the body language of women to reveal the inequality of gender power. In her works, women are predominantly in passive, subordinate positions, yet this passivity conceals struggle and resistance, representing a silent challenge to the social order.

4.2 The Innovative Significance of Dance Theater

Pina Bausch's Wuppertal Dance Theater was founded in 1973. Although she was not the first to propose the concept of "dance theater," she achieved a major breakthrough in her creative approach. She not only transcended the boundaries of dance as a single art form but also skillfully combined theatrical performance techniques with diverse spatial installations, using the most straightforward everyday expressions to deeply explore a series of social issues.

Bausch's breakthrough reconstruction of the art of dance is firstly reflected in the incorporation of theatrical performance mode into a new creative way of dance expression, breaking the single pursuit of "formal beauty" in traditional dance. Her "Dance Theater" is no longer centered on pure physical technique, but rather on plot, dialogue, scene scheduling and other theatrical elements, making dance a carrier for complex emotions and social issues. "Pina Bausch's 1978 production of *The Crossing Ground*, in which the actors spoke, sang and danced on stage, created a great intellectual shock in the German dance world at the time."^[7] Not only did she change her approach, but Bausch's work revolutionized dance from a formal exploration of "how to move" to a deeper questioning of "why to move," as in her central proposition: "I don't care about how people move, but why people move. As her central claim, "I don't care about how people move, but why they move", this concept is directly related to the essence of artistic expression, i.e., the concern for the state of human existence.

"Café Müller" is not only Pina Bausch's signature work, but also her bold attempt to break the boundaries of dance and incorporate theatrical performance techniques. Through the construction of dramatic scenes and the use of "alienation effect," she creates a strong sense of strangeness. Set in an abandoned café, the dancers repeatedly collide, fall, and grope their way forward, showcasing control and struggle. The white-clad woman, portrayed by Pina Bausch herself, blindly stumbles over tables and chairs yet persistently moves forward; the man with eyes repeatedly arranges tables and chairs in the darkness, attempting to maintain order; the red-haired woman, always wearing high heels, anxiously paces back and forth. Behind these seemingly disordered movements lies a metaphor for humanity's "inertial behavior" in times of adversity. This "unexpected" plot device—such as sudden stillness, repetitive mechanical movements, and breaking the fourth wall with direct gazes—disrupts the audience's emotional immersion, forcing them to step back from their

preconceived notions of “dance aesthetics” and instead examine the survival dilemmas in the work with the clarity of an observer. This alienation is not detachment but rather an invitation for the audience to confront their own and others' life experiences in a state of trembling.

Secondly, in terms of narrative technique, the audience is no longer merely passive recipients of beauty. Bausch's works consistently refuse to provide clear answers, instead employing an open-ended narrative style to subtly direct questions toward the audience, thereby stimulating their reflection. In “Café Müller,” she does not explain why the characters are suffering nor does she point to a specific path to redemption; instead, she presents life experiences such as loneliness, alienation, and futility in a highly impactful manner. This “non-problem-solving” expression reinforces the reflective function of art: when audiences are struck by the repetitive, clumsy, almost absurd actions in the theater, what arises in their hearts is not pleasure from “beauty,” but empathy and trembling toward their own existential condition. This tremor transcends sensory stimulation, becoming an opportunity for reflection—this is precisely Bausch's innovation in the function of art: art need not provide comfort, but should instead serve as a sharp tool to pierce through the numbness of daily life.

The works of the Wuppertal Dance Theater not only break new ground in terms of creative techniques and narrative styles but also demonstrate a broad cross-media influence. Pina Bausch's innovative works have not only reshaped the dance world but also had a profound impact on multiple fields of contemporary art. From the perspective of theater and performing arts, Bausch's works have broken down the traditional boundaries between dance and theater. She has dismantled the text-centric nature of traditional theater, instead constructing “body narratives” through repetitive physical movements and everyday actions, making the body an independent carrier of meaning that directly conveys raw emotions. This aligns with the post-theatrical theater's emphasis on the equal dialogue of diverse stage elements and the autonomy of the body. Additionally, her works blur the boundaries between the stage and the audience, transforming the environment into a narrative element, reconfiguring the spatial relationships within the theater, and enhancing the audience's sense of presence, thereby offering new insights into “immersive performance.” This is precisely what Lehmann emphasizes in “Post-Dramatic Theater”: post-dramatic theater breaks away from traditional theater's reliance on literary texts, no longer treating the script as the core. This provides a theoretical framework for Pina Bausch's practice of breaking down the boundaries between dance and theater. Bausch's experiment not only offers valuable references for the dance world but also injects richer creativity and possibilities into theatrical performance.

On the other hand, there was a breakthrough in visual art and installation art. In Pina Bausch's dance theater, visual installations and props no longer served merely as scenery and decoration, but took on a deeply metaphorical meaning. This experiment influenced contemporary installation art, driving a shift from installations serving as scenic backdrops to becoming subjects of meaning, and prompting artists to use decoration itself as a direct vehicle for expressing emotions and issues. In “Café Müller,” the black chairs that are commonly seen in everyday life are arranged throughout the performance space by Bausch, symbolizing a barrier separating the white-clad woman. These chairs serve as both physical constraints and psychological and emotional bonds. In “Carnations” (1982), the entire stage floor is covered with vibrant carnations, creating a strong sense of absurdity. The fresh and vibrant carnations are eventually trampled into a mess, with these beautiful flowers metaphorically representing the journey of “life”—from its initial beauty to its eventual decay. In “The Rite of Spring,” the stage is covered in red earth, instantly transporting the audience to a primal era. This “earth” first symbolizes the primal earth, an untamed natural source brimming with wild power; its viscous texture makes the dancers' movements difficult, further emphasizing the heaviness, pain, and inevitable sense of fate of the girls' sacrifice. In this context, the “soil” possesses the power to devour life. In the work “Bluebeard,” the scattered yellow leaves on the ground represent the passage of time, withered emotions, and memories or promises trampled upon by people. The dancers tread on the leaves, constantly emitting cracking sounds, and the “irreversibility” of the leaves aptly suggests the destroyed trust and beauty in relationships.

Pina Bausch's dance theater profoundly explores the relationship between art and society. She refuses to confine art to the ivory tower of pure formal aesthetics, instead using a highly impactful stage vocabulary—including metaphorical props, bodily movements, and spatial constructions—to confront the universal and acute existential dilemmas faced by humanity, such as the shadow of violence, the power dynamics of gender, and the alienation of interpersonal relationships. This unflinching social engagement transcends the traditional boundaries of dance as a form of entertainment, transforming her work into a powerful form of public discourse. Bausch does not merely reflect social phenomena but, through artistic condensation and amplification, reveals the underlying structures and emotional traumas hidden beneath everyday life, forcing audiences to confront the universality and complexity of these issues. As a result, her dance theater effectively drives a shift in contemporary art concepts, inspiring artists to more actively use their medium to address and explore social

realities, ultimately transforming the theater into a critical space and medium that sparks widespread attention, deep reflection, and public discourse.

The emergence and development of dance theater is essentially a return to the humanistic values of art. Through dramatic physical language, it breaks down the barriers between art forms and stimulates audience reflection through open-ended expression. Its influence has long transcended the realm of dance, becoming a spiritual benchmark for contemporary art that focuses on and questions humanity.

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