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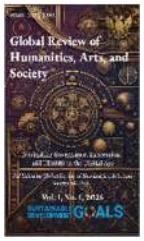
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Reconstructing the Body and Space: A Comparative Study of Biped and Xihe Jianqi in Digital Interactive Dance

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Abstract

This study explores how digital technology reshapes the aesthetics of dance performance by analyzing two representative works: *Biped* (1999) by Merce Cunningham and Xihe Jianqi (2020) produced by the China Dancers Association. Through a comparative framework, the research investigates the interaction between body, technology, space, narrative, and audience experience within digital interactive dance. While *Biped* utilizes motion capture and computer graphics to abstract and depersonalize the body in a non-narrative structure, Xihe Jianqi integrates LiDAR and depth-sensing technologies to create a poetic fusion of traditional Chinese sword dance and digital responsiveness. The study reveals that digital dance is not a singular aesthetic trend but manifests diverse cultural and philosophical approaches. Key findings highlight the dual role of technology as both an abstracting tool and an emotional medium, the reconfiguration of the stage as a responsive ecosystem, and the transformation of the audience from passive spectators to interactive participants. This research contributes to the discourse on digital performance by proposing a refined analytical model that integrates body, technology, and space, and offers a culturally grounded perspective on the evolution of digital dance aesthetics.

Keywords: digital dance, interactive performance, choreography and technology, Chinese aesthetics, audience experience

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Rationale and Objectives

As contemporary technological logic deeply influences human culture, the metaverse is gradually becoming a realistic model for digital living spaces. The technological dimension of artistic creation is significantly enriching the expressive language of dance art. Against this backdrop, the intervention of digital technology not only reconstructs the contextual space of stage performances but also provides new narrative frameworks for dance productions. As the interaction between technology and the human body creates new forms of digital expression distinct from traditional performances, the audience's experience of appreciation is also undergoing transformation. Therefore, studying the impact and application of digital technology on dance art holds significant importance in understanding the developmental trends of dance in the new media environment.

The development of the concept and practice of digital performance has shaped diverse aesthetic landscapes in contemporary new media dance. Modern art movements such as Futurism, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus were the first to propose the fusion of art and technology in the early 20th century, promoting interdisciplinary thinking and the advancement of cross-media narratives. These aesthetic strategies have provided a theoretical foundation for digital performance and are now widely applied in contemporary dance creation. However, current research has not sufficiently addressed how digital technology specifically intervenes in the dance creation process or how it affects the dynamics of performance. Therefore, this study aims to explore how digital technology shapes the narrative structures and audience experiences of contemporary dance performances by analyzing the aesthetic strategies of Futurism, Constructivism, and digital performance.

In the early 20th century, Futurism first emerged in Italy, and the publication of The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism (Manifesto del Futurismo) by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909 marked the official beginning of the movement. Marinetti, a poet and literary critic, created a wide range of works and spread Futurism globally, exerting a profound influence on subsequent avant-garde art movements.

With the emergence of new technologies following the Industrial Revolution, technological changes brought significant impacts to culture, perception, and modes of social production. Futurism emerged as an artistic movement in the midst of these rapid transformations and, as Dixon (2007) notes, "originated from a belief in and fascination with new technologies that fundamentally transform human life." The Futurists regarded mechanized

production, speed, and efficiency as symbols of a new era of civilization and argued that art, too, should be redefined according to the logic of technology.

The emergence of machines transformed the concept of time and efficiency for humans, leading society as a whole to pursue speed and power. As a result, the standards for artistic works and sensory experiences were also redefined. Futurism strongly criticized traditional art, calling for a break from existing forms and the creation of new artistic expressions that aligned with the spirit of the age. In the 21st century, dance art is experiencing a transitional phase of new aesthetic practices driven by the rapid advancement of digital technology. This shift goes beyond the mere expansion of stage devices as visual aids; it signifies a transformation in the performance ecosystem where the body and technology act as co-agents. Within this context, *Digital Interactive Dance* is emerging as a practical genre that dismantles the boundaries between art and technology, dance and algorithms, space and narrative.

Digital Interactive Dance challenges the formalism and body-centric focus of traditional dance by creating new sensory structures through a multimodal approach, multisensory feedback, and real-time interaction. This study aims to examine how the relationships between the body, space, and sensation are being restructured in technologically mediated environments by conducting a comparative analysis of two key works: Biped (1999) by Merce Cunningham and Xihe Jianqi (2020) by the China Dancers Association, both of which are considered core examples of this transformation.

1.1.1. Participants

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

- To explore the theoretical foundations of Digital Interactive Dance and analyze the interaction structure between body, technology, and space.
- To compare the use of technology, aesthetic strategies, and audience experiences presented in *Biped* and Xihe Jianqi.
- To present the artistic value and aesthetic potential of technology-mediated dance creation.

1.1.2. Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following key questions:

- In what ways do *Biped* and Xihe Jianqi integrate digital technology into dance?
- How does each work define the relationship between technology and the body?
- What aesthetic differences can be observed in the spatial composition and audience experience of the two works?

- How are traditional and contemporary, Eastern and Western aesthetics fused within the context of Digital Interactive Dance?

1.1.3. Research Methodology

Comparison, in this study, is not merely about listing the similarities and differences between two works but rather serves as an interpretive strategy that derives meaning, reveals structure, and constructs context (Bal, 1999). In the field of bodily arts such as dance, comparison enables the following:

- Analyzing how different cultures, eras, and technologies interpret and construct the body.
- Contextualizing and attributing meaning to abstract movement.
- Articulating the structure of audience experience (e.g., immersion, distance, participation).

Therefore, in this study, comparison functions not as a simple "quantitative comparison," but as a philosophical framework aimed at interpreting the aesthetic relationship between the body and technology with precision.

1.1.4. Limitations of the study

This study is based on the analysis of performance recordings of *Biped* and Xihe Jianqi. As such, certain aspects of the live performance experience and sensory immersion may be limited.

In-depth explanations of the specific algorithms or engineering principles behind the digital technologies used are beyond the scope of this study.

The analysis is grounded in the performances themselves and official documentation; primary sources such as interviews with the creators are not included.

While cultural contextual differences are duly considered, the primary focus remains on the technical and aesthetic compositional methods of dance creation.

2. Main Body

2.1 *Biped* Analysis: Abstraction and Visual Reconstruction of the Body through Motion Capture Technology

2.1.1 Overview and Background of the Work



Figure 1 《Biped》 performance scene

Merce Cunningham, a pioneer of 20th-century modern dance, expanded the philosophical concept of dance through his collaboration with composer John Cage. Their joint work introduced new artistic approaches such as chance operations, structural deconstruction, and non-narrative composition. Especially notable is *Biped* (1999), regarded as an early example of Cunningham's full integration of digital technology into the stage, innovatively merging choreographic language with real-time motion capture and computer graphics.

Biped premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in New York and was realized through collaboration with the Open Ended Group, led by Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar. They captured dancers' movements digitally and visualized them as various abstract lines, dots, and forms, thereby creating a new dimension of dance. This approach presented new possibilities for stage art through the fusion of dance and technology, leaving a significant impact on both the dance world and the broader art scene.

Cunningham and Cage's collaboration dissolved the boundaries between dance, music, and visual art, exploring artistic pluralism and the potential of interdisciplinary fusion. Their work opened new horizons in contemporary art and continues to inspire future generations of artists.

2.1.2 Choreographic Principle: Mechanical Abstraction and the De-Personalized Body

A key feature of *Biped* is the dual representation of the dancer's movement—as both the physical body on stage and its digital image. Dancers perform behind a screen placed at the front of the stage, and their movements are transformed by computer into visual graphics projected on the front screen. The audience thus experiences both the "real body" and the "virtual body" simultaneously.

This structure aligns with Cunningham's philosophy of "chance operations and aesthetic distancing." He believed that "movement does not need to convey meaning," and in *Biped*, the body is presented not as a narrative symbol but as a purely structural unit (Kozel, 2007).

Moreover, by representing dancers as "abstracted entities," the work encourages audiences to move away from traditional human-centered emotional identification. This reflects a concept of the de-personalized body and reposes a philosophical question in dance: "Who is dancing?" "Technology does not merely represent the body, but functions as a structure that composes it." (Popat, 2011)

2.1.3 Technological Strategy: Motion Capture and Data Visualization

The technology used in *Biped* was highly innovative for the late 1990s. The Open Ended Group collected real-time data through sensors attached to the dancers' joints, and through various algorithms, transformed that data into lines, dots, silhouettes, and grid structures. These digital forms extended beyond the physical stage to construct an "abstract space."

Kozel (2007) interprets this as "an extended expression of the body mediated by technology," and analyzes the balance between bodily materiality and digital language as central to the work. Importantly, technology in *Biped* functions not as a secondary tool, but as a primary artistic agent—establishing a foundational model for future digital dance creation. "Biped is the first dance in which technology enters not merely as a tool but as an aesthetic subject." (Dixon, 2007)

2.1.4 Spatial Composition and the Reconfiguration of the Gaze

Biped also features a distinctive stage setup. The dancers perform behind a screen, while the audience receives visual information through front projection. As a result, the audience's gaze constantly shifts between physical space (the body) and virtual space (the data), absorbing layered meanings within a "superimposed stage."

This breaks away from the traditional proscenium stage format of modern dance and transitions into a space of multi-perception. Digital choreography prevents the audience's gaze from remaining fixed and instead offers a constantly readjusting experience of time and space.

Popat (2011) emphasizes the interactivity of internet-based dance, explaining that the connectivity between choreographer and audience transcends the norms of traditional staging to create new flows of participation.

Dixon (2007) observes that in digital performance, "the audience exists within multilayered images, real-time movement, and technological temporality, resulting in a simultaneous disruption of visual perception and reality recognition."

2.1.5 Characteristics of Audience Experience: Distance, Abstraction, and Sensory Reconstruction

The audience experience in *Biped* leans more toward formal and intellectual immersion than emotional absorption. Its abstract visual language invites structural exploration over emotional narrative, drawing attention to the formal elements of movement—such as lines, spacing, and trajectories—echoing the non-formal tendencies pursued in modern dance.

Notably, the asynchronous relationship between the digital imagery and the dancers' real-time performance introduces intentional misalignments and gaps, prompting

the audience to engage in sensory reconstruction. This "aesthetics of dissonance" simultaneously reflects the experimental spirit of modern dance and the innovative nature of technological performance.

2.1.6 Scholarly Significance

Biped is considered one of the first works to demonstrate a mode of creation in which technology and art collaborate as equals. The body is no longer limited to a physical entity; it expands into a datafied body, a sculptural body, and formless movement.

This work proves that technological media can function as a central meaning-making agent in artistic creation and has profoundly influenced all subsequent developments in digital dance.

2.2 Xihe Jianqi Analysis: The Poetic Fusion of Chinese Traditional Dance and Digital Technology

2.2.1 Overview and Creative Background of the Work



Figure 2. A scene from the performance of *Xihe Jianqi*.

Xihe Jianqi is a digital interactive dance performance produced in 2020 under the supervision of the China Dancers Association and the Literature and Art Center for Martial Arts. It features a modern reinterpretation of traditional sword dance (jianwu) combined with digital technology. The performance utilizes LiDAR and depth cameras to capture the dancer's movements in real time, transforming them into digital natural imagery (such as landscapes, waves, and light lines) projected onto the stage. This creates an interactive system where the dancer's movements act as triggers for the visual effects.

This work is considered a pioneering example of integrating technology and emotion, drawing on the traditional Chinese dance aesthetics of yijing (artistic conception) and xingyi (form-intent), and harmonizing Eastern spatial philosophy with digital visuality (Tian Tian, 2019).

2.2.2 Stage and Technological Structure: Real-Time Interaction between Body, Technology, and Space

Xihe Jianqi departs from traditional stage structures by turning the entire performance area into an interactive detection space. The depth camera captures the dancer's body contours and movement speed in real time, while the floor-mounted LiDAR calculates distance and direction to generate digital data. This data is then immediately converted into visual imagery through pre-designed algorithms, causing mountains to rise, waves to ripple, and light to scatter in response to the dancer's sword swings, jumps, and spins.

This spatial setup functions not merely as decorative background but as a "living interface" that responds to movement. The dancer expands the body within this technological environment and communicates sensorially (Liu Chun, 2018).

2.2.3 Digital Interpretation of Chinese Traditional Aesthetics

Xihe Jianqi does not simply incorporate digital technology; it reconstructs the aesthetic of yijingmei (the beauty of artistic conception) in a digital sensory context. The following traditional aesthetic concepts are embedded in the dance:

- Xing (form): Basic sword dance movements, the external shape and rhythm of the body
- Yi (intent): Internal emotions and the flow of spirit, directionality of movement
- Jing (realm): Poetic space created through stage visuals and lighting

These three concepts combine with digital visual elements in a cyclical structure—xing reveals yi, yi forms jing. For example, when the dancer spins and raises the sword, the background visuals evoke an image of a mountain rising, symbolizing concentrated energy. This provides the audience with not just visual stimulation but an emotional narrative and a connection with the natural world."The goal of Eastern dance is not to dominate space but to become one with it." (Shuzhen Gao, 2015)

2.2.4 Embodiment Strategies: Integration of Traditional Technique and Digital Responsiveness

In Xihe Jianqi, the dancer's body functions not merely as a medium for movement but as a key that generates the digital world. Sword dance emphasizes precision, balance, and flowing lines, which, when combined with digital triggers, turn the dancer's body into a brush painting digital imagery.

This body is no longer a traditional human-centered "dancer" but a responsive interface that co-resonates with technology. (Tian Tian, 2020) analyzed this as "an artistic ecosystem in which body, technology, and environment are

unified," stating that "the dancer is not the master of technology, but a conduit of resonance working in harmony with it."

2.2.5 Temporality and Narrative Structure: Flow-Centered Poetic Composition

Xihe Jianqi does not follow a clear dramatic plot or storyline. Instead, it forms a narrative through the flow of nature, the breath of martial arts, and the rhythm of emotion. This reflects the "poetic narrative" structure of Eastern art, in which time is not linear but cyclical and wave-like.

The central motif of the piece follows "the energy of the sword cutting through mountains, circling water, and returning to stillness." This mirrors the cycles of the universe, the integration of humans and nature, and the Daoist worldview of harmony.

2.2.6 Audience Experience: The Aesthetics of Immersion and Resonance

Audiences do not simply "watch" Xihe Jianqi; they resonate with it. Real-time interaction produces layered visual-auditory-spatial responses, stimulating the audience's senses multidimensionally. The connection is not built through emotional identification, but through "sensory resonance."

Unlike the Western theatrical model, this experience aligns with the Eastern tradition of gan-ying (aesthetics of resonance), where the boundary between stage and audience becomes blurred, and the performance is experienced as a living flow "The audience does not merely see the dance with their eyes but senses it with their whole body." (Jing'an Xu,2012)

2.2.7 Academic Significance

Xihe Jianqi holds the following academic value:

- It successfully presents a fusion model of traditional dance and digital technology.
- It realizes a new form of embodiment where the dancer's body functions as a data trigger.
- It transforms Eastern aesthetics (*yijing*, poetic narrative, non-verbal storytelling) into digital sensory experiences, creating a new performance form that integrates sensation, emotion, and nature.

2.3 Comparative Analysis of the Two Works: A Multidimensional Convergence of Technology, Body, Space, and Audience Experience

2.3.1 Differences in Technological Application: Experimental Abstraction vs. Poetic Responsiveness

While *Biped* and Xihe Jianqi both adopt cutting-edge technologies, their approach to using technology as an artistic language fundamentally differs.

Biped, created in the late 1990s during the early phase of technological experimentation, uses technology as a visual tool and a material for formal exploration. Motion capture abstracts the body to generate new visual rhythms, with technology functioning as a dance language in itself (Dixon, 2007).

Xihe Jianqi, based on the advanced sensing technologies of the 2020s (LiDAR, depth cameras), uses technology as a medium for emotional storytelling. Technology transforms the "meaning" of movement into visual imagery, extending the dancer's expression into a digital visual space. Here, technology acts as a "digital brush" that paints the emotional tone of the work (Tian Tian, 2020).

2.3.2 Differences in Embodiment Strategies: Depersonalization vs. Symbolization

The two works reflect differing philosophical and aesthetic approaches to the representation of the body.

Biped disassembles the body into abstract data units, removing individuality and emotion, and emphasizing the structure of "pure movement." This aligns with the modern dance trend of "depersonalization" and focuses on form rather than symbolic expression (Popat, 2011).

In contrast, Xihe Jianqi centers on traditional concepts of *yi* (intent) and *qi* (energy). Each movement in the sword dance symbolizes inner emotion, natural flow, and cosmic harmony. The body functions not just as a tool but as a symbol-laden medium conveying spiritual messages (Gao Shuzhen, 2015).

2.3.3 Differences in Spatial Composition: Layered Visuality vs. Immersive Space

The two works also contrast sharply in their use of stage space.

Biped presents a dual-stage structure where the real body and projected image are separated. This duality induces a mixed perception for the audience, with space remaining an object of observation (Kozel, 2007).

In Xihe Jianqi, the stage is designed as a responsive system. The entire space visually reacts to the dancer's movements, drawing the audience into the space sensorially. This reflects the characteristics of immersive interactive environments, dissolving the boundary between performance and audience (Liu Chun, 2018).

2.3.4 Differences in Audience Experience: Contemplative Viewing vs. Resonant Immersion

The two works offer distinct experiences in terms of

audience perception and emotional involvement.

Biped invites the audience into a distanced, analytical engagement. The asynchrony between movement and visuals and the abstract imagery encourage structural reflection over emotional immersion.

Xihe Jianqi draws the audience into the emotional flow of the performance. With integrated visuals, lighting, and sound, the audience experiences emotional resonance within the spatial vibration."The audience does not see the dance with their eyes but senses it with their whole body." (Xu Jing'an, 2012)

2.3.5 Comparative Summary Table

Table 1

Category	Biped	Xihe Jianqi
Production Year	1999	2020
Technological Approach	Motion capture + computer graphics	LiDAR + depth camera + real-time trigger
Body Aesthetics	Abstraction, depersonalization, non-narrative	Symbolization, emotionalization, poetic expression
Spatial Composition	Dual projection, layered visual structure	Responsive stage, immersive space
Audience Experience	Contemplative, analysis-oriented	Immersive, resonance-oriented
Aesthetic Foundation	American modern dance, formalism	Chinese traditional aesthetics, naturalism
Narrative Strategy	None, chance-based structure	Poetic narrative based on natural flow

2.3.6 Scholarly Significance of the Comparative Analysis

The comparison between the two works sheds light on the following academic issues in the field of digital dance:

Dual tendencies in techno-aesthetics: *Biped* uses technology as a tool for abstraction, while Xihe Jianqi uses it as a medium for emotional expression, showcasing the diversity within technological aesthetics.

Reconstruction of the body: While modern dance tends to deconstruct and depersonalize the body, Eastern approaches interpret the body as a medium that connects emotion and nature.

Transformation of spatial perception: Technology not only expands visuality but fundamentally alters the experience of space itself.

Shift in the viewer's role: The audience is no longer a passive observer but becomes a resonant and responsive presence.

3. Conclusion and Suggestions

3.1 Research Summary and Key Findings

This study conducted a comparative analysis of two representative works that integrate digital technology and dance—Merce Cunningham's *Biped* and the Chinese digital interactive piece Xihe Jianqi—to academically examine how the body, space, narrative, and sensory experience are reconstructed within technological environments.

While both works integrate digital technology into dance art, the analysis revealed that they adopt fundamentally different strategies in their use of technology, bodily expression, audience experience, and spatial composition.

Table 2

Category	Biped	Xihe Jianqi
Purpose of Technology	Formal experimentation, abstraction of the body	Emotional representation, enhancement of narrative
Concept of the Body	Depersonalized, data-driven structure	Responsive medium, cultural symbol
Spatial Composition	Separated video and stage	Integrated interactive stage
Audience Experience	Structure-oriented, contemplative	Sensory-oriented, immersive

This comparison confirms that digital dance is not a singular trend but is practiced within diverse cultural and philosophical contexts.

3.2 Comprehensive Response to the Research Questions

- **There is no single way to integrate digital technology into dance.**

Technology can serve as a tool for abstraction or a medium for emotional narrative. It holds the potential to function as an artistic language within dance itself (Dixon, 2007; Kozel, 2007).

- **The body holds multiple roles within technological environments.**

In *Biped*, the body is a geometric unit of composition, while in Xihe Jianqi, it acts as a medium connecting emotion and nature. The philosophy of dance shifts

depending on how technology "reads" the body.

- **The stage is evolving from a physical background to a responsive device.**

Interactive technology redefines the stage as a multi-layered space-time in which the dancer, audience, and technology resonate together.

- **The audience is becoming a participant.**

Technology transforms the viewer from a passive observer into an active co-creator of meaning through interaction with the work.

3.3 Academic Contributions

This study offers the following academic contributions:

- By applying comparative analysis methodology, it explores how the integration of technology and art is realized across different cultural codes.
- Through the interpretive framework of body–technology–space, it refines the understanding of relationships between core elements in digital performance.
- From the perspective of digital dance based on Eastern aesthetics, it proposes a regional alternative to the Western-centric discourse on digital art.

3.4 Practical Suggestions

3.4.1 For Creators:

Technology should be understood not as a tool but as a creative partner. Beyond visual effects, there is a need for choreographic designs where technology actively participates in narrative structure, bodily movement, and emotional flow.

3.4.2 For Educators

Dance education should go beyond physical training to include digital literacy. Basic understanding of AR, VR, motion capture, and interface design can expand the dancer's expressive capabilities.(Kozel, 2007.)

3.4.3 For Researchers

There is a need for multidisciplinary research models capable of comprehensively analyzing the fusion of body, technology, media, narrative, and space. Dance criticism should expand beyond emotional interpretation to include technical analysis and cultural interpretation.

3.4.5 Future Research Directions

- Artistic impact of AI-based automated choreography systems and dancer interaction

- Implementation methods and body representation in digital performance within metaverse environments
- Audience immersion design using interactive sensory interfaces
- Critical approaches to the digital preservation and retouching of traditional dance

3.4.6 Connection to Course Objectives

This study closely reflects the following course goals:

- **Exploration of artistic meaning through comparative analysis:**

By comparing the aesthetics, technological strategies, and audience experiences of the two works, it interprets the multifaceted meanings of digital dance.

- **Development of the ability to express dance in language:**

By structuring the non-verbal art of dance into academic language, it fosters the ability to speak and write about dance.

- **Strengthening critical thinking as a dance researcher/artist:**

By exploring the theoretical foundation that connects creation and research, it builds a bridge between academic study and practical application.

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