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Inquiring and imagining human-environment relationships through dance

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Abstract

An increasingly popular response to Western thinking about human dominance over nature is posthumanism. Rather than addressing the challenges of anthropocentrism by focusing on yet another grand perspective in response to it, we propose that environmental philosophers engage in arts-based research to reflect on how to relate differently to non-human life and our environment. This article explores how arts-based research, particularly dance-based methods, can enhance environmental philosophers' moral imagination in rethinking human-environment relations. It discusses the dance film *Cobalt* (2024) as a case study to explore how embodied movement can explore the human–environment relationship beyond verbal discourse, leading to expressive and imaginative responses. Screenings of *Cobalt* in academic settings engaged participants in discussions that revealed diverse interpretations, demonstrating the film's potential to challenge dominant perspectives on human-environment relationships and to foster the moral imagination essential for addressing current environmental crises.

Introduction

Arguably, the challenge of a philosopher is to question widely held assumptions and dominant conceptualizations and to think what has not been thought before. It is debatable whether the infrastructure of philosophical scholarship currently enables philosophers to do this well. Researchers in fields such as science and technology studies and the philosophy of science have long been concerned with the organizational structures that support and constrain academic thinking. Building largely on Kuhn's (1962) theory of scientific paradigms, these fields have done much to show how academic work is partly defined by its discourse. This makes it difficult to think beyond the language, practices and norms that characterize academic disciplines and consequently makes certain academic breakthroughs likelier than others.

A critical examination of the infrastructures of academic thought is important, especially at a time when climate and related crises present environmental philosophers with the imperative to reconceptualize human-environment relationships. The challenge in environmental philosophy is how to rethink human-environment relations, particularly in response to human-proclaimed dominance

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over and the resulting exploitation of nature. In recent decades, society has grown acutely aware of how human activities have fundamentally disrupted and imperiled the natural world, propelling us into the so-called Anthropocene – the new geological epoch marked by extensive human impact on the planet. This profound impact has far-reaching consequences that will shape the trajectory of life on Earth for generations to come. This prevailing environmental crisis, therefore, presents us with a moral imperative to rethink and reimagine our interactions with nature, urging a transformative shift in thought, perspective, and action. Environmental philosophers are increasingly committed to exploring how humanity might reconstruct and redefine its relationship with the natural world. Their work not only encourages a reflection and reinterpretation of human-environment relationships but also seeks to imagine new ways of relating to nature.

This article examines how art-based research methods can support environmental philosophers in their inquiry into human-environment relationships by enhancing their moral imagination. Moral imagination, according to philosopher Mark Johnson (1993), means imagining the full range of possibilities in any ethical situation. Moral imagination is key for environmental philosophers who seek to rethink and reimagine the ways in which humans and their environment relate to each other. Existing work on moral imagination has already shown that creative methods can effectively enhance the moral imagination of engineers (van Grunsven et al. 2024) and citizens (Lehoux et al. 2020). In this article, we argue that there is an additional and urgent need to enhance the moral imagination of philosophers. Mono-disciplinary discourses have been repeatedly criticized for their limited flexibility and narrow focus. For example, typical philosophical discourse focuses on arriving at logical conclusions through valid arguments, emphasizing the importance of rational cognition and formulation within that discourse. There is a growing body of research that highlights the limitations of thinking in this way, such as research that demonstrates the epistemological value of emotions (Roeser 2017) and how cognition is located in the body, not just in the brain (van Balen, forthcoming; Gallagher 2005). Below, we will explore how dance-based research can help environmental philosophers rethink environmental ethics, by allowing them to think outside their academic discourse and beyond dominant conceptions of human-environment relations, namely anthropocentric and posthumanist conceptions.

The idea that dance can inspire insights into human-environment relationships is not new. Philosopher Donna Haraway (2016) argued that art in general can shape worlds ("worlding") in which humans relate differently to their environment. More specifically, scholars of arts-based research methods have shown that dance, in particular, can generate new insights into human relationships. Patricia Leavy (2020), for example, in her practical guide to arts-based research methods, describes how dance is uniquely equipped to explore human relationships because dance works with the lived body. The body is both "the condition and the context" (Grosz 1994, p. 86) through which social actors relate to their environment, and therefore any form of dance inevitably explores and articulates body-environment relationships. This idea is succinctly summarized in the words of leading dance-based research scholar Celeste Snowber (2012, 2016), who famously wrote, "We do not have bodies; we are bodies."

Although dance is known to inspire insights into human-environment relationships, this paper explores its value in shaping academic thought beyond anthropocentric and posthumanist conceptions of these

relationships. We argue that both making and watching a dance film are valuable practices for fostering moral imagination and challenging dominant perspectives on human-environment relations in academic settings. We discuss this based on our experience with two screenings of the dance film *Cobalt* (2024), a film created by one of our authors, a philosopher, in collaboration with a cinematographer and professional dancer. To this end, we will first discuss posthumanism as an increasingly popular response to anthropocentric thinking as a limitation to understanding human-environment relationships. We will then discuss how *Cobalt* addresses this limitation by exploring post-anthropocentric human-environment relationships through dance. Finally, we will discuss how multiple screenings of *Cobalt* have expanded the moral imagination of not only the filmmakers but also their academic audiences in their study of human-environment relations.

Posthumanism as a common answer to anthropocentrism and the Anthropocene

The notion of nature as something distinct and separate from humanity remains deeply rooted in Western conceptualizations of human-environment relations. This separation reflects the influence of humanism and its anthropocentric underpinnings, which privilege human agency and place humanity at the center of existence. This places humans at the top of the moral hierarchy, giving them a privileged status that justifies prioritizing human interests over those of non-humans and the environment. This perspective has been argued to be a driving force behind the Anthropocene, the current geological epoch characterized by humanity's pervasive and destructive impact on Earth's systems.

In response, posthumanist thinkers challenge this separation between humans and nature and advocate a more integrated view in which humans, along with their creations, are considered part of nature because there is nothing inherently unnatural about them. This approach promotes a more interconnected understanding of nature (Braidotti 2013; Haraway 2013, 2016; Latour 2012). Posthumanist philosophy suggests that humans and nature are interwoven, complexly linked, and mutually constituted. Rejecting strict divisions, these thinkers encourage us to consider humans and nature through concepts such as actor-networks or hybrids (Latour 2012), assemblages (Bennett 2010), and even cyborgs or compost (Haraway 2013, 2016). They argue for situating both humans and nature within an expanded framework that includes a more-than-human or multispecies perspective and places all life forms along a zoe/geo/techno continuum (Braidotti 2019). This perspective emphasizes a non-hierarchical moral assessment across species and life forms, expanding moral consideration beyond humans. Ultimately, these ideas challenge the conventional human-nature divide, even suggesting that the concept of a human "self" no longer exists in posthumanist thought (Morton 2013). Thus, environmental philosophers discuss posthumanism as an answer to the shortcomings of humanism and the resulting problematic anthropocentrism and Anthropocene.

Posthumanism is a recurring theme in academic and artistic narratives of the future. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that posthumanism has its own limitations (e.g. Blok 2021). Above all, posthumanism remains a reaction to a certain dominant Western tradition, humanism and its resulting anthropocentrism, and thus risks being limited by the substitution of one grand perspective for another. In other words, the perspective on the human-environment relationship that

is so urgently needed requires a reimagining of the human-nature relationship beyond this reactionary approach.

Cobalt as an illustration of a dance-based research method for exploring human-environment relationships

In this article, we propose a more embodied, emotional, and imaginative approach to environmental theory. We illustrate this through the making and viewing of the dance film *Cobalt*. *Cobalt* was made by a philosopher in collaboration with an improvisational dancer and a cinematographer. The film explores how humans have related to the natural environment and to technology, how these relationships have changed over time, and speculates on the future of these relationships. The project explores dance as an art-based speculative research tool, as a method of investigating possible ways of human-environment relating. The dancer in the film shows four modes of environmental relating through semi-structured improvisational dance. The title, *Cobalt*, refers to the dominant Western image of humans as troublemakers on this planet. In German folklore, the Kobold is a small, goblin-like creature with a short temper and a mischievous spirit. German miners named cobalt after the goblin, which they blamed for the toxic fumes that prevented them from extracting the metal. The film explores and questions this dominant image. *Cobalt* can be seen as a non-verbal philosophical essay that asks if humans can find a new way to move – if they can relate differently to other beings and to the environment.

The narrative follows a dancer as he moves from the forest to the dunes to the sea. His journey reflects the evolution of humanity from premodern history to a speculative future. *Cobalt* unfolds in four acts. At first, his movements reflect a harmonious relationship with nature, as the first act shows how the dancer is born in nature and thus becomes part of it. But as he ventures into the open space of the dunes, his gestures become more mechanistic, signifying the exploitative and controlling tendencies of modernity. He begins to perceive his natural environment as an objectifiable reality subject to domination. The dancer's eventual transformation into a fluid, decentralized being represents the posthuman condition, suggesting that humanity collapses under its own human-centered success and becomes mere compost for the environment. In the final act, as the dancer reaches the sea, his movements become tentative yet playful, suggesting a cautious re-engagement with other beings in his environment. This moment captures the essence of the film's speculative inquiry: How can we reimagine human-environment relationships beyond dominant images and theories?

Improvisational dance as an act of inquiry into human-environment relations

The improvisational dance in this film effectively explores human-environment relationships by highlighting the co-constitution of bodies and their surroundings (Hermans 2022). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's (1968) concept of active-passive duality, Hermans emphasizes touch as the embodied link through which we simultaneously shape and are shaped by our environment. This process supports a sense of self through active engagement with our environment, but also through passive reception of its impressions. In improvisational dance, the movement and touch of different bodies and their environments co-constitute

each other, fostering mutual presence and coexistence. In this way, touch is a medium of communication, exchanging affective intensities and promoting shared meanings. Hermans introduces the term "enactivism" to refer to the co-creation of meaning through coordinated interaction that enables new meanings beyond what individuals could generate alone. Here, cognition emerges as a relational process rooted in the active interplay between perception and action, bridging organism and environment. Dance improvisation thus serves as a method for investigating relationality and our being in the world (Hermans 2018).

Improvisational dance also offers a way of rethinking human-environment relationships that avoids anthropocentrism. It serves as a method of inquiry using movement as a universal language. By prioritizing embodied, contextual, and therefore meaningful interactions with the environment, dance resists anthropocentrism by rejecting human-centered hierarchies and embracing a more-than-human mode of engagement. Through movement, the dancer becomes attuned to the agency of non-human elements, such as trees, sand, and other species, and responds to the various environmental affordances at hand. As such, improvisational dance fosters an interactive and non-hierarchical way of relating, rather than one of domination or separation. This practice emphasizes more-than-human relationality and interdependence, challenging anthropocentric perspectives that position humans as distinct from or superior to their surroundings.

Furthermore, the dance-based research method explored in this film offers a non-verbal mode of inquiry. In the film, the dancer plays a crucial role in accessing bodily knowledge. Bodily knowledge refers to the awareness and understanding derived from the body's sensory and motor engagement with the world, often bypassing verbal or conceptual articulation. As

Blumenfeld-Jones (2008) describes, the dancer functions as "both analytic instrument and analyst" (176), accessing forms of knowledge that are otherwise inaccessible. Despite being "always available to us," bodily knowledge is often described as "the best kept secret" (Snowber 2012, 119). Although all of our human experiences are always embodied, a dancer proactively and consciously accesses this bodily knowledge through movement and the practice of "thinking through" movement (Blumenfeld-Jones 2008, 175). Dance-based research thus facilitates inquiry beyond the traditional emphasis on rational cognition and wording within philosophical discourse.

Dance film and active spectatorship

Assuming for the moment that there is such a thing as bodily knowledge, and that a dancer can access such knowledge, the question remains as to how this knowledge can inform an academic debate. A first question might be whether the dancer can access this knowledge consciously enough to share his or her findings with others through a performance. In the interesting parable *On the Marionette Theatre*, the philosopher Heinrich von Kleist (1810) suggests that full awareness of one's body is impossible because any awareness inevitably creates a separation between the self and the body. Von Kleist concludes that only non-thinking dancers, like marionettes, can be fully in touch with their bodies: "Where grace is concerned, it is impossible for man to come anywhere near a puppet. Only a god can equal inanimate matter in this respect" (von Kleist, 1972, 214)

This points to the common assumption that it is difficult, if not impossible, for dancers to let their bodies do the research while thinking through these movements. However, this assumption implies a distinction between mind and body that is typically rejected in dance-

based research (Leavy 2015). Furthermore, dance-based researchers can become very adept at this seemingly paradoxical practice (see, e.g., Blumenfeld-Jones 2008). More importantly, dancers do not have to think about their movements while dancing to make their embodied research accessible to others – they can also perform their research in front of others. A remaining question, then, is what kind of insights academic viewers might derive from watching a dance performance. In these final sections, we explore how two performances of Cobalt fostered the moral reimagination of human-environment relationships among its audience.

In times of environmental crises, understanding audiences has become increasingly important. For example, proponents of empirical ecocriticism (e.g., Schneider-Mayerson et al. 2020; Toivonen and Caracciolo, 2023) argue that empirical methods should be used to investigate how readers interpret the human-environment relationships described in fictional climate literature. Despite this interest, the role of audiences in arts-based research is still poorly understood; dance-based scholarship has largely focused on the epistemic value of doing rather than watching dance. For example, in her seminal handbook for arts-based research, Leavy (2020, 153) only mentions in a footnote that the experience of watching a performance can also be considered a sensory experience:

> It's important to note that all Art-Based Research (ABR) is embodied, both in its creation and in the audience experience. For example, you feel a novel or a play, as you consume it – it's a sensory experience. So although I emphasize embodiment in the following chapter on dance and movement because in response to the body is the instrument in those practices, it's important to understand that the entire field of ABR is connected to embodiment.

However, other scholars that have reflected on audience engagement and perception offer some clues as to what bodily sensations viewers might experience while watching a (dance) film. Bertolt Brecht (1964), for example, was famously wary of methods that allowed audiences to fully identify and immerse themselves in a theatrical story, fearing that they would lose the objective, critical perspective necessary to unravel ethical situations. We might interpret Brecht to mean that the audience can identify with an actor or dancer to such an extent that they lose touch with their own perspective or, we might add, their own bodies. Walter Benjamin (1935) offers similar reflections on the viewer's bodily experience with his observation that the act of filming creates a separation between the actor and his audience. As a result, he argues, the film audience does not identify with an actor, but with the camera.

Beyond Brecht's and Benjamin's insights into the relationship between the bodies of dancers, cameras, and viewers, audience responses to Cobalt suggested that viewers of a dance film can still "feel" certain movements of a dancer in their own bodies by projecting their own bodies onto the dancer's at certain moments. For example, several viewers commented that when the dancer carefully steps into a pool of moss and mud, they can feel the wet, spongy structure brushing against their own feet and between their toes, sometimes even evoking a sudden, repulsive movement in their own bodies.

Watching *Cobalt* Together

In this last section, we further describe our personal experiences with screenings of *Cobalt* in two academic settings: an academic conference on non-Western approaches to environmental philosophy, and a research meeting of a national project on the philosophy of disruptive phenomena such as climate

change. Both were attended by 30–40 philosophers from various subdisciplines, especially environmental philosophy and the philosophy of technology. At both events, we took an interactive approach to presenting *Cobalt*: we first screened parts of the film *Cobalt* and then asked the audience to share their interpretations of the film, asking them how they felt and what moments in the film resonated with them. Only after this discussion did we move on to the maker's own intentions with the narrative and its possible theoretical connections.

Viewers extrapolated a wide range of insights about human-environment relationships from watching the dance film. A significant number of viewers' comments focused on whether the dancer was comfortable and moving naturally in the environment, which was perceived as an indication of the degree of connection between the dancer and his or her environment. For example, most viewers mentioned that in the first scene the dancer seemed to move more slowly and smoothly, while in the second scene his movements became more "rigid," "stiff," "uneasy," and "jerky." Most viewers interpreted these movements as indicating that the dancer was originally part of nature ("organic" and "close to the tree"), but then lost touch with it as he walked up the hill and out of the forest, gradually becoming "alienated" from that environment. For these viewers, any lack of fluidity in the movement signalled a lack of comfort and, by extension, a separation from the environment.

Other viewers felt that the dancer was out of place from the beginning. The initial slow and gentle movements were interpreted as a sign of insecurity and caution. For example, one viewer commented that the dancer seemed to be finding his way, "finding himself, finding a way to engage with his environment" through careful, tentative movements. Another viewer described the same tentativeness as "touching nature for the first time," implicitly emphasizing the environment as something external to be explored. These interpretations suggest that the movements were perceived as indicating the degree of connection between the dancer and his or her environment, perhaps assuming that a person who fits into his or her environment will also move confidently within it.

In addition, viewers gained insight into the relationship between the dancer and his or her environment from the differences in how they moved or did not move. Movement seemed to indicate agency and, by association, a higher position in the relational hierarchy. One viewer, for example, saw the human as the only one dancing, leaving the environment "nothing but a static background." In contrast, another viewer saw the environment as a dance partner, especially when the dancer kicked the sand around and the sand in turn shaped the dance. For this viewer, the flying sand seemed to be part of the choreography, bringing the environment out of the background into centre stage. In both of these interpretations, the environment achieves equal status with the human only by demonstrating the same kind of agency. Another viewer also noted the differences in movement, but did not draw conclusions about status, only about their being. They contrasted the tentativeness of the dancer's movements with the lack of tentativeness of the surrounding trees and concluded that, unlike the human, "the tree is already there and does not need to find its way of being."

Finally, viewers made sense of the movements in combination with other visual aspects of the dancer and his environment to explore the dynamics of control and oppression. For example, some viewers commented on the dancer's confidence and proud face, and how the dunes in the second scene were like a "stage" that gave the dancer full control and oversight. Other viewers commented on

the dancer's body, pointing out that in this film humanity is represented by a "beautiful man," which brought the conversation to the relationship between dominant human–environment conceptualizations and male dominance in Western history. Others, however, emphasized the dancer's lack of control in this situation. One viewer compared his dance to that of a paradise bird, a reference that highlighted the dancer's exaggeration and possible succumbing to evolutionary drives. Others similarly described this dance as being "possessed" or literally "pulled by the strings" of modern life. Apparently, the same movements conveyed different meanings to different audiences: there was a sense of being in control and being controlled at the same time, a dualism that is often difficult to escape in traditional environmental philosophy theory.

These observations indicate that *Cobalt* fostered the moral imagination of environmental philosophers in several ways. Initially, the making of *Cobalt* was a tool for its makers (who were, in part, philosophers) to investigate and expand on existing dominant anthropocentric and posthumanist perspectives within environmental philosophy. This is in line with the body of work describing dance–based research as an epistemic practice that can be used to investigate human–environment relationships (e.g. Grosz 1994). In addition, however, we have shown that joint screenings of the film could foster the moral imagination of environmental philosophers in the broader academic community. Many audience members readily responded to our questions – apparently, they had felt *something* and were keen to share. Dance served as an embodied way to imagine humans in relation to their environments differently. As such, the film fosters moral curiosity, by exploring different possibilities of action and positions as a human on a planet among other beings. We observed several mechanisms through which the moral imagination of viewers was

enhanced. We identified several mechanisms that enhanced viewers' moral imagination. First, the film reimagined and played with dominant images of modern Western humans in nature – for example, as "troublemakers," "parasites," "controllers," "sacred," or "rational." This approach encouraged conversation and reimagination, creating space to critique stereotypes and assumptions about human–environment relationships prevalent in society and environmental philosophy. By juxtaposing these dominant conceptualizations and emphasizing their limitations, the film opened the door for imagining alternative possibilities. Second, the group setting allowed viewers to confront not only their own assumptions but also those of others. The director's portrayal of human–environment relationships across different acts invited diverse interpretations – some aligning closely with the creators' intentions, others diverging. This pluralistic approach encouraged collective reflection, fostering paradoxical insights, such as humans being simultaneously controlled by and controlling their environment. Such interpretations challenged dualistic thinking and expanded the imaginative possibilities for these relationships. Finally, and most significantly, the film evoked personal, bodily experiences without relying on concepts from dominant theories to describe human–environment relationships. Viewers developed their own expressive, often visual, language to articulate their experiences, escaping the jargon of entrenched academic discourse. Rather than relying on humanistic or posthumanistic conceptualizations, audience responses were shaped by expressive and imaginative wording, enabling reflection and imagination beyond those dominant perspectives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article discusses the potential of art-based research methods, particularly improvisational dance, in fostering the moral imagination required to rethink human-environment relationships in the Anthropocene. By drawing on the dance film *Cobalt*, we have explored how an embodied, non-verbal medium can serve as a valuable tool for environmental philosophers to both inquire and to imagine human-environment relationships beyond the dominant Western academic perspectives such as posthumanism. Through collective engagement with *Cobalt*, viewers experienced a diversity of interpretations of the interconnectedness of humans and their environment. The film serves as an example of how dance as an art-based research method can foster pluralistic dialogue amongst philosophers, allowing for a more embodied, emotional, and imaginative approach to environmental theory, expanding the limitations of traditional academic frameworks.

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