

Choreographing Proximity Choreographic Tools For Exploring Intimacy In Digital Platforms

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Abstract

This article explores how choreography can serve as a critical framework for analysing and intervening in the affective economies of digital platforms. Building on André Lepecki's notion of choreography as a "technique designed to capture actions," it is examined as a medium that abstracts movement into data, enabling further technical or creative processes. Drawing on theories from dance studies, media theory, and affect theory, this article examines choreography's capacity to expose, modulate, and reconfigure proximity and distance. It explores how affect, gaze, and movement are governed, simulated, and potentially subverted within platform cultures. The argument is grounded in case studies ranging from Mette Ingvartsen's performance 50/50 to Candela Capitán's SOLAS. These examples illuminate how bodies and affects are choreographed not only on stage but within digital architectures, offering tools to think against the commodification of intimacy.

Introduction

Imagine scrolling through your Instagram feed and stumbling upon a girl: her face fills the screen, she seems to be impossibly close. She holds your gaze, maintaining eye contact as if she sees you. Her smile is disarming. You notice her cute cheek dimples and feel hypnotised. It draws you in and makes you feel seen, as if this gaze is meant only for you. She creates a sense of presence that is almost uncomfortably intimate, leveraging the illusion of proximity to connect with her thousands of followers. On platforms like Instagram or OnlyFans, the *production of proximity* becomes a conspicuous tool for creating intimacy, often blurring boundaries between public performance and private connection.

Emerging technologies are multiplying the ways in which proximity is produced, often by simulating emotional presence and connection. Services for video conferences, such as NVIDIA Maxine, offer real-time gaze correction and facial expression adjustments to create a sense of attentiveness. Deepfake tools like DeepFaceLab and Wav2Lip generate hyperrealistic facial expressions and precise lip-syncing, making pre-recorded or altered content appear convincingly authentic. Most recently, video generation models such as OpenAI's Sora can produce lifelike gestures, facial cues, and subtle emotional inflexions, further blurring the line between scripted performance and spontaneous, affective interaction.

Intimacy is not just present on the Web – it is thoroughly constructed through strategic self-presentation, continuous engagement, and the creation of affective bonds that simulate closeness. It becomes particularly evident in affective platforms with erotic content, where proximity is not just simulated but commodified. For instance, an OnlyFans content creator may establish a sense of intimacy by creating a digital morning-after scene to evoke a sense of proximity, ultimately directing the viewer towards engagement with monetised content. However, as Kaufman, Gesselman and Bennett-Brown observe in their analysis of cam sites, clients often experience this affective labour as 'real' (2). This closeness is perceived by viewers as "authentic," even though it is produced through a specific choreography of affect, gesture, and gaze that aligns with platform economies.

The production of proximity has been increasingly instrumentalised not only for commodification but also for the circulation of reactionary political affects. With the rise of AI-driven technologies, affective interfaces now simulate intimacy with growing precision, intensifying the manipulation of attention and further entrenching users within ideologically charged affective economies.

In *The Digital Subject: People as Data as Persons*, Olga Goriunova coins the term *digital subject* to describe new forms of subject construction constituted through data, including social media profiles, browsing history, and mobile phone positioning records, as well as biometric and facial recognition inputs. This concept captures the entanglement of biological characteristics, legal frameworks and performed

identities. In the context of digital intimacy, shaped both by bloggers and by technologies such as gaze correction, face tracking, deepfakes, and AI-generated videos, the digital subject is formed using data abstracted from the body, including eye movements, smiles, voice, and posture. These emotional gestures are transformed into patterns that can be manipulated, animated, and replayed. According to Goriunova, the idea of distance is central to understanding the digital subject, as it possesses ontological instability, occupying neither the space of lived human experience nor its representation but exists as a *distance between the two* (5). In her article, Goriunova also warns against assuming an equivalence between “digital subjects and the humans, entities, and processes they are connected to” (5). She argues that distance becomes an urgent political issue when digital subjects are “constructed not only to sell products but also to imprison, medically treat, or discriminate against individuals” (7).

To respond to Goriunova’s political call to confront the erasure of distance, I propose to explore the *distance* and the *production of proximity* through the seemingly marginal yet conceptually rich lens of choreography. Here, choreography is understood not merely as dance movement but as a conceptual tradition that engages with the creative and critical potentialities of algorithmic thinking. Building on André Lepecki’s notion of choreography as a “technique designed to capture actions” (Lepecki “Choreography and Pornography”), I examine it as a medium that abstracts movement into data. Viewing choreography as a framework for the production of proximity prompts us to consider how algorithmic structures are embodied and practised, echoing Andrew Hewitt’s concept of choreography as embodied ideologies, which are ways in which social order is enacted physically (Hewitt 11). Through this lens, I explore how choreographic thinking might offer not only tools for critical engagement with the mechanisms of proximity production, so central to platform culture, but also strategies for repurposing them, enabling the digital body to become something more than a local embodiment of ideology (Massumi 3).

In this text, I will focus on two perspectives on choreography: first, as a historical technology for representing societal hierarchies by managing affects, distance, and proximity through steps, posture, and collective movement patterns; and second, as a set of strategies developed in contemporary dance to address the abstraction of movement into data, to reframe the choreographic score, and to critically engage with affect. In addressing the concept of affect, I follow the tradition of affect theory articulated by Deleuze and Guattari and developed further by Brian Massumi, as well as its elaboration within choreographic discourse by Bojana Cvejić.

Choreography As An Approach

Long before algorithms learned to track our eye contact or simulate our smiles, there was already a technology for scripting bodies – choreography – organising limbs, timing gestures, and composing presence in highly coded ways. Flourished as

a Louis XIV court practice of political control, choreography, a tool of writing down movement, could also be observed as a "technique designed to capture actions" (Lepecki, "Choreography and Pornography"), a medium that abstracts movement into data, enabling further technical or creative processes. By abstracting bodily movement into data, choreography transforms it into systems of control and knowledge production, shaping behaviour by training bodies to perform socially acceptable identities.

In one of the early dance manuals, *Orchésographie: A Treatise in the Form of a Dialogue. Whereby All May Easily Learn and Practice the Honourable Exercise of Dancing* (1589), Thoinot Arbeau introduces an *orchésographie* (where *orchésis* – dance) as a written form of dance knowledge transmission. The manual unfolds as a dialogue between a young lawyer, Capriol, and Arbeau himself, offering detailed descriptions of 16th-century and earlier dance forms. Through this textual format, dance is transformed into codified knowledge. The written score abstracts movement from the living body, creating a distance between embodied performance and its data-like representation.

As André Lepecki argues, with the invention of its written form, dance possesses a spectral dimension: by being written down as choreography, it becomes a medium that conjures the presence of an absent dance master (Lepecki, "Exhausting Dance" 28). In this sense, the choreographic score does not just preserve movement – it animates bodies across time, allowing historical authority and disciplinary regimes to speak through the dancer. "In Orchesographie, a young lawyer returns from Paris to Langres to visit his old master of "computation (...) Capriol asks for dance lessons to attain what Erving Goffman called a socially acceptable "performance of the self" – a performance that would give the young lawyer admission into social theatrics, into society's normative heterosexual dancing" (25). During the Baroque era, choreography evolved further, functioning as a tool of propaganda (Maravall). By codifying steps, postures, and sequences, dance emphasised symmetry and control, aligning the disciplined body with a higher spiritual or intellectual order. As Susan McClary, referring to Robert Isherwood stressed, Louis XIV used dance as a source of political control "to regulate – indeed, to synchronise – the bodies and behaviours of his courtiers" (McClary 89).

Similarly, digital data is aggregated today to mobilise bodies within a fluid logic of surveillance capitalism. In this sense, *choreography and algorithms both function as technologies of subject formation*, conditioning our behaviours and interactions in increasingly automated ways.

Lepecki's idea that choreography "socialises with the spectral" helps us think through how the digital subject is haunted by the idea of presence, even when the body is absent, the subject must appear available, coherent, and even emotionally attuned. Through this lens, we can think of algorithmic media as staging choreographies of presence—Zoom backgrounds, auto-eye contact tools, and real-

time filters all simulate spontaneity and emotional availability, much like how baroque dancers rehearsed “natural” grace.

Dance Strategies

By the 20th century, modern and later contemporary dance sought to liberate movement and the body from the codifying constraints of choreography understood as a technology that produces societal hierarchies by regulating affect, distance, and proximity through steps, posture, and collective movement patterns. From Isadora Duncan’s praise of free movement to postmodern dance’s passion for improvisation, choreographers have historically resisted the rigid legacy of court dance and ballet in favour of spontaneous self-expression and embodied freedom. In problematizing the very notion of choreography, they developed diverse strategies for subverting established structures, often creating new modes of emotional connection with the audience. These strategies offer some insights into the production of proximity and its affective charge, making them particularly relevant in the context of today’s digitally mediated cultures.

In *Choreographing Problems*, Bojana Cvejić outlines a compelling genealogy of how dance has theorised sensation, emotion, and affect, from the emotionalism of the modern dance tradition, where performing and perceiving movement are inherently tied to emotional expression and kinesthetic empathy, to more critical and experimental engagements with affect in contemporary choreographic practices. The idea of the movement as an emotional act of expression of true self, one that binds the spectator to the performance through empathy, was central to the work of iconic choreographer Martha Graham and her critic and advocate John Martin. Their ideas later informed the practice of the *Authentic Movement*, which treated movement as the expression of an inner life. As Cvejić notes, in this tradition, emotional proximity between performer and audience was thought to emerge from “an emotional experience of one’s own body and its freedom of movement, a value dance was believed to hold for its viewers” (162). However, postmodern dance explicitly broke with this conception, seeking to dissociate choreography from dance by disrupting what Cvejić calls “the onto-historically foundational bind between the body and movement” (17). Here, movement is no longer the natural expression of interiority, but an object in its own right.

In the clash between two ideas about movement – the one is that movement is an expression of the true self, and the other is that movement is not a reflection of interiority but its own thing, a new approach has emerged. In her performance *50/50*, a Danish contemporary choreographer, Mette Ingvarsten investigates the composition of affect, positing the question of whether affect can be deliberately constructed and artistically produced. In *50/50*, she works with an interplay of movement and sound borrowed from semiotically distinct expressive forms and clashes them into a specific affective object. Thus, in one of the scenes, Ingvarsten rhythmically moves her buttocks mirroring a drumroll with extreme precision, to create the illusion that the drummer is playing directly on her body. As the rhythm

accelerates, the movement becomes a visceral vibration, and the pulsating body dissolves the distinction between stimulus and response. Motion and sound appear to merge, or even reverse roles. This synesthetic fusion intensifies the experience: sound is visually amplified, and movement becomes aurally charged (Cvejić 174-175). Ingvarsten's experiments with affect in 50/50 parallel Brian Massumi's analysis of Ronald Reagan, who, as Massumi argues, generated ideological effects through non-ideological, but affective means. In both cases, affect is not tied to explicit content but operates through a kind of abstractive suspense – multiple sensorial or expressive registers resonating in parallel to produce an intensity that exceeds rational articulation (Massumi 41).

In her reading of Ingvarsten's performance, Cvejić approaches affects as "synesthetic events that exist autonomously, neither only in the body of the performer, nor only in the perception of the attender" (194). Drawing on genealogy from Spinoza to Deleuze and Guattari, Cvejić conceptualises affect as impersonal – detached from the subject's interiority (168). She also shows affects can be composed by choreographing sensorial materials and appropriated styles of performance (rock concert, opera, pantomime). For the analysis of the production of proximity, I find Bojana Cvejić's argument for a constructivist composition of affect particularly fruitful. It offers a valuable lens for speculating on the affective techniques employed by platforms. This approach allows us to interrogate how affect is composed and how bodies, movement and choreography become integral to this construction.

In Mette Ingvarsten's work, movement is treated not as a vehicle for personal expression; but rather as a system of discrete units – gestures, postures, rhythms – that can be abstracted, recomposed, algorithmicised and choreographed to generate affect. This resembles the logics of services for video conferencing, deepfake tools, and AI video generation technologies, in which gestures, facial expressions, and vocal inflections – are broken down into measurable variables, recombining them to create realistic simulations of proximity. Crucially, however, Ingvarsten's choreography does not replicate this logic in order to reinforce ideological capture; instead, it seeks to expose and reconfigure the affective mechanisms underlying such processes. By rendering the dynamics of distance and proximity manipulable and visible, such practices of choreographing affect might serve as a framework for critically examining how platforms shape attention, behavior, and embodied interaction. Through abstraction, recomposition, and the deliberate misuse of platform grammars, these choreographic strategies open space for friction, distance, and critical reflection—providing potential counter-strategies within systems designed for affective capture and behavioral control.

While Ingvarsten's work demonstrates how choreographic strategies can be used to critically and creatively compose affect, sparking the imagination for its potential applications for platform cultures, Candela Capitán, another contemporary choreographer, engages with digital intimacy, bringing us back to the notion of distance as articulated by Goriunova.

In SOLAS digital intimacy production techniques are explored from a detached, bird's-eye perspective. On stage, five performers in tight pink suits each perform an erotic solo in front of their laptops, evoking the setup of webcam models. Simultaneously, the solos are broadcast live to an audience via the Chaturbate platform. Capitán reveals the gap between the digital subject and the labour that sustains it, making this distance strikingly palpable. By exposing the fractured connections and isolating conditions of digital performance, SOLAS lays bare the mechanisms through which intimacy is manufactured, commodified, and consumed in virtual spaces. Candela's critical gesture is achieved by revealing living bodies behind digital subjects. By foregrounding the performers' corporeal presence, it insists on the presence of the body as essential for critique in the age of algorithmic mediation.

The performance also invites us to speculate on choreographic interventions within digital platforms. What kinds of artistic strategies might be developed as online practices to reconfigure the digital body so that it becomes more than an embodiment of ideology? How might proximity, attention, and affect be repurposed as aesthetic and political tools for critical engagement and disruption within the platforms?

Thus, choreography becomes not merely a metaphor but a critical method for analysing digital intimacy and the affective architecture of platforms. It can function as a critical lens, a performative practice, and a tactical intervention within platforms and outside them. This choreographic perspective allows us to critically examine the mechanics of digital intimacy and mediated presence while also opening space to imagine interventions into platform architectures themselves.

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Biography

Daria Iuriichuk is a dance artist, researcher, and educator based in Berlin. Her work explores the political dimensions of performativity, infrastructural critique, and body politics. In her most recent research and artistic projects, she explores choreography as a medium that abstracts movement into data, enabling further technical or creative processes. Her works have been presented at the MyWildFlag festival (Stockholm), neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst (nGbK, Berlin), Hellerau Europäisches Zentrum der Künste (Dresden), H0 Institut für Metamorphose festival (Zürich), and the Meyerhold Theatre Center (Moscow). She is also a co-founder of *Girls in Scores*, a collaborative project with Polina Fenko, focused on artistic research at the intersection of media studies and expanded choreography.