

## **Understanding ‘Hypertrophy’**

*A Critical Review for my second semester at the Master of Film program  
and a lesson in self-cycling*

### **Hypertrophy:**

*The enlargement of an organ or tissue from the increase in size of its cells.*

Throughout this review, I will give in an insight in how this notion of Hypertrophy became the language in which the backbone of my method is constructed.

I will do my best to resort to a language which favours clarity over eloquence, and provide a clear explanation of the terminology if needed.

In the athletic world the Hypertrophy is one of the essential, if not the most essential point to take into account when training, nourishing and competing bodies. Without a clear mastery of it, there is literally no room for development. The customisation of the athletic body, geared towards peak performance is built on this rigorous development cycle.

In my reading, the cycle found Hypertrophy is analogous to the phenomena of auto-death found in artistic and religious practices. Therefore, in order to understand how these notions can seamlessly transcend from one realm to the other, I propose treating the position of an Athlete synonymous to an Artist and to an Alchemist. Rather than just superimposing, or aligning them in some sort of collage, I suggest taking these three notions (the Athlete, the Artist, the Alchemist) as well as their respectable domains to be *identical to one-another*.

In the following three phases, I like to expand on each stage of this cycle, starting from their practical features and moving onto more mythological echoes. For me, understanding Hypertrophy was *the* way to understand my own desired trajectory as a maker, as well as providing ground for self-analysis.

## **Phase 1 - CONSUMPTION**

This is our initial condition. During the consumption, raw material is taken in by the body, broken down by the digestive system and either stored or disposed of as waste. What is stored becomes a surplus which is then added to the body to meet its energy demands. When the influx of surplus is lower than the body's energy demands, we talk about weight loss. When higher, we talk about weight gain. The body can store this surplus in two ways: either as muscle, or fat. There are countless sources to consume energy, but if broken down to categories, exercise science defines three key components: nutrition (micro and macro), rest (aka low-stress activities, such as sleeping or just hanging around), and additional supplements to assist the former two.

*If you are at this point a bit doubting the relevance of all the scientific banter in this programme, I'd like to assure you that in order to make sense of what is going on, we need to understand the physiology of Hypertrophy. As promised in the beginning, I'll try my best to keep unnecessary chatter to near-zero.*

How the phase of CONSUMPTION is defined in the athletic realm can easily echo in the artistic. To use my personal process as a point of study, I can very much say that the time of the first semester in the Master's (from September 2015, till January 2016) was devoted to the coordinated consumption and digestion of different external inputs, in order to separate the wheat from the chaff, and see what mass of undefined energy that can be later on used. This brings to probably the most important point about each individual phase. CONSUMPTION is not the intake of raw material for its own sake, but in order to give rise to the opportunity to transcend its' initial condition. This will be equally true for all the coming phases discussed throughout the review. They are self-catalysing systems both individually and collectively, thriving for perpetual acceleration motion momentum.

I see my works made in the first semester as correspondences and embodiments of the phase of CONSUMPTION. Experiments, such as the ritual cutting of hair, the maps and manifestos composed, as well as the reexamination and rearrangement of my personal archive are all preparatory gestures in order for my progress to define its embryonic core, from which it can grow.

From a subjective perspective CONSUMPTION is undoubtedly an inwards, centripetal process. It is about collecting energy, which is then stored, ready to be used. By nature, surplus energy demands an outlet, since the body is not meant to contain it infinitely. This is done by putting the energy up to an external resistance, a process which I will explain later. If this demand is not met, the energy can turn against the body and without an externalising element, it puts itself against the internal. This can easily turn into a jammed handgun backfiring, with the unused surplus taking its toll in forms of depression, frustration, fat gain, and all sorts of horrible ways.

What prevents this from happening is body's the DESIRE to externalise the surplus energy. DESIRE is the need to pervert the external, and by that realise (and by realise, I mean realise in all possible sense of the word) this otherwise undirected fire in the body. It is akin to the adolescent sexual drive, reptilian and immoral. In religious practice, this drive is akin to what is referred to as zeal. It allows the body to transgress the initial condition of CONSUMPTION and move onto SITUATION.

*It is important to mention that when I talk about body in this programme, I do mean the entire (aural, physical, mental) body, as opposed to the body being a material vessel for the mind/soul/spirit/whatever to inhabit, or control. Thus, in order to make our discourse fluent, I propose denouncing any ownership. In other words, I prefer to say "You are a body." as opposed to "You have a body".*



## ***Phase 2 - SITUATION***

During the phase of SITUATION, the energy is funnelled or moulded into shape by having itself put up to external resistance. The DESIRE that allowed to transcendence from the initial condition of CONSUMPTION into SITUATION is the primary catalyst for the momentum of work in this phase.

When the body is met with external resistance, it gives rise to stress, a state of overall discomfort. The level of stress is dependent on the intensity of the external resistance relative to the body. In order for the body to withstand the stress imposed it needs to tap into its' energy reserves. This is where the consumed surplus comes into picture. The surplus is necessary so that the body does not put its' fundamental reserves in the line, but rather an expendable mass, which when broken down becomes engorged with blood and lactic acid.

The basic idea behind working with external resistance, is that because of the body's adaptive nature, the stress level should ideally be set to a point which is relative to the athlete's current physiological limits. In the case of endurance athletes, this is usually the lactate threshold, a point where the body shifts from using its' aerobic (Oxygen-based) system to using its' anaerobic (Glycogenic) system as its' energy resources. Once this point is past, the experience of stress drastically changes and the athlete is confronted with an almost entirely different exercise. Depending on the sport, athletes either try and avoid this point of high stress, by adapting themselves to delay it as long as possible (in case of long-distance runners), or deliberately tapping into the anaerobic, high-stress realm (in case of short-distance sprinters). The result of this effect can be easily demonstrated by examining the different body composition a long-distance runner has as opposed to a short-distance sprinter.

The nature of stress thus defines the way in which the surplus (in forms of muscle and fat fibre) is being torn down and later on recomposed. This in the long run allows room for experimental customisation of the composition of these fibres, and for the customisation of the body overall. This customisation I call DISCIPLINE. But let's not get too ahead of ourselves.

I'd like to talk about the echoing effect of SITUATION in my research. I've been a practitioner of both training methods outlined above, but especially taking preference in anaerobic, or high-intensity / high-stress training. My body genetically geared towards doing long-distance, moderate intensity workouts, so the complete shock the anaerobic training gives allowed me to be confronted with a much greater challenge.

I found that during anaerobic training, my fears, struggles, borders and developments were far more radically and obviously exposed, than any other method of development I used in- or outside the athletic realm. The near-hysterical need to stop, to slow down, and the merciless task to keep going brought me almost to tears many times, and equally many times to the brink of just wanting to straight out throw up. The sheer terror from the coming workout, the panic, all seem to echo in my evolutionary safety mechanisms, and thus making changes there the same way.

What got my interest was this particular point where despite these warnings (physiological, neurological or psychological) to stop the intake of further stress, I could put them aside and was able to go on, against all odds. The fact that the perceived endpoint can be wilfully transgressed for the sake of continuation became my centre of focus within each individual training session. As mentioned earlier, certain athletes in order to transform their physique, regularly tap into this domain and go through a breaking point where the evolutionary safety mechanism is disabled.

This for me resonated very vividly with the notion of Crossing Over, present in liminal rites, which was my initial starting point, and the drive to experience it was the reason that got me into athletic training in the first place. Both require the practitioner to pervert a threshold in order to tap into an unknown, somewhat dangerous territory, where true transformations can occur. I've spent countless hours reading about this moment of liminality, but this was the first occasion I actually understood in on an experimental level.

My experiments relating to SITUATION was geared towards finding these points of transgression throughout training as much as possible.

The primary guinea pig for these experiments was of course myself, using anaerobic training (more specifically high-intensity military drills and olympic weightlifting) as test cases. I started recording each workout in the fashion of gym athletes, initially to be able to review and correct my technique, but later on also as to construct an unquestioned, periodic output of small works. Next to this, I started documenting the demolition of a block house that was standing opposite to my gym, using the exact same length to record, as the length of the workout video I made that day. These small videos do not make much sense or strike great meaning on their own, but added together they form a correspondence, with the individual sequences arching together in a line of development the training and the destruction in the building.



But more importantly, regardless of what narrative could be superimposed, the biggest joy came when I put each days recordings next to each other, and without any meaning or literal sense, just have the unquestioned combination of the two. This gave me a very useful insight as maker, about how two object can be just put next to each other, without the need to tie them together in any manner (as connecting, or counterpoint, analogy or association), rather just marvel at the contradictions it gives rise to.

After my unfortunate accident, where I ended up breaking the wrist of my writing hand, my training was put on a halt and in order to keep the momentum going, I started experimenting with creating collective sessions, where this point of transgression can be embodied and experimented in one way or another.

One experiment was done with the graduate year of 2015, during the Master Alumni Retreat in Bulgaria. The idea was something very simple: I asked them to shake to an hour-long techno session in any way they want, in any intensity they want, but without ever stopping. This was to see what effect an accessible, repetitive movement such as shaking, which can be tailored to everyone's individual capabilities, can produce. The session provided me with a lot of insight, and the rounds feedback afterwards helped me to contextualise how I can move away from the formulas of established movement practices (in this case athletic and dance practices), to a more complex and less literal domain.

The last experiment directly relating to these practices I just mentioned, was a session titled Interval Studies, which I hosted for a Hague-based research group made up of dancers, artists

and academics all engaged in working with the corporal realm. I was very interested in the different training intervals athletes use to cycle their training sessions, how the ratio of alternating between moments of rest and moments of work can act as a compositional tool to access certain effects in the body.

Throughout the session I made the group perform direct athletic exercises based on a selection of training intervals, followed by an experimental movement exercise, using the same interval. Since there was no preliminary corpus of information to build upon, the main goal was to make the first step in translating the chosen exercise intervals into experimental, movement-based exercises. The results and feedbacks gathered throughout the session should then be used as a base to construct further sessions.



The same way the phase of CONSUMPTION gives rise to DESIRE in order to make the leap onto SITUATION, SITUATION in itself is not a self-referential system, but rather a preparatory phase for PRODUCTION. How SITUATION is passing into PRODUCTION is not through the undirected DESIRE to transgress a threshold, but a directed, crafted perverse skill, which I refer to as DISCIPLINE.

DISCIPLINE is to put it short is the mastery of the skill that the training leads up to. It is the purposely customised body in relation to a certain goal. This shows everywhere, from the muscle composition of a wrestler, to the fine skills of a lock pick, to the combination skills of a theoretical physicist. The purpose of DISCIPLINE is that it allows the phase PRODUCTION to commence.

## ***Phase 3 - PRODUCTION***

The third phase, PRODUCTION is the phase that both CONSUMPTION and SITUATION are prospectively working towards. It is the moment, when the nurtured, trained and disciplined body is put to a test and where the true perversion of the external manifests. The ritual cycling of smaller auto-deaths in during the SITUATION phase merely act a simulation, a down-scaled rehearsal for the premier moment in PRODUCTION. What is different is that while the breaking points found in SITUATION are mostly still working with undefined matter of energy, in PRODUCTION the perversion of the external happens in a channeled and directed trajectory, due to the mastery of skills, or in other words: due to the DISCIPLINE wielded by the athlete / artist / alchemist.

If the energy in SITUATION would be an undefined block of steel to be melted and funnelled into a mould, the energy in PRODUCTION is the arrowhead crafted out of that steel, waiting to be put on target and shot. To use an outrageously masculine example.

Thought the experiments in SITUATION I was doing, I gained insight in how different actions of progressive cycling can be used to develop material, and it was a natural step from here to start thinking about what goal could this development thrive towards. The training systems in SITUATION are self-contained systems, and outside of their intended purpose they leave little to no room for expansion. I wanted to find a form, where while still keeping some of the governing principles found in my experiments, I could allow more open-ended, modular and complex environments of transformation.

By the end of my second semester at the Master's programme I came to choosing the form of *games* as my central point of focus. I came to this decision somewhere at the end of March, when sitting at a preliminary meeting of an experimental dancing studio. I found that games fit to be an organic continuation of my trajectory in the Master's, due to reasons I'll elaborate in my Research Dossier.

This is by far the most uncharted territory from all phases in my development. I'm still yet to understand the nature, the laws I need to take into account. Though I inevitably have expectations in what experience I'd like to get in and throughout working with games, I also realise that due to the empiric nature of my research I will not be able to even nearly grasp it's fundament until I actually *do it*.

With the phase of PRODUCTION a great number of external factors are added, that I have to take into account. Though while constructing my preliminary prototypes earlier this year I was merely focusing on structure and methodology, as well as my subjective locus, I realise that in order to take a step further, I have to start incorporating a great deal of aspects coming with PRODUCTION. That involving questions of aesthetics, of contextualisation, of engagement, of adaptability and of openness. Nevertheless the tasks ahead come off more exciting, than intimidating in their challenge.