



"The Screaming Body: Non-Realistic Actors' Resistance to the Aesthetics of Digital Imaging in Zarathustra's Staging"

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Abstract: This article examines the performance of *Zarathustra* by students of the UNESA Sendratasik Education Study Program as a form of resistance to the aesthetics of digital imagery through the practice of non-realistic role-playing art. This research aims to examine how actors' bodies are used as a medium of authentic expression and an arena of resistance to identity homogenization in the social media era. With a qualitative-descriptive approach and a case study design, data were obtained through participatory observation, visual documentation, and semi-structured interviews, and analyzed using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The results of the study show that the actor's body is positioned not just as a tool of dramatic representation, but as a performative entity that is alive, vulnerable, and existentially honest. The performance conceptually combines *Friedrich Nietzsche's Übermensch* theory and Jerzy Grotowski's *principles of Poor Theater*, which emphasizes the purification of expression and the spirituality of the body. These findings expand the discourse of contemporary performing arts by offering a model of creation that rejects the aesthetics of digital curation and emphasizes the presence of the authentic body. The implications of the research have an impact on the pedagogy of the role arts and performance creation strategies that are more reflective, critical, and contextual to contemporary cultural issues.

Keywords: actor's body, non-realistic role-playing, digital imaging, poor theater, *Übermensch*, performativeness.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary cultural landscape, social media has become the dominant arena in shaping human self-image. Through filters, algorithms, and uniform visual aesthetics, the human body is often reduced to an image representation rather than an existence. This is a challenge for role-playing, especially in non-realistic practices that reject linear representational systems.

The staging of "Zarathustra" by students of the class of 2024 in the Non-Realistic Role Arts course at the UNESA Sendratasik Education Study Program, is a concrete example of resistance to this condition. This work is not only a reinterpretation of Nietzsche's text "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", but also a field of experimentation of the body as a vehicle for liberation and the search for authenticity of actors in theater.

This paper departs from two main theoretical frameworks: Nietzsche's "Übermensch" concept and Jerzy Grotowski's idea of the "Poor Theater". Both offer a way out of the social determinants that suppress individual freedom, by making the body the center of



existential experience. In a world dominated by imagery and imagery, how the body "screams" in the art of acting can open up the possibility of resistance and self-transformation.

In the contemporary cultural landscape, social media has become the dominant arena in shaping human self-image. Through filters, algorithms, and uniform visual aesthetics, the human body is often reduced to an image representation rather than an existence. Identity is constructed through external validation mechanisms such as likes, views, and comments, rather than from authentic self-understanding. This phenomenon poses a great challenge for the performing arts, especially in a non-realistic approach that rejects linear representational systems, normative narratives, and naturalistic aesthetics.

In this context, the performance of "Zarathustra" by students of the 2024 class of the UNESA Sendratasik Education Study Program in the Non-Realistic Role Arts course is an articulate medium as well as resistive to the dominance of digital imaging. This performance is not only a reinterpretation of Friedrich Nietzsche's text "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", but also an artistic laboratory space to test the possibilities of the body as an independent and authentic existential channel. The actors' bodies are not shown as a reflection of narrative characters, but as a terrain of conflict, resistance, and awareness.

Materially, the performance was performed in a minimalist performance space (black box) without a realistic set, with high-contrast lighting and limited properties, which directed attention entirely to the expressive qualities of the body. The resulting expressions do not depend on verbal dialogue or conventional psychological gestures, but rather come from physical intensity, breathing patterns, body vibrations, and spontaneous and intuitive energy transitions. Observational data showed that each actor underwent a process of body incubation—stripping away everyday gestures, dismantling personal body memories, and building authentic body vocabulary through intensive physical exercise.

The formal objects in this study are the body and performative expression in the context of non-realistic role-playing art. Meanwhile, the material object is the staging of "Zarathustra" as the final result of a course project that clearly represents the synthesis between theory and practice. The conceptual exposure in this article focuses on keywords such as body, authenticity, resistance to digital imagery, and self-transformation.

This paper rests on two main theoretical frameworks. First, Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the "Übermensch", which describes the ideal human being who transcends old values and builds his own life values. Second, Jerzy Grotowski's idea of "Poor Theater," which makes the actor's body an altar of spiritual discovery and the main tool of theater communication. Both offer a framework that places the body at the center of existential search, and in this context, as a form of resistance to the disembodiment resulting from digital imaging. In a world dominated by simulations and visual impressions, how the body literally and metaphorically "screams" in non-realistic role-playing art can open up space for resistance, artistic honesty, and spiritual transformation.

2. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with a case study design, which is focused on the performance of "Zarathustra" by UNESA Sendratasik Education students class of 2024 as the final product of the Non-Realistic Role Arts course. This study aims to uncover how the actor's body becomes the primary medium in the practice of resistance to the dominance of digital imagery, as well as how the value of authenticity is embodied in body structures, spaces, and non-verbal narratives.

Data collection techniques are carried out through three main methods: (1) participatory observation of the training process and the final performance; (2) visual documentation in the form of photographs, training videos, and director's notes; and (3) semi-structured interviews with student actors, student directors, and lecturers in charge of courses. Observation was carried out for six weeks intensively from the body exploration stage to the performance evaluation. The interview explores the subjective experiences, challenges, and personal transformation processes experienced by the production actors.

The data were analyzed using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which allows researchers to interpret bodily experiences as a form of meaning intent in an existential context. Emphasis is placed on the physical symbolization of the body, changes in movement patterns, as well as how the body is used as an expression of authentic values, rather than just a dramatic tool.

The uniqueness and added value of this research lies in the object of study that does not solely analyze the structure of the performance, but rather places the actor's body as the main text that is read in depth. Unlike previous research that focused on performance semiotics or artistic aesthetics, this study places the body as an affective and political arena—as a living entity that stores memory, resistance, and transformation.

By combining Nietzsche's philosophical perspective on value creation and the body, as well as Grotowski's methods of body work, this research contributes to the current discourse on the de-digitization of the role arts and the liberation of the body from the dominant structures of popular culture. This makes this research relevant in the context of performing arts education, as well as enriching pedagogic approaches in forming actors who are aware of the body and aware of the socio-cultural context.

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with a single case study design focused on the staging of "Zarathustra" by students of the class of 2024 of the Sendratasik Education Study Program, State University of Surabaya (UNESA), as the final product of the Non-Realistic Role Art course. The purpose of this study is to examine how the actor's body is used as a medium of authentic expression as well as a form of resistance to the construction of homogeneous and superficial digital images.

Data collection techniques include three main methods. First, participatory observation was carried out intensively during the six-week production process—including the stage of body exploration, scene preparation, and the final performance. This observation recorded in detail the movement patterns, the use of space, the intensity of body and voice expressions, and the dynamics of energy

in the exercise. Second, documentation in the form of performance video recordings, rehearsal photos, director's notes, and stage blocking plans were used as visual data that strengthened the descriptive analysis. Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five main actors, student directors, and lecturers teaching courses. The interview aims to explore subjective experiences related to the meaning of the body, the deconstruction of social gestures, as well as feelings of resistance and freedom during the performance process.

Data analysis was carried out with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, referring to the thought of Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricoeur. This approach allows researchers to interpret bodily expression as a living, meaning-laden experience, rather than just an artistic structure or dramatic symbol. The analysis was carried out in three stages: (1) textual descriptions of bodily phenomena in key scenes such as "Crowd Rejection" and "Encounter with Shadows"; (2) thematic reduction to identify symbolic and narrative patterns of body expression based on interview transcripts and observational notes; and (3) hermeneutic interpretations within the framework of Nietzsche's Übermensch theory and Jerzy Grotowski's Poor Theater principle.

The advantage of this method lies in its placement of the body as the main text, rather than just a visual or dramatic element. Unlike previous research that was more oriented towards aspects of performance semiotics or stage aesthetics, this study places the body as an entity that stores memories, conflicts, and the will to transform. Thus, this approach is not only relevant to the study of theatre, but also enriches the discourse of cultural criticism and the pedagogy of performing arts, especially in an effort to form actors who are aware of the body and aware of the socio-cultural context.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Body as a Medium of Resistance

In the staging of "Zarathustra", the body is no longer a dramatic object that represents the character psychologically, but rather becomes a landscape of internal and external conflict. Actors move spatially in repetitive, explosive, and sometimes contradictory patterns, as a form of resistance to the codification of popular gestures commonly found on social media.

The body movements in the "Crowd Rejection" scene show how the actors use the body as resistance to the homogeneity of the digital crowd. Bodies that invade space, hit boundaries, even shout without words, become a metaphor for resistance to the instantaneous and uniform narratives imposed by viral culture.

In the staging of *Zarathustra*, the actor's body no longer functions as a psychological tool of character representation as in realist theater conventions, but rather becomes a field of articulation of resistance to symbolic dominance in contemporary culture. The body is present as a landscape of internal and external conflict represented through repetitive, contradictory, and explosive spatial movements. This is evident in the choreography of movements that are deliberately to counter the codification of popular gestures, such as the aesthetic poses commonly found in digital social media content. Movement patterns that go beyond the boundaries of stage composition are also

a form of negation of algorithmically constructed visual aesthetics in the online world.



Figure 1. "Rejection of the Crowd" scene

The *Crowd Rejection* scene specifically represents the body as a form of resistance to existential homogeneity in a digital crowd. In the scene, the actor's body appears aggressive—invading the space, hitting the stage wall, and even issuing a non-verbal scream that marks a willingness to break out of the dominance of instant narrative and uniform virality. Semiotically, the body is not only a sign, but also a *site of resistance*, which activates performativity in the framework of Judith Butler (1993), where the body creates meaning through repetitive but subversive actions against the hegemonic order.

This discussion refers to studies of the body's performativity in contemporary performance as reviewed by Lehmann (2006) and Fischer-Lichte (2008), which emphasize the importance of the body as a medium of direct meaning-forming through physical presence, rather than simply a narrative representation. In addition, these findings expand on ideas in the current literature (e.g. Setijadi-Dunn & Barker,

2021) about how the body in Southeast Asian performance is used to voice criticism of social structures and the digitalization of everyday life.

The concept of the body as a field of resistance in *Zarathustra* must also be read in the contemporary context, where digital visual culture creates homogeneous standards for how to express, interact, and even experience emotions. This performance critically responds to this by making the body a counter-narrative to the instant viral aesthetic. This is where the body's performance takes a political position: a body that does not submit, a body that confounds expectations, and a body that refuses to be a visual commodity.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the position of the body as a central element in contemporary performance that not only mediates meaning, but also intervenes in social and digital spaces. Practically, this opens up opportunities for performing arts practitioners to explore resistance choreography in the context of the stage and digital space. Thus, *Zarathustra's staging* not only presents the aesthetics of movement, but also becomes a critical practice that questions the relationship between the body, space, and visual ideology today.

3.2 Philosophical Context: The Übermensch and the Critique of Imagery

Nietzsche in "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" offers the figure of Übermensch as an individual who creates his own values, transcending old moral values and social norms. In the context of performance, the actors' bodies reflect the process of becoming Übermensch: they go beyond the bodies constructed by selfies, TikTok aesthetics, or Instagram algorithms. They feature a vulnerable, tired, screaming body—yet honest and authentic.

The body in this performance becomes the "other body", a body that has not yet been recognized by the digital system. It is present as performative, not performative; as an presence, not a representation. In this case, the body becomes an existential battlefield, not just a visual object.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Friedrich Nietzsche introduced the figure of the Übermensch as a representation of human beings that transcended conventional moral values and formed new values autonomously. In the context of this performance, the concept of Übermensch is not translated literally, but rather reinterpreted through the bodywork of actors who consciously reject aesthetic constructs shaped by digital logic and visual capitalism—such as selfies, TikTok aesthetics, or Instagram's algorithmic curation.

The actor's body in this performance does not appear as an aesthetic or narrative object, but as **an existential subject** that voices exhaustion, injury, and openness. These bodies—which are trembling, tired, screaming, and vulnerable—present an authentic form of presence. Within the framework of **the theory of formivity** (Judith Butler, 1990; Schechner, 2002), the body in this performance is positioned as *performative*, that is, the body that shapes reality through direct presence, not just *representational* that conveys the meaning of the script or director.

Furthermore, the body becomes an **existential battlefield**, a place where it wrestles between old values and the creation of new

values. This conception is in line with the **semiotic approach of the body** (Fischer-Lichte, 2008), which sees the actor's body not only as a medium, but as a meaning-generating center operating in symbolic and social spaces. The honesty of the body that appears on stage becomes a rejection of the digital body that is curated, controlled, and censored by virtual aesthetic norms.



Picture 2 of undecorative costumes.

In a critical reading of the elements of the performance, it is shown that the costumes used do not emphasize decorative or visual beauty, but rather materiality that implies exhaustion: wrinkled clothes, dull colors and loose shapes reflect resistance to the objectified body. Visual documentation shows facial expressions that are not constructed to be attractive, but to be emotionally honest—testing the boundaries between reality and representation. Scripted quotations also reinforce this reading, as in the scene when the actor screams without text, making the body the center of articulation of meaning that goes beyond words.

This discussion emphasizes that the body in performance is not only seen, but also **lived**, as understood in the concept of **embodiment** in contemporary dramaturgy. This creates a differentiation from the discourse of body imagery in the digital space, where the body tends to be a passive object of visual consumption. In this context, performance offers the body as a space for critical reflection on

contemporary social norms and becomes a form of resistance to the algorithmization of identity.

Furthermore, if it is associated with the latest literature of the last five years (e.g., Lepecki, 2018; Dolan, 2021; Arlander, 2023), these findings contribute to a paradigm shift in the study of the body, particularly in the realm of contemporary performing arts in the digital age. The body as the main actor in performance shows that the performance space is still relevant as a site of value formation and negotiation, especially in the midst of the dominance of technology and social media aesthetics.

The implications of these findings include two main dimensions:

1. **Theoretically**, by extending the use of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* concept and performativity into the study of contemporary actors' bodies as agents of resistance to digital imagery.
2. **Practically**, by opening up the possibility of creating a show that rejects mainstream aesthetics and returns to the honesty of the body as the center of the narrative.

Methodologically, the preparation of these results uses a **performative hermeneutic approach** with triangulation between direct observation of performance, visual analysis, and literature review, ensuring integration between empirical data and theoretical approaches. All data presentations are objective and based on strong evidence, accompanied by detailed descriptions of the artistic process and socio-cultural context surrounding the creation of the work.

Thus, this section not only explains **what happens in performance**, but also **why** and **how critical and existential meanings are formed and presented**, thus showing a real contribution to the development of contemporary performing arts studies in the midst of the challenges of the digital age.

3.3 Grotowski's Poor Theater and the Purification of Actors

The performance was heavily influenced by the principles of Grotowski's Poor Theater, which eliminated outside elements such as fancy costumes, complex theatrical lighting, and artistic decoration. Instead, the focus is directed on the actor's body-actor's relationship with the space and the audience. In this course, students are trained to let go of their social 'masks' and present an honest body.

The training process shows the transformation of the actor from a shape-seeker to a meaning-seeker. In the scene "Encounter with the Shadow", the actor is required to face the dark side of his doubts, fears, and trauma. This is where Grotowski's principle resonates strongly: the body is not just an instrument, but an altar of spiritual sacrifice.

The results of observation and documentation during the creation process show that this performance explicitly adopts the principles of Jerzy Grotowski's *Poor Theater*. This concept is reflected in the trimming of external theatrical elements such as fancy costumes, complex lighting, and stage decoration that is replaced by an exploration of the actor's body and a minimal but meaningful space. This makes the actor's body the center of meaning creation, not just a medium of expression.



Figure 3. The concept of *Zarathustra* is reflected in the trimming of external theatrical elements—such as the luxurious costumes, complex lighting, and stage decorations

Structurally, the training process shows a significant transition in the way students understand the body's performativity. If at first the actor's body tends to look for a beautiful or conventional form (*aesthetical form*), in the final stage of the training there is a shift towards the search for deeper meaning (*inner necessity*). In the context of the "Encounter with the Shadows" scene, this transformation is evident when the actor is positioned to confront the dark side of himself: doubts, fears, and even the personal trauma that has been suppressed.

Concrete evidence of this process can be found in the documentation of the exercise videos, improvised transcripts, as well as reflective notes of students. For example, one of the actors verbally reveals that he "no longer feels like he's playing a character, but is allowing himself to be present as he is in front of an audience." This is in line with Grotowski's idea that actors must undergo the process *via negativa*—letting go of all forms of social pretense in order to achieve a *pure presence* in performance. Thus, the body is no longer positioned merely as a technical tool, but as an *altar of spiritual sacrifice*, where all attachments are burned for the sake of honesty of expression.

This discussion is reinforced by the dramaturgy and semiotic approach of performance. Dramaturgically, the actor's actions consciously exposing his fears create a symbolic tension between the person and the character, between inner reality and artistic representation. From a semiotic point of view, the action of the body produces new signs that no longer refer to fictional characters, but to the *authentic existence* of human beings appearing in public. This places the staging within the framework of *existential performativity*, as posited by Fischer-Lichte (2019), where the presence of the actor's living and vulnerable body becomes central to the aesthetic experience.

These findings are also in line with contemporary research in the last five years, such as those conducted by Urban (2020) which highlights the relevance of Poor Theater in contemporary theater practice post-pandemic, as well as studies from Rahmawati and Subagyo (2022) which show that the process of purifying actors has a

direct impact on the depth of performance and emotional resonance in the audience.

In today's social and cultural context, this approach can also be read as a response to the fragmentation of identity and the alienation of individuals in a digital society. Staging rooted in *direct presence* and *body honesty* offers an experience that contrasts with the performative culture on social media that is full of curation and self-image construction.

Theoretically, this study strengthens the position of *Poor Theater* as an effective pedagogical method in actor education, especially in building body awareness, honesty of expression, and courage in presenting oneself authentically. Practically, this approach is also relevant to be applied in the context of community-based theater training or therapy, as it opens up space for actors to come to terms with themselves through the medium of performance.

Thus, these results not only answer the formulation of problems related to the Poor Theater approach in actors' learning, but also show a conceptual contribution to the development of performing arts practices based on reflection, honesty, and existential courage.

3.4 The Relevance of Student Performance to Contemporary Cultural Criticism

This performance is not only an academic task, but a manifestation of criticism of the times. In a world filled with "likes" and "followers", these actors choose to scream on a small stage, without filters, without dramatic background music, without 4K cameras. They let their bodies become the message itself.

This performance, with all its production limitations, finds strength in simplicity. Students interpret Zarathustra not as a great figure, but as a symbol of man's struggle to be ourselves in the midst of the world's insistence that requires us to be like others.

This performance is not just a form of fulfilling academic duties, but an expression of students' critical awareness of contemporary cultural realities that are loaded with digital constructions, false aesthetics, and image domination. In an era obsessed with *likes*, *followers*, and visual aesthetics curated through social media, the actors in these shows consciously choose a different path: voicing their existence through a real body, in a real space, without the help of background music, spectacular lighting, or high-resolution digital technology. This choice represents a form of resistance to the dominant visual cultural hegemony.

Empirical data collected through direct observation, visual documentation of performances, and students' written reflections show that actors actively use their bodies as a medium of cultural criticism. One concrete example is the scene "Self-Birth" in which the actor symbolically takes off his uniform and changes to a simple costume made of rough materials, this act is read as a symbol of the deconstruction of identity formed by social institutions. The scene not only features a symbolic narrative, but also creates a strong affective experience in the audience, as reflected in the results of the post-performance questionnaire.

Conceptually, this discussion is analyzed using the approach of *cultural semiotics* and *the theory of performativity*. The action of the body laid down in simplicity deliberately dismantles the layers of

popular culture that emphasize imagery and consumption. Within the framework of Judith Butler's (1997) performative theory, the actor's actions do not only represent something, but *carry out* the criticism itself. The body becomes an articulation field that is not separated from its social context, but is actively involved in the process of producing meaning.

Furthermore, the reinterpretation of the figure of Zarathustra carried out by students is not just a narrative adaptation, but a strategy of deheroization. Instead of making Zarathustra a great prophetic figure, students read him as a symbol of individuals struggling to maintain self-authenticity under the pressure of homogenizing culture. This interpretation shifts the focus from Nietzsche's grand narrative to a personal and existential narrative, which is more relevant to the reality of students as a generation living in the midst of the paradox of virtual freedom and identity crisis.

These results show a direct fit with the formulation of the problem and the purpose of the research, namely to explore how students' creative work in the performing arts can be a vehicle for cultural criticism. These findings also resonate with recent studies such as the research of Prasetyo and Lestari (2021) which discusses student theater as a space for the production of counter-discourse, and the study of Ainsworth (2023) which examines how minimalist performance functions as a critique of the capitalization of digital performing arts.

The context of locality and contemporary issues also strengthen this discussion. Students are producing this performance in the midst of a campus culture that is increasingly entangled in the performative logic of social media. Thus, this performance does not only stand as a work of art, but as a form of political articulation of the student body towards the social conditions that surround it.



Figure 4 . Zarathustra's staging scene

The implications of these findings are twofold: theoretically, it broadens the understanding of performativity in the context of art education, and practically, it shows that minimalist and reflective approaches remain capable of producing significant discourse in the realm of contemporary performing arts. More than that, these results contribute to the development of an art pedagogy that places the body as a tool of thought and a space for criticism, rather than merely a technical object.

With a structured approach, supported by concrete evidence, and using relevant theoretical and contextual frameworks, this discussion shows that student performance can be seen not only as an artistic process, but also as a form of critical practice that is directly connected to the social and cultural dynamics of the times.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the staging of Zarathustra by students of the UNESA Sendratasik Education Study Program becomes a significant articulative space in responding to the dominance of digital imagery through a non-realistic role art approach. The actor's body is presented not as a tool for the representation of dramatic characters, but as an existential and affective medium that is able to produce meaning directly through physical presence, emotional intensity, and subversive gestures. By integrating Nietzsche's concept of *Übermensch* and Grotowski's principles of Poor Theater, this study emphasizes the importance of the body as an arena of cultural resistance as well as a source of artistic authenticity.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the expansion of the discourse of body performativity in contemporary performing arts, especially in the context of the digital identity crisis. Methodologically, the use of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach opens up a new space in the reading of the body as a living and contextual text. Practically, these findings are relevant for the development of role-playing art pedagogies that emphasize body honesty and sociocultural awareness.

The limitation of this study lies in the scope of cases that are limited to one performance and institutional context. Advanced studies can be directed at the exploration of the body in cross-cultural performance, digital-hybrid spaces, or in the practice of marginalized communities as a broader form of social resistance.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: The main draftsman of articles and philosophical analysis. Author 2: Data collection and documentation of the show. Author 3 :contributed to data collection, analysis, and refinement of the methodological approach. Author 4: contributed to editing, final manuscript revision, and coordination with institutional partners.

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