

Performing masculinity: A Fontanillean semiotic reading of Dimitris Papaioannou's 2

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Dimitris Papaioannou's dance-theater performance 2 (2006) through Jacques Fontanille's six-level semiotic model (2008), mapping the work from minimal signs to broader forms of cultural life to reveal its ideological orientation. Applying Fontanille's six levels - Signs, Texts/ Utterances, Objects/Supports, Practices/Scenes, Strategies and Forms of Life - the analysis shows how 2 functions as a multi-layered semiotic system that deconstructs conventional masculinity, exposing its fragility and contradictions. Although 2 follows a non-linear narrative, its fragmented images and atmospheres produce a coherent aesthetic and semiotic effect through strongly visual staging that combines movement, music, speech, and song with shifting sets and props. The work revolves around the themes of existential loneliness, identity crisis, desire, male sexuality, communication deficit, objectification and alienation, placing the Mediterranean male within contemporary, urban modernity. Its all-male cast, wide use of modern settings (airport, office, gym) and contemporary pop culture references (videogames, mainstream film, football, Greek bouzoukia) frame masculinity as a constructed, performative identity. Ultimately, 2 exposes the social construction of male identity from childhood to adulthood, negotiating individual agency and the potential of alternative masculinities.

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1. Introduction

Dance performances constitute complex semiotic events in which meaning is produced through movement, spatial organization, visual elements and cultural conventions. Dance translates natural movement into symbolic expression through culturalization and abstraction, allowing for multiple interpretations (Blănariu 2013, Rochelle 2015). In this context of semiosis, the body functions as more than a mere biological entity; it acts as a semiotic scheme that mediates between physical substance and symbolic meaning. To analyze these processes, this study adopts a socio-semiotic framework grounded primarily in the multi-level semiotic model developed by Jacques Fontanille (2008) for an analytical approach to the performance 2 by the Greek choreographer and director Dimitris Papaioannou.

2 is a work that explores the male psyche and human solitude through a series of surreal vignettes. Premiering on November 24, 2006, at the Pallas Theatre in Athens, 2 was Papaioannou's first major stage work after his globally acclaimed direction of the 2004 Athens Olympic ceremonies. 2 was a massive commercial success while at the same time, sparked a notable controversy within the Athenian and Greek society.¹ It is a visually driven, non-linear performance piece that unfolds as a sequence of striking stage images in which performers continuously reshape themselves and each other, creating hybrid forms that blur distinctions between human and non-human. The number "2" functions symbolically, suggesting pairs, oppositions and interdependence - core ideas that structure the piece's visual and conceptual language. In this process, the different scenic environments that develop on-stage often suggest various social environments in which the male identity is formed.

Dimitris Papaioannou is a central figure in contemporary Greek performance, known for his distinctive fusion of dance, theatre and visual art. Over time he gained both national and international recognition, particularly after directing the opening and closing ceremonies of the Athens Olympic Games in 2004 which established his global reputation (Tzintziloni 2013). Co-founder of Edafos Company in 1986, established with the dancer and choreographer Aggeliki Stellatou, they shaped a new performance language that emphasized slow, controlled movement, strong visual imagery and the expressive potential of the body. Edafos Company gradually gained great status and recognition within the Greek art field (Tzintziloni 2013: 241). Influenced by butoh, release techniques and his background in visual arts and comics, Papaioannou's work focused less on technical dance and more on energy, transformation, and emotional resonance. His artistic path reflects a combination of high art and underground culture, as well as his personal experience as a homosexual man in a society marked by strict gender norms (Tzintziloni 2013).

¹ <https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/recent/2#:~:text=Looking%20back%20at%20the%20record%2Dbreaking%20success%20of,the%20piece%20as%20it%20was%20being%20created>

2. Theoretical framework and objective

Jacques Fontanille's framework conceptualizes meaning production as operating across six interconnected levels – from signs and texts to practices and forms of life. In his seminal work *Pratiques sémiotiques* (2008), Jacques Fontanille proposes a stratified model of six hierarchical levels to analyze the generation of meaning within cultural and social systems. The Signs operate as the basic level constituting the elementary units of expression, which coalesce into Texts that organize them into coherent, signifying wholes. This structure expands into the level of Objects, where materiality and physical affordances dictate how meaning is embodied. These objects are then activated through Practices, representing the lived, temporal dimension of semiotic action. At a more complex social scale, these practices are organized into Strategies, which govern interpersonal interactions and goal-oriented behaviors. Finally, the model culminates in Forms of Life, the integrative level that synthesizes the preceding layers into a coherent existential 'style' or ethical consistency that defines an individual or collective identity. Essentially, forms of life describe the cultural, social, existential totalities-ways of living- that embed the strategies, practices, objects, texts and signs.

Within Fontanille's semiotic hierarchy, the body acts as the foundational perceptual anchor that bridges biological matter with cultural meaning. At the level of Objects, the body is treated as a material entity with specific affordances and resistances, while at the level of Practices, it functions as the active agent of temporalized movement. Most importantly, the body is central to Forms of Life, where its gestures and postures coalesce into a coherent existential 'style' or ethos. Fontanille emphasizes the concept of the 'flesh' as the sensitive interface where internal sensations meet external stimuli, suggesting that semiosis is an embodied process where meaning is not just thought, but physically felt and enacted (Fontanille 2008).

To supplement the main framework for the specific purposes of this analysis, the study integrates insights from the genealogical analysis of power by Michel Foucault (2020), the theory of embodied social dispositions developed by Pierre Bourdieu (2013) and the performativity theory articulated by Judith Butler (1990). Together, these perspectives enable a multi-layered analysis of how meaning, social norms and subjectivities are produced, reproduced, and contested within cultural practices. While Fontanille's model offers a structured approach to semiotic analysis across multiple scales, the contributions of Foucault, Bourdieu, and Butler are used to illuminate further the historical, social, and performative dynamics that underpin these processes. Together, they can offer a nuanced understanding of how cultural meanings are constructed, embodied and contested. Furthermore, to specifically address gendered embodiment, this framework incorporates the theory of masculinities developed by R. W. Connell (1995). Connell's model conceptualizes masculinity not as a fixed identity, but as a configuration of social practices embedded within power

relations, formulating hegemonic, subordinated, complicit and marginalized masculinities. This perspective enables the analysis to examine how the dance performance negotiates and ultimately, challenges dominant gender norms.

From a Foucauldian perspective, structures are inseparable from historically specific regimes of power/knowledge. Michel Foucault's (2020) genealogical method shifts the analysis away from fixed meanings toward the historical production of norms, revealing how bodies are disciplined through diffuse mechanisms such as institutions, discourses and everyday practices. Within this framework, the signs and practices identified in the performance can be understood not merely as expressive elements but as effects of power that regulate and normalize masculinity. Spaces seen in the performance such as the gym, the corporate office, or even the toilet function as micro-sites of discipline where bodies are trained, observed and corrected. Pierre Bourdieu's (2013) theory of habitus deepens the analysis of embodiment by emphasizing how social structures are internalized as durable, embodied dispositions. Habitus operates below the level of conscious intention, organizing gestures, postures, and movements in ways that appear natural but are socially conditioned. In this sense, recurring bodily motifs—such as athleticism, controlled physicality, and gendered comportment—can be understood as manifestations of a masculine habitus. Bourdieu's concept of capital, particularly physical capital, further clarifies how the body becomes a site of accumulation and display. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity introduces a crucial destabilizing dimension. For Butler, gender is not an inherent essence but the effect of reiterated acts that cite and reproduce normative frameworks. Gender depends on repetition and it is always open to variation, failure, and subversion. Moments of ambiguity, contradiction, or breakdown in the performance – such as androgynous embodiments or disrupted communication patterns – can thus be interpreted as sites where the constructed nature of masculinity becomes visible. Furthermore, to specifically address gendered embodiment, this framework incorporates R. W. Connell's (1995) theory of masculinities. Connell conceptualizes masculinity not as a unified or fixed identity, but as a configuration of social practices structured through power relations. Connell's model distinguishes between hegemonic, subordinated, complicit and marginalized masculinities, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of how different masculine forms coexist, compete and are hierarchically organized. This perspective is particularly productive for examining how the performance stages multiple masculinities simultaneously – ranging from dominant, hyper-masculine expressions to vulnerable, queer, or marginalized forms – thereby exposing internal tensions and contradictions within the gender order.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives support Fontanille's semiotic model for the purposes of this analysis. Michel Foucault foregrounds the historical and disciplinary production of subjects, Pierre Bourdieu explains the embodied internalization of social norms, Judith Butler reveals the performative and unstable nature of identity and R. W. Connell provides a framework for understanding the plurality and hierarchy of masculinities. Their integration transforms semiotic analysis into a critical and interdisciplinary tool capable of examining not only how masculinity is represented, but how it is produced, negotiated and potentially contested within specific socio-cultural contexts. The application of the rich semiotic conceptual toolkit to the study of dance has already been undertaken. Susan Leigh Foster's (1986) work was seminal in discussing dance within a semiotic context, outlining four distinct models for representation. Furthermore, attention has been paid to the gender perception of homosocial dance (Beller-Tadiar 2025), the construction of gender in the context of dance courses (Peterson and Anderson 2012; Henderson 2019), constructions of male dances (Basetti 2013), among others. Valeria De Luca's (2017, 2021) work demonstrates that dance provides a valuable field for semiotic investigation, revealing how meaning is produced through bodily interaction in the case of Argentine tango. The Romanian scholar Nicoleta Popa Blănariu has been particularly active in this line of research, tackling a variety of subjects (2013), primarily relying on a Saussurean framework (2019), and only occasionally combining individual concepts from Fontanille's theory with cognitive linguistics (2021). The present study aims to contribute to the growing body of semiotic scholarship on dance with special focus on the performative construction of masculinity in the context of Greek contemporary dance-theater, a subject that remains understudied.

3. A Fontanillean semiotic reading of 2

3.1. Signs level

According to Fontanille, Signs are the most basic semiotic elements operating as minimal signifying units (2008). The signs constitute the very elementary level of expression, the minimal semiotic units endowed with signifying potential defined by their differential relations within a system. At this level, the meaning is not yet organized into larger coherent structures, however, the signs already point to the basic thematic anchor of this work which is contemporary masculinity.

For the purposes of this analysis, the arrangement of the minimal semiotic elements in 2 may be organized in the following categories:

- a) Body modes and designs. The gestural code of the performance (De Marinis 1993: 98) is rich and revolves around the main theme. The visual and performative language is articulated through a series of distinct body modes and physical designs such as the merging of two male figures into a single entity, as well as the dynamic of one body supporting while the other engages in 'float-running.' Physical actions range from the athletic energy of football running and kicking to the raw, private acts of masturbation and urination. Traditional movements like the *Tsifteteli* dance are juxtaposed with the disciplined forms of martial arts and push-ups. The physical presence is further marked by the exposure of the male form, bodies sliding or being carried away, and the psychological detachment of the protagonist's alienated gaze.
- b) Symbolic objects. The visual landscape is constructed through a dense assembly of symbolic objects and material signs. Professional identifiers like suits, offices, bags and suitcases are juxtaposed with icons of pop culture and gender, such as a giant Barbie doll and a one high-heel shoe. The setting is defined by structural elements like a conveyor belt segment, an inclined plane and blocks that hide and reveal, alongside everyday items such as a broom, trash bins, lighters, mobile phones and balloons. Athletic and subcultural life is represented through footballs, player uniforms, gym weight-lifting bars, boxes of anabolic steroids and energy drinks, as well as helmets, motorcycles and fast cars. These are interspersed with objects of consumption and habit – pizza, Sprite refreshment, coffee, cigarettes, worry beads (or *komboloi*)² – and marked by a sense of fragility or danger through a box marked as 'Fragile,' white gloves, toy/real weapons and a bomb.
- c) Aural and music fragments. The auditory landscape is composed of a diverse collection of aural fragments and musical signs: surreal Google Maps instructions in multiple languages appear alongside the synthesized sounds of video-game shooting and punching. Elements of the corporate environment, such as office directions and automated voicemail prompts

² The *komboloi* or Greek worry beads, is a circular string of beads serving as an accessory for relaxation and stress relief, but most importantly as a distinctive cultural symbol of traditional Greek masculinity, often associated with the Rebetiko subculture and the *manga* ragged male persona.

³ The origins of 'Misirlou' lie in the diverse musical melting pot of the Eastern Mediterranean during the Ottoman era, where it circulated as a traditional folk melody shared by Greek, Turkish, Arabic and Jewish communities. The title itself – meaning 'Egyptian girl' in Turkish – reflects its cross-cultural roots, with early lyrics depicting a forbidden romance. Ultimately, the song became part of the popular culture through Quentin Tarantino's movie *Pulp Fiction*.

are layered with cinematic pop-culture quotes like Arnold Schwarzenegger's *'I'll be back.'* The soundscape includes the *Misirlou*³ theme as well as a fragmented, repetitive version of the *Love Story* theme used as a ring-tone. The aural landscape is further punctuated by wild screams, distorted male voices, and sounds of refreshment consumption. Urban textures – including construction noise and car engines – mingle with *Tsifteteli*⁴ music and explosions, all while the recurring motif of navigation instructions shifts between the surreal and the realistic.

- d) The visual design consists of specific lighting and video projections. Projections frame scenes such as the explosion and the fireworks, while the final scene is defined by the image of the sky. The lighting palette includes 'boyish' blue light, green office light, white hammam light, red light for the androgynous figure and mobile phone screen light.

3.2. Text level: Structure and main motifs

In this level we can extract units of meaning that are articulated through the internal cohesion and arrangement of the signs (Fontanille 2008), which will lead to a more complete account of how the basic thematic units are constructed at the next levels. The Text level refers to how segments are organized into a formal, expressive whole. These texts, in the broad semiotic sense, assemble signs into coherent (or in this case, deliberately incoherent) units of meaning.

Structure-wise, 2 uses a cinematic text-structure (*fondue enchaînée*) where one image emerges from another and is subsumed by the next (Thalassa 2018: 122). In a broader understanding of textuality within the semiotics of performance, we may consider as 'text' every unit of discourse that results from coexistence of several codes and possesses the constitutive prerequisites of completeness and coherence. According to this understanding of textuality, an image or a group of images can be considered as such (De Marinis 1993: 47). This creates a 'fluid text' that mirrors the atmosphere of a dream rather than a logical-linear sequence of events, drawing

⁴ Tsifteteli originated as a traditional rhythm and dance in Asia Minor and the broader Ottoman Empire, shared for centuries by Greek, Turkish and Arabic communities, characterized by its syncopated 2/4 or 4/4 rhythm and fluid body movements.

⁵ The theatre critic Dio Kangelary notes in her review of 2: 'Bisected beings search among the swarming masses for their other halves, seeking the severed segments of their very selves – to "make one of two" in the words of Plato's Symposium. They strive for the time when two people were joined in a single body with one head, two faces, four legs and as many arms, and when there were three sexes – the male (of the sun), the female (of the earth), and the "androgynous" sex (of the moon); creatures like those monstrous forms created by the bodies of two dancers (first seen in the work of conceptualist choreographers), or the duo who suddenly come together and try to fit into the same set of clothes.' This text was especially commissioned for the '2' DVD booklet

<https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/recent/2>

directly from Pina Bausch's dance-theatre dream-like articulation and Robert Wilson's optical storyboards (Thalassa 2018: 31). As Thalassa points, in his later works Papaioannou creates a collage of images with no climax, broadening the scope of the audience's reception (Thalassa 2018: 121). Most prominent images in 2 include: the airport, a corporate environment, a playground, a hammam, Greek bouzoukia, a gym. These settings organize the basic contexts of meaning that evoke themes such as existential loneliness, identity crisis, gender, desire, male sexuality, the crave for intimacy, communication deficit and alienation.

Within these images certain core-signs of the performance's gestural code (De Marinis 1993: 98) are used as repetitive motifs with variations producing the main theme of duality. The motif of intertwined bodies is used as a physical expression of duality, evoking Greek mythology and philosophy, following a strategy of juxtaposing elements from different historical periods of Greece and contemporary culture. Intertwined bodies point directly to Aristophane's speech on Eros as developed in Plato's Symposium. Aristophanes speaks of the primordial human as two bodies in one whole, who's strength was so big that threatened the god's status quo. As such, Zeus split the primordial human into two separate beings that immediately started longing for their other half to become whole again. Through this story Aristophanes argues that humanity is a product of the tension and consequent collision between the original 'pre-human' nature, and the humanizing constraints of convention (Berg 2010: 71-74). This reference also signals one of the core themes of 2, namely, the tension between the nature and social structures. Nature here is seen as a lost Eden, presented in the introduction by a man with a leaf over his genital area taking a bite from an apple, then throwing it away and getting dressed slowly, indicating his entrance into the social world.

A motif that is frequently used to visualize this tension is running against the flow or towards something placed very high and ultimately, being taken by the flow or giving into gravity and sliding back down. Examples here include running to the opposite direction of the conveyor belt's flow and ultimately falling, frantic running on the inclined plane and sliding back down. Highlighting the theme of duality through the urge for intimacy, communication and the search for a life-partner, other motifs include two men crossing paths or trying to meet, two men dancing simultaneously with a wall/walls in-between and also, spatial tension (Preston-Dunlop 2014: 135) between two men that indicates distance but at the same time, some form of connection. These motifs underlie the theme of unfulfilled longing and point to the two beings after the separation, as described in Aristophane's speech.



Figure 1. Dual figure from the opening section

Source: <https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/>

3.3. Objects and supports level

Objects are the material or technical supports of semiosis in which texts are inscribed, embodied, or operationalized (Fontanille 2008). The object level introduces material constraints, affordances and modes of manipulation that condition meaning production and interpretation, materially grounding the signifying process. As such, at the object level meaning is grounded in material supports that enable, constrain and orient action.

The basic scenographic devices of 2 function as operative elements that organize movement, visibility and spatial continuity. The devices fulfilling this purpose are the two moving walkways and an inclined plane located at the rear of the stage. Furthermore, throughout the performance the scenic space undergoes continuous transformation to evoke the various locations required. These locations are delineated primarily through the exclusive use of specific tableaux, namely, rectangular slabs resembling office cutting surfaces carried onstage by the performers, as well as through other everyday objects that contribute both to the spatial articulation and to the development of the action. Finally, these three scenic elements – the moving walkways, the inclined plane and the tableaux – also function to frame the human body, to enable the appearance and concealment of performers and objects from the spectators and to provide continuity, flow, and mobility in the transitions between scenes, while simultaneously operating on a symbolic level (Thalassa 2018: 124). Furthermore, video projections add an extra visual layer in the performative text with images such as a bomb explosion, fireworks and the blue sky of the final scene.

Across the performance, scenic objects operate as condensed semiotic units that structure the dramaturgy of action and the spatial organization of the stage, mediating relations of mobility, containment, interaction and exposure among the performers. In Fontanille's analytical framework, this level corresponds to the semiotics of objects where material elements operate as mediators between signs and embodied practices. In 2, objects do not function merely as decorative scenographic elements, rather, they actively participate in the choreographic system by organizing movement, directing attention and shaping the visual configuration of bodies within space. Objects in this sense do not simply carry symbolic meaning, but they also structure the conditions of action by enabling or constraining the movements that performers execute. As such, objects in 2 are not just a physical support of signs but contribute as an active component in semiosis. Semiotic forms here constitute dynamic processes rather than fixed structures; therefore, materiality is regarded as a constitutive dimension of semiosis, participating directly in the generation and stabilization of meaning (De Luca 2021).



Figure 2. Bodies sliding down the inclined plane, two men with suitcases.

Source: <https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/>

A first group of objects organizes movement and spatial circulation on stage. Movable suitcases mark the transfer of objects and bodies while producing a continuous sense of motion and displacement. Beds introduce temporary zones of stillness and separation between performers, interrupting the fluid circulation of bodies. A second group of objects operates through weight, accumulation, or physical resistance in relation to the body. Large boxes containing everyday consumables are stacked upon the protagonist until they collapse over him producing a visual configuration in which the body is subjected to the pressure of material accumulation. These boxes operate as containers of identity, suggesting masculinity as something packaged, transported, and managed. Similarly, a weight-lifting bar lifted by performers foregrounds muscular effort and accumulation of physical capital. Footballs

circulating between performers function both as objects of athletic interaction and as floating elements within the stage environment. A third group of objects operates as extension or transformation of the body. White gloves animating isolated hands produce the impression of disembodied gestures, while a wheelchair carrying a disabled Superman juxtaposes the iconography of heroic masculinity with bodily immobility. In another moment, a bomb attached to a performer's torso visually merges object and body, altering the performer's physical configuration within the scene. Other objects appear in ways that carry symbolic or ironic implications, including a broom attached to a performer's genital area and a leaf covering the performer's genitals. Additionally, television frames displaying male faces act as multiple representations of masculinity with extending references to popular culture. A fourth group of objects support actions structuring small-scale gestures that contrast with the broader spatial dynamics of the performance. These objects do not organize large movement sequences but instead, enable micro-performative acts that concentrate attention on the performer's body and on subtle interactions between hand, object, and gesture. The protagonist is forcefully given a *komboloi* to play with, while a mobile phone functions as the device through which his spoken words are transmitted. The repeated ignition of a lighter introduces brief flashes of light that punctuate the performance. Costumes and wearable elements constitute another category of objects that frame the body within recognizable social codes. Performers appear in football uniforms, casual clothing and formal suits, each evoking distinct cultural associations and modes of masculine presentation. Certain items operate relationally between performers, such as a shared jacket worn simultaneously by two bodies. In another instance, a high-heeled shoe worn by an androgynous figure introduces a visual element that destabilizes normative gender coding within the predominantly male environment of the stage.



Figure 3. Two men trying to come close while running to the opposite direction of the conveyor belt, momentary contact with lighter and a cigarette

Sources: <https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/> , Thalassa, C., 2018.

Among the objects appearing in the performance, the large Barbie doll occupies a distinctive position due to its strong cultural connotations and its central role in structuring action. Unlike objects that primarily organize spatial movement or everyday gestures, the Barbie figure functions as a symbolically charged object toward which bodily actions are oriented. The oversized doll introduces an immediately recognizable icon of femininity within a stage environment otherwise dominated by male bodies. Its presence produces a visual contrast that foregrounds gender representation at the level of material form.

Taken together, these objects form a dense material network that structures the performance's semiotic environment. At this level, they configure the material conditions under which movement becomes possible. At the same time, their manipulation by performers already anticipates the next analytical level – practices – where these object-mediated interactions become stabilized as repeated bodily actions. In this way, the objects of the performance function as interfaces between material scenography and embodied choreography, linking the spatial organization of the stage with the social and cultural meanings generated through the performers' actions.

3.4. Scenes / Practices level: Masculinity as enacted social action

At the level of scenes and practices meaning emerges from organized, situated action governed by implicit norms, values and expectations (Fontanille 2008). Here, the material affordances provided by objects are activated through bodily practices and masculinity appears as a mode of doing rather than an attribute. The bodily practices develop through a concrete gestural code – the convention/s on the basis of which the gestures in a performance signify and communicate their meaning (De Marinis 1993: 98) – that evokes the main themes of the performance.

The scenic environments created on stage function as semiotic configurations that frame the process of masculine identity formation. The airport signifies a journey, operating as a metaphor for movement toward subjectivation and identity construction within the conditions of contemporary society. The corporate environment represents male-dominated professional spaces aligned with stereotypical models of masculine success and legitimacy, highlighting how the labor market shapes masculinity (Connell 1995: 95). The playground functions as a return to childhood, directly referencing normative expectations that regulate boys' behavior and define the toys and activities deemed appropriate for them, often privileging violence and speed. Here, the rhythmic slaps the protagonist receives and then mimics show that gender is built through repetition. This cycle directly links the performance of gender (Butler 1990) to acts of violence. The hammam appears as a space of cleansing and corporeal exposure, opening the possibility for homoerotic expression while simultaneously engaging with traditional masculine practices.

This approach seems to align with Pasin's (2014) analysis of the Ottoman Turkish hammam conceptualized as a queered space, where the boundaries of heteronormativity are negotiated, contested and occasionally transgressed. Pasin's reading highlights how spaces of homosocial interaction may simultaneously reproduce and disrupt dominant sexual norms. In this respect, Pasin argues that the spatial and sexual practices in the men's section of the hammam are much more complex than in the way they are conceived, represented and coded in popular media. Marginalized masculinities (Connell 1995: 80-81) are evoked through culturally specific objects such as the komboloi and the cigarette within the context of the hammam, again with Turkish/Eastern references, which signal forms of masculinity rooted in the socially marginalized rebetes and the figure of the macho traditional man (*mangas*). Greek bouzoukia constitute the symbolic space of mainstream folk-pop culture in Greece, within which gendered identities are reiterated and stabilized through performative rituals (Koutsougera 2023). Lastly, the gym emerges as the site where physical capital (Bourdieu 1986) is accumulated through repetitive movements like push-ups and weight-lifting, visualizing the disciplined production of bodies aligned with dominant models of masculinity.



Figure 4. The hammam scene
Source: Thalassa, C., 2018.

Practices of mobility and transition are enacted with the use of bags and suitcases, tracing a masculine trajectory from childhood to adulthood while simultaneously evoking the accumulation of emotional and biographical baggage. This sense of movement is counterbalanced by images of stasis and isolation, such as the placement of two beds apart with suitcases nearby, which foreground loneliness and the burden of personal histories. Urban noises like construction work and car engines create a dense city atmosphere setting the contemporary, metropolitan context as the wider environment in which masculinity is performed. Corporate masculinity emerges through suits and offices which reference male-dominated professional environments governed by legitimate dress codes, productivity and normative expectations of success. Within this framework, the toilet appears as a paradoxical space: on the one hand, it constitutes a private refuge where men momentarily release the tension generated by corporate pressures through masturbation, on the other, it operates a formative site of socio-physical education where boys acquire a legitimate male bodily habitus (Bourdieu 2013), learning how to occupy and discipline their bodies in socially accepted ways by being, for example, prohibited to urinate in a seated position and encouraged to do so in a standing position (Foucault 2020).

Hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) is further articulated through physical manipulation of objects that index physical capital and bodily power. Weight-lifting bars, large boxes of anabolic steroids and energy drinks signal the accumulation of muscular strength and the visual display of dominance. Footballs and football uniforms reference a sport culturally legitimized as an arena for the enactment of dominant masculinity, while helmets, motorcycles and fast cars associate masculinity with speed, risk, and technological control. Pizza functions as a culturally coded 'male' eating habit associated with football watching, while fast coffee reinforces rhythms of productivity and masculine sociality within urban life. Furthermore, violence and domination appear as central components of this semiotic economy. The juxtaposition of a toy weapon with a real weapon signifies the performative normalization of physical power and aggression from childhood onward, underscoring how toxic forms of masculinity are learned and repeated over time (Butler 1990). A similar logic operates in the pairing of a toy car with a real car, where speed and control parallel the symbolic economy of weapons. This trajectory arrives at its climax in the image of a kamikaze carrying a bomb, which offers a striking visualization of internal struggle and the violent eruption of repressed emotions and unmet needs.

At the same time, the scenes introduce moments of fracture and ambiguity that destabilize normative gender identities. A high-heeled shoe worn with a male suit gesture toward concealed, divided or fluid gender subjectivities, while a shirt shared by two men signifies potential communion and attempts for intimacy. The presence of the large Barbie doll invokes popular culture and operates as a powerful visualization

of female objectification, whereas the juxtaposition of an androgynous Venus de Milo with the actual image of the statue encloses references to Ancient and contemporary Greek culture, exposing the tension between abstract ideals on gender, physical perfection and lived corporeality. Notably, irony and critique emerge through objects that disrupt masculine coherence. The presence of a box marked 'Fragile' crashing – among others – on the protagonist powerfully exposes the vulnerability underlying dominant male identities, whose authority remains imposed. A broom attached to a man's genital area operates as a symbol of cleansing in the end of the Hammam scene. A trash bin and a balloon seem to symbolize an aspiration toward individual liberation and a non-biased utopia, however, the balloon's repeated placement in the trash bin and its later appearance as consumed and poorly digested signal the failure of this ideal. Practices of homosocial bonding and fleeting intimacy are suggested through smaller, everyday objects. A lighter and a cigarette operate as signs of attempted proximity and communication, while white gloves imply the superficial satisfaction derived from multiple homoerotic encounters. The consumption of Sprite refreshments similarly conveys momentary gratification tied to passive leisure activities such as watching television, emphasizing pleasure as transient and ultimately unfulfilling. Together, these objects and their physical manipulation compose a dense semiotic map of desire, tension, vulnerability and repetition, revealing masculinity as an ongoing, conflicted performance rather than as a stable essence.



Figure 5. Men in white gloves
Source: Thalassa, C., 2018.

The aural and musical landscapes add an additional layer of semiotic meaning to the performance. Particularly striking are the surreal Google Maps instructions delivered in Greek and other languages, suggesting a sense of globalization, disorientation and de-humanized technological prevalence that seem to destabilize the further the process of the search for identity and also, the other half. Navigational directions within a corporate environment a few scenes later, seem to echo this atmosphere. The Google Maps instruction motif re-emerges during the final scene now sounding more realistic, in Greek language, suggesting a tentative shift from chaos toward orientation. In this scene we listen to the dialogue between two men speaking on the phone, one trying to come close to the other. Furthermore, the use of spoken Greek phrases in some cases foregrounds bodily practices and physical habitus formed as an outcome of societal disciplinary forces (Foucault 2020, Bourdieu 2013). The short dialogue that we hear during the corporate environment scene: *"What do you want to do? I want to pee. Standing, please."* accurately highlights the latter.

Iconic pop-culture aural references appear, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger's line from *The Terminator*, *"Don't worry, I will protect you. I'll be back"*, supplemented by video-game shooting and punching sound effects that accompany the performers' movements. Furthermore, several sound cues highlight themes of miscommunication and communicative failure, including the automated message *"Call waiting has been activated. Please don't hang up unless you hear the busy tone."* This motif is reinforced by repeated phone-ringing sounds and a fragmented, looping version of the *Love Story* theme which feels "stuck," emphasizing emotional and communicative blockage, co-existing with deep and unmet emotional needs. In the final scene, another attempted phone call signals ongoing communicative deficiency, yet this time it appears to hint at potential resolution. Despite this, physical distance and spatial tension between the bodies remain unresolved.

Musical quotations further enrich the soundscape, including the "Misirlou" theme in the Hammam scene and music in a tsifteteli rhythmical pattern during the Greek Bouzoukia scene with the performer singing the lyric *"Πρέπει να γαμήσω γιατί θα λαλήσω"* (*"I need to fuck or I will go crazy"*) invoking raw masculinity, while the exclamation *"Aman"* further reinforces a Turkish/Eastern sonic reference. A distorted male voice singing Elvis Presley's *"Love me tender"* creates a deep level of irony during the explicitly raw Barbie doll scene. Also, the reference to Arvo Part's *"Für Alina"* sets the tone of longing, consolation and even purification.

3.5. Strategies level

At the level of strategies we examine the broader structuring of the performance, namely, how scenes and practices are arranged to produce a coherent (or deliberately fragmented, in this case) aesthetic and semiotic effect (Fontanille 2008). Here, we can distinguish two main categories; content-related and production related strategies.

3.5.1. Content-related strategies

As previously noted, 2 uses a cinematic text-structure (*fondue enchaînée*) where one image emerges from another and is subsumed by the next on stage, creating a 'fluid text' that mirrors the atmosphere of a dream rather than a logical-linear sequence of events. This has also been related to comic-book aesthetics, as Papaioannou had gained early recognition as a painter and comics artist before his focus shifted on the performing arts. The scenes distinctively revolve around a specific theme each and some share common motifs. This strategy seems to be a deliberate choice that further enhances the exposure of disruptions, creating an open-ended environment in terms of reception and, an allegory pointing to social constructions and the fractures/de-constructing potential inherent. In this context, Papaioannou inserts irrational images (e.g., a gentleman pacing without a head, an androgynous figure shooting its own leg) to rupture the rational flow of the performance, symbolically uncovering the structured nature of social doxas and opening the play of interpretations. A similar strategy involves juxtaposing contrasting signs, for example, during the Barbie doll scene when a performer sings the popular love song "Love me tender" with a deep, distorted voice while sexual actions are performed on the doll. Another powerful visual image that is constituted around contrasting signs is the handicapped Superman who enters the stage on a wheelchair and ultimately falls down. Super Men's muscular, hyper-toned bodies are increasingly on display embodying the hegemonic qualities of both the eroticized object and the commanding subject. Even though men are eroticized for the female gaze and one could argue that men and women are equally exploited in this regard, ultimately men's combined powers and authority positions retain privilege (De Dauw and Connell 2020: 11). Papaioannou visually deconstructs the ideal of hegemonic masculinity exposing Superman's fragility and even perhaps drawing a reference to the real, tragic story of Christopher Reeve who became paraplegic after a horse-riding accident. We can also draw connections here to Lloyd Newson's seminal work *Enter Achilles* (1995), in which he explores contemporary masculinities raising critical questions. Interestingly, Superman is a leading figure in *Enter Achilles*, embodying an alternative representation of masculinity-gentle, non-violent yet not necessarily homosexual, target of bullying and perhaps even a secret aspiration (Wall 2006: 97).

Pop culture manipulation is a strategy that puts the male in the heart of contemporary environments, demonstrating how this context strongly shapes gendered identities. The performers' appearance with fused TV screens over their heads further highlight the impact of television as a means of the mass diffusion of pop-culture. Through pop culture, constant images of dominant masculinity emerge picturing physical strength, violence, testosterone outbursts and objectification of women. Visual and aural references to Superman and The Terminator constitute such examples. The large Barbie doll emerges in one of the rawest scenes of the performance, indicating how men ultimately come to view women as sexual objects rather than partners. It is worth noting that some reviews of the time perceived as problematic the fact that the only female presence in the performance was a large Barbie doll (Thalassa 2018: 131). This strategy is again reminiscent to Newson's *Enter Achilles*, in which the only female reference is a plastic blow-up sex doll which is used to demonstrate the lack of communication ability towards real women (Wall 2006: 98). As Weissman (1999) notes, the Barbie doll has been a primary example of how women are depicted in the media as objects of the male gaze. Moreover, Barbie's image has been strategically used in consumer culture as a marketing tool towards commodification of beauty, both reflecting and reinforcing cultural norms on gender, beauty and power.



Figure 6. The large Barbie doll

Source: <https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/>

The strategy of intertwining mainstream masculinity with homoeroticism and queerness, thus, hegemonic and subordinate masculinities (Connel 1995) is also apparent in 2 and broadens the perception of gender, further exposing the disruptions and the fragility of dominant masculinity. One of the most prominent scenes that disrupts dominant masculinity through queerness is the androgynous figure shooting

its own, high-heeled leg. This action visually communicates the fluidity of gender and the esoteric pressure internalized by the male to suppress any existing feminine attributes, resulting to an internal war.

2 also encompasses the strategy of juxtaposing elements from different historical periods. The context of the contemporary metropolis is associated with mechanization and the pressure of the expectations affiliated with the workplace, highlighting the sense of alienation. Globalization adds an extra layer of confusion questioning the technological impact on the human, possibly mediating further the communication deficit and the inability of intimate connection. The references to contemporary culture are juxtaposed with images of ancient Greece and the Ottoman period of Greece highlighting the historical aspects of masculinities (Connell 1995: 27-30). Papaioannou further includes elements from the Greek popular music culture (*bouzoukia*). As Koutsougera (2023) notes, the notion of the 'popular' (*laiko*) conveys a combination of working class and provincial elements and intersect urban and rural boundaries, while also evoking the Turkish colonized past and the Orient. This kind of popular music is usually performed in night venues where, as Koutsougera observes, traditional stereotypes of masculinities and femininities are privileged and performed while sexist, homophobic and heteronormative narratives circulate, reproducing existing social norms.

3.5.2. *Production-related strategies*

A main strategy in 2 includes the involvement of an all-male cast, namely, 22 performers that undertook an intensive workshop with Papaioannou lasting four months to come up with material relating to the male world.⁶ The method of recalling personal experiences as main material for choreography derives from the tradition of Pina Bausch's dance-theater (Climenhaga 2009: 20-21) and provides substantial connections between the lived-embodied experience, the cultural context and the poetics of art. Here it is useful to draw reference to Pavis's (2016: 63) application of Butler's theory to the theater, in which traditional hierarchies are disrupted by shifting the locus of meaning from textual supremacy to the performer's physical presence. Within this framework, the performer's body is understood not as a passive medium, but as a fabricated construct meticulously shaped by training, socio-cultural conventions, and somatic techniques to function effectively within an ensemble. Rather than subordinating the performer to a pre-existing script, this reading demands that the discourse is contextualized within 'thinking bodies.' Through embodying structures of power and habitus development, performers accumulate a form of physical capital which is actively used into the choreographic process. Ultimately, all or part of this capital transfigures to art, when it becomes embedded in the final structure of the performance.

⁶ <https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/recent/2>

Furthermore, placing only male bodies on stage enhances the main ideological point of the work, highlighting the various ways through which masculinity is collectively performed and regulated. The strategy of staging masculinity as performance unfolds around the main character, performed by the popular actor Aris Servetalis. Servetalis is a lone man constantly exposed to cultural norms, sometimes reluctantly performing what is expected and other times, observing bewildered or following passively what is suggested by the environment, thus exposing the tension between the cultural canon and the individual agency and also, the structured nature of social gender hence, shedding light on the fragility and disruptive character of dominant masculinity.

Finally, Papaioannou is strategically using the mainstream both as a platform of communication towards a wide audience and as the foundation for its own critique. A similar strategy had been developed a few years earlier in his work *One Moment of Silence* (1995), a homoerotic dance work that was expected to address a wide audience with funding from the Ministry of Culture and private sponsors (Tzintziloni 2013: 275). 2 was a work exclusively funded by the private sector, presented in the mainstream theater Pallas, located in the center of Athens. Papaioannou's fame after the 2004 Olympic Games drew a record number of people to the theater, expanding the audience way beyond the artistic circles. As one critic interestingly notes 'Papaioannou now inhabits an unusual place, where "queer" seems to have effortlessly shifted into the mainstream. Performances at the recently renovated art deco Pallas cinema have been sold out ever since the opening in November, where edgy Athenians rub shoulders with the bourgeois blue-rinse brigade.' The performance team included popular actors like Aris Servetalis who is the main performer here. In this context, 2 blends in and at the same time, deconstructs elements of popular culture within a multi-layered semiotic system, in a mainstream venue, addressing a wide audience. Ultimately, we could suggest that popular culture is used here as the absolute lever providing broadly recognizable signs to a wide audience through a popular platform, to dismantle dominant discourses of masculinity.

3.6. Forms of life level – Performing masculinity in contemporary society

In this level, all previous practices and strategies coalesce into a stable, recognizable worldview (Fontanille 2008). 2 interrogates the condition of male existence in contemporary, urban and globalized society exploring themes of gender, alienation, identity, desire, and mediated social realities. Papaioannou's dance-theater places hegemonic masculinity at the core of its multi-layered, multi-semiotic system to highlight its constructed, performative and fragile character and to open space for subordinate masculinities to emerge. Aligning with gender performance theory, the artwork mainly speaks of contemporary masculinity, suggesting its historical construction and breaking away from essentialist viewpoints that prioritize fixed origins or natural meanings.

Moreover, 2 manages to expose the turbulence beneath the surface of hegemonic masculinity. The dance-work highlights how power structures inscribe onto/into the subjects' bodies and souls through various social environments since childhood. In this sense, one could draw again links to *One moment of silence*, where the exposure and stylization of the male body create a space for homoerotic desire and challenges fixed notions of identity (Tzintziloni 2013).

A powerful visual image that encompasses the question of the breaking-away potential can be seen in the scene of the fireworks explosion where the men are slowly approaching the night sky but slide back again, carried away against their efforts by the conveyor belt. Such imagery suggests the potential for active agency – going against the current – but also the near irresistible power of the current (in this case, the conveyor belt). In the last scene, we understand that finally the two men are getting close to one another when the one says “I’m outside your door” and the other one replies “push gently and you will come in.” However, the visual elements contradict the aural background as the two bodies exist in spatial tension that keeps extending in different spatial levels. This image seems to reference Rene Magritte’s *Golconda* (Thalassa 2018: 131), a surrealist painting that depicts identically dressed men suspended in an urban sky. Patricia Allmer (2009) theorizes the bowler hat motif in Magritte’s work as a powerful visual signifier of mass anonymity and the systematic erasure of individual identity in modern society.



Figure 7. Rene Magritte’s *Golconda* and 2’s final scene
Sources: Khalilova, N. (2015), Thalassa, C., 2018.

In *Golconda*, the repetition of identical, bowler-hatted men creates a claustrophobic vision of social conformity, transforming human beings into indistinguishable, floating units (Allmer 2009). Magritte’s deployment of this figure that serves as a philosophical dismantling of the self, defines both aesthetically and thematically the final scene, encompassing 2’s core negotiation of the relation between the individual and the society.

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