

Abstract: This chapter explores competitive street dance crew choreography in relation to interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks regarding virtuosity and excess. Through a close analysis of five performances featured on the British television talent shows of *Britain's Got Talent* and *Got to Dance*, this chapter examines the concept of virtuosity as transcendence in relation to the continued emphasis on technology and the street dance body. Through the choreographic application of animation techniques, synchronicity, the construction of “meta-bodies,” and the narrative of ordinary versus extraordinary, this chapter reveals that crews create the illusion of transgression through their affinity with technology, while also competing with their cinematic counterparts. Through this analysis, this chapter further reveals the negotiation between the individualistic nature of the virtuoso and the crew collective within the neoliberal capitalist framework of the competition.

Keywords: animation; choreography; competition; meta-bodies; neoliberal; street dance; technology; television talent show; virtuosity

Chapter 7

Above and Beyond the Battle

Virtuosity and Collectivity within Televised Street Dance Crew Competitions

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If you believe in superheroes, we are those superheroes, in real life, on stage, right now.

—Mark “Swarfe” Calape, *A Team* (2011)

In keeping with the dramatic trope of the television talent show, Calape’s pre-performance interview hypes up the *A Team*’s pending audition. Through his affinity with superhuman beings, Calape prepares the home television viewer for the extreme physical stunts they are about to witness and frames the crew’s competitive performance through the idea of human bodies transcending their material capabilities. Calape does not disappoint. Eight males in trench coats curiously toy with playing cards, while a lone girl waits in the center, wearing an oversized T-shirt emblazoned with an *A*. To an atmospheric soundtrack, the crew executes tightly controlled floor slides, shifts in body weight, quick flexes of the arms, and slow and smooth turns in carbon-copy unison. The camera cuts between medium close-up shots of the individual dancers and wide group shots to capture both the intricate labor of each dancer and the perfectly timed group syncopation. A sharp change in tempo, accompaniment, and the removal of trench coats signals a harder dynamic. Two dancers perform identical aerial corkscrews downstage, and are quickly followed by all nine dancers executing an aerial backflip in precise unison. Stunt after stunt follows, leaving judge Adam Garcia holding his head in his hands, while judge Kimberley Wyatt stares open-mouthed, with hands dangling in

disbelief. As a finale, one dancer performs over six identical “windmills” in time with the repetitive electronic soundtrack, while the rest of the crew encircles the lone performer.¹

The crew comes to a controlled finish in contrast with the previous corporeal pyrotechnics, slowly rising from a crouched position as the music fades. The judging panel jumps into a standing ovation and the studio audience screams with approval.

In the context of televised street dance crew competitions, the A Team is not alone in creating the illusion of enhanced corporeal beings through choreographic display. Through tightly controlled and highly labored performances, street dance crews on television talent shows, such as the British *Got to Dance* (GTD; 2009–2014) and *Britain’s Got Talent* (BGT; 2007–present), and the US series *America’s Best Dance Crew* (2008–2012, 2015), push the boundaries of the physically possible into the realm of fantasy.² Human attributes of pain and exhaustion are replaced by machine-like invincibility and, for two and a half minutes, dancers transform the constructed persona of the “ordinary” television talent show worker into the mythic, the invincible, and the virtuosic. These explosive performances provoke both physical and emotional affective reactions in the judging panel and studio audience, as bodies appear to defy gravitational limitations and execute strict uniformity, rapid speeds, and physical dexterity in a variety of hip-hop dance styles.³

With crews continuously testing the limitations of their corporeality through these competitions, these screen dance choreographies therefore raise three key questions that I explore within this chapter: First, how is virtuosity defined in the context of competitive televised street dance choreography? Second, what are the ways in which crews create the illusion of corporeal transcendence? And third, how does the collective virtuosity of

the crew operate in relation to discourses of virtuosity as the epitome of individual excellence? To explore these questions, I provide a close analysis of five televised street dance crew performances featured on British television talent shows: Peridot's semi-final performance on *BGT* (Peridot 2010); Flawless's audition performance on *BGT* (Flawless 2009); Diversity's final performance on *BGT* (Diversity 2009); Ruff Diamond's semi-final performance on *GTD* (Ruff Diamond 2013; and the A Team's audition, as previously described. In conversation with interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks regarding virtuosity and excess, I consider these concepts in relation to the continued emphasis on technology and the street dance body, or, as I propose, the technocorporeality of the choreography. In particular, I focus on the application of animation techniques, synchronicity, and the construction of "meta-bodies" within these choreographies, while also considering the televisual treatment of the crews within the neoliberal cultural economy of the competition. Prior to the dance analysis, I commence with a discussion of the relationship between dance and competition, followed by an exploration of virtuosity in relation to dance practice and, specifically, hip-hop dance culture.

Dance and Competition

The placement of vernacular dance styles within sporting codes of competition and organization shifts both intention and reception. Ethnomusicologist Amy Stillman's (1996) and anthropologist Frank Hall's (2008) respective studies of hula dance and Irish dance competitions reveal a dynamic shift in the aesthetic of the style to achieve the associated commodities of trophies, prizes, and visual exposure. In hula dance competitions, greater emphasis is placed on visual display rather than the musical and

poetic elements of the form, and dancers contend with “increased demands for physical fitness and body conditioning, even bodybuilding,” due to the increased demand for physical feats and athletic displays in the competition (Stillman 1996, 373). Irish dance competitors aim to “outdo” previous years’ winning routines with more complex footwork and elevation, while the embodiment of “Irishness” becomes secondary to visual spectacle (Hall 2008).

Similarly, the incorporation of hip-hop dance practices in the commercial competitive format of the television talent show shifts emphasis from the “corporeal orature” of the style, as described by dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz (2004, 76), to an emphasis on spatial formation and outward execution.⁴ In its vernacular origins, the competitive nature of breaking fueled the virtuosic elements of the performance, creating multiple head spins, physically precarious power moves, such as the windmill or the suicide, and an ever-increasing velocity and ferociousness (Toop 2000).⁵ This desire to defy the limitations of the body through physical skill and athletic prowess is further enhanced by the placement of the mediated street dance body in a crew format and competitive framework.

Despite the continued academic focus on solo hip-hop dance practice operating in the spatial construction of the group cypher (Banes 1985, 2004; DeFrantz, 2004; Hazzard-Gordon 1996; Rose 1994), hip-hop and funk dance styles have a strong history situated in group or crew formations. These groupings include the Lockers and the Electric Boogaloos performing on *Soul Train* (1971–2006) in the early 1970s, competitive b-boy crews such as the Rock Steady Crew and the New York City Breakers, and the geometric formations of Michael Jackson and Janet Jackson’s back-up dancers

(Lockerlegends 2011). In the context of reality television in the United Kingdom, the Kombat Breakers' appearance on *BGT* in 2007, followed by the high-profile win of Diversity on *BGT* in May 2009, led to street dance crews becoming part of the fabric of British television talent show competitions. Over fifty duet, trio, and group performances were recorded between 2008 and 2013, and crews such as Diversity, Flawless, Twist and Pulse, Chris and Wes, the A Team, Trinity Warriors, Kazzum, Antics, and Ruff Diamond have reached their respective finals.

Despite the preference toward the subjective opinion of a panel of judges rather than a reliance on codified rules and criteria, these competition structures have a direct effect on the crew choreography. In the example of the A Team on *GTD*, the crew is restricted to a one and a half-minute segment for its audition. The need to quickly attract the judges' and viewers' attention is paramount in the crew's progression in the competition; thus emphasis is placed on the rapid execution of gymnastic feats. As the edit frequently results in the omission of optimum angles for the reception of such showcase moments within the choreography, crews rely on the quantity of stunts.⁶ The A Team additionally demonstrates its members' dexterity within the short time frame by appearing to defy the physical laws of gravity, force, and speed. The slow execution of turns and floor glides in the sustained and wistful dynamic of the opening section of their audition are juxtaposed against the sharp intricacy of arm tutting, with dancers continuously shifting the velocity of their grounded and aerial movement phrases. The time-bound structures of the competition therefore have a direct influence on these choreographies, placing greater emphasis on virtuosic acts and illusionary techniques that create visual impact through pushing the body to its physical limitations. But how does

the classical concept of virtuosity as a notion of artistic excellence operate within competitive street dance performance?

Going beyond the Human

The term *virtuosity* refers to “going beyond” human excellence through “hyperdisciplined, hyperlabouring thus hypervisible” displays of skill (Hamera 2000, 147). While the term *virtuosity* is more often used to describe canonical Western art forms, such as ballet and opera, these displays of hyper-skill are historically situated at the border between popular culture and high art, embracing both Western concert dance and the theatrical spectacles on the popular stage (Osterweis 2013). In his study of the violinist Niccolò Paganini, communications scholar David Palmer (1998) situates the appeal of virtuosity in the revelation and transcendence of individual agency: the triumph of artistic prowess that emerged from the Renaissance era. In Western concert dance, dance scholar Ariel Osterweis (2013, 2014) reveals that the ballet soloist was revered for her levels of skill, her ability to replicate such performances night after night, and her capacity to visually distinguish herself from the *corps de ballet*. In terms of the popular dancing body, writings regarding virtuosity are predominantly situated in historically staged forms of entertainment, such as circus, cabaret, and magic (Darley 2000; Kershaw 2003). Theatrical spectacle thrived in the live popular entertainment forms of the late eighteenth century that were “designed to stimulate and capture the eye and, often the gut (viscera) as well, rather than the head or intellect” (Darley 2000, 40). Acts, such as circus acrobatics, conjurers, vaudeville performers, puppeteers, and burlesque performances, placed emphasis on high skill, elaborate props, special effects, tricks, and stage devices to produce “intense and instantaneous visual pleasure: the production of imagery and action

which would excite, astound and astonish the audience” due to the implausibility of their performances (Darley 2000, 40).

Similar to these historically situated accounts of popular dance virtuosity, hip-hop dance offers distinctive aesthetics divergent from a comparison with the Western art canon’s virtuosic aesthetic ideals of beauty, refinement, and grace. Virtuosity and dexterity can be viewed throughout African American social dance history, from slaves’ circle dances of the 1840s to the block parties of the 1940s (Hazzard-Gordon 1990). In particular, the continued emphasis on high skill can be witnessed in the athleticism, versatility, and the velocity required in the execution of breaking, as evidenced by several dance scholars. In reporting on the breaking style, dance scholar Sally Banes emphasizes the “flamboyance” of the dance, likening the floor and aerial performances to those of gymnasts or circus entertainers ([1985] 2004, 18). Observing the bounce and physical recoil of the body, DeFrantz (2004, 78) situates hip-hop virtuosity in both the technical skill of the mixmaster and in the powerful “weightiness and aggressive physicality” of the body. In the hip-hop idiom, bodies emulate the sudden change in rhythms and accents of sampled music tracks through isolations and accenting polyrhythms with body parts, allowing dancers to visualize the beat through a variety of creative means. The hip-hop dancing body labors through its physical tightness, creating fragmented performances that mimic the rhythms and samples of the mixed tracks. De Frantz (2004, 78) states that

[t]his is a virtuosity of precision and attack; of finish joined to flow. The movement startles the viewer with angularity and asymmetry; with an outwardly-explosive directness of precision unknown to earlier black American social dances.

In the case of street dance crew choreography, the grounded center of gravity derived from African diasporic practice is coupled with the polyrhythmic attack and flow of the body in motion. As witnessed in the A Team's audition, limbs slice and carve through the air as if expelled from the body. Dancers balance and topple from their heads, while chest cavities and arm joints appear dislocated and mutilated. Animation techniques give the illusion of the loss of skeletal limitations through liquid arm, leg, and torso waving. Gliding allows the feet to slip and slither fluidly across the floor with reptilian qualities, while popping electrifies and mechanizes the body. A tension of push and pull exists between symmetrical and asymmetrical design, as dancers play with angles and clean lines and then distort them through judders, pops, and gravity-defying freezes.

These performances thus produce spectacles of bodily control, efficiency, and precision, emulating and surpassing previous auditions and showcases, and often previous crews' attempts in the competition. The setting apart of bodies through high skill levels, achieved through intensive, repetitive labor and heightened by the dramatic rhetoric of the competition, results in the crews' ability to produce televised moments that amaze and astound the viewer. It is here, I argue, where the term *virtuosity* is aligned with concepts of transcendence and corporeal excess.

Transcendence and Excess

The term *excess* refers to a state of overindulgence, surplus, or exaggeration. It is subjectively loaded in its sense of reaching beyond permitted and conservative limitations, and in producing too much or going beyond rational need. Through the reimagining the body as a fluid and "excessive" entity with transgressive potential (Williams 1998, 2001), the term *virtuosity* can be further understood as a state of moving

beyond the physical efforts of the artist. In particular, Osterweis (2013, 68) importantly highlights how the “highly kinetic choreography” witnessed within the African diaspora, including honed skill, execution, charisma, versatility, and velocity, draws traditions from the African diaspora’s aesthetic resistance to “stasis or capture.” Complex histories of corporeal oppression have subsequently resulted in an excessive performance aesthetic that takes risks and places the agility and dexterity of the body at the center of the movement experience.

Dance scholar Gabriele Brandstetter (2007, 178) further explores the concept of virtuosic excess in her analysis of the solo performing artist in the eighteenth century, “whose actions . . . contravene the boundaries of the physically possible while at the same time concealing from delighted audiences the nature of his transgression.” Brandstetter (2007, 185) links the implausibility and technical skill of the virtuoso with ideas of “the phantasm of the machine,” in both the superhuman and repetitive execution of ability that reflected eighteenth-century engine technology. She captures this enacting of the machine in her description of the artist J. J. Grandville’s illustrations of the Romantic ballerina:

The sylphide ballerina of Romantic ballet whirls around en pointe in a pirouette. She is the flywheel of this great, general rotation. To her left, legs are moving in grotesque-arabesque poses, having gained their independence as a particularized bodily series. To her right, the human body is transformed into a doll and finally into a spinning top by the speedy mechanics of the turn. This scenario pushes the theatricality of movement, as a figure of virtuoso mechanics, in the sense of Blasis’s body code, to the extreme—crossing the line of what is considered worthy of

admiration and astonishment towards the grotesque. Grandville's picture stages a fascination with a uniform, inexhaustible and self-regulating mechanics. (Brandstetter 2007, 188)

Here, Brandstetter establishes the important distinction of the virtuosic body blurring the boundaries between artistic excellence and the grotesque in its reflection of the contemporary era of mechanical intervention, moving away from the aesthetically pleasing Renaissance ideal of artistic prowess. In a contemporary cinematic example, Osterweis's analysis of the film *Black Swan* (2010) depicts this crossing over between human and other, referencing the moment that the protagonist ballerina Nina grows wings during her *fouettés*.⁷ She states that this moment marks "the point at which the pinnacle of her [Nina's] technical achievement coincides with raw animalistic attributes associated with the ecstatic" (Osterweis 2014, 74).

Virtuosity, as explored by Brandstetter and Osterweis, not only speaks to ideas of artistic excellence, but also to the transcendence from the human into a boundary figure. This reinterpretation of virtuosity results in a shift in aesthetic archetypes, and further demonstrates how corporeal excess can reflect and embody the contemporary moment. Returning to the choreographic displays of the street dance crew, the following analysis will thus explore this crossing into virtuosic excess, with particular attention to the physical negotiation between technology and the competitive body.

Animating Illusion

Peridot's robot-inspired semi-final performance on *BGT* is brought to life through a mixture of muscle shudders, sharp starts and stops, leg pops, chest isolations, gliding of the feet, and angled arm lines. Bodily joints and bones appear to dissolve through

waving, while fluid actions are transformed into static, mechanical shudders through body popping. Accompanied by the soundtrack of pistons and clouded in dry ice, movements suddenly stop and start as if being controlled by internal motors, or appear to break down and malfunction, with the upper arm taut while the lower arm dangles lifelessly. Dancers form a line across the stage, linking hands to elbows, and wave the lower arms inward toward a central dancer. Once the crew “plugs into” the central dancer, the eight-limbed waving creature leans back, and the *en masse* arm wave is replicated in the central dancer’s dislocated isolation of his chest cavity.

Animation techniques, which include the stylistic practices of popping, waving, gliding, roboting, strutting, tutting, ticking, and boogalooing, originated in the mid-1960s in the Bay area of Los Angeles.⁸ Crews, such as the Robot Brothers, were inspired by cartoons, science-fiction television programs, store mannequins, and martial arts films, and dancers attempted to physically recreate the actions of these mediated bodies (Lockerlegends 2011). These illusionary techniques tense, release, curve, and angle the body away from habitual pedestrian movement.⁹ Gliding, for example, removes friction from the transference of foot to foot, with weight passing seamlessly, as if the feet were gliding across ice. Popping is the rapid tensing and relaxing of the muscles, creating a freeze-frame effect, while ticking speeds up this process, creating the effect of the body in a strobe light. Through the physical interpretation of science fiction characters and cartoons, these styles already allude to the transformation from the human into fantasy. For example, “the robot” came into public consciousness through the Jackson 5’s televised performance of “Dancing Machines” on the Carol Burnett Show in 1974, creating the term “doing the robot” (MRDAVEYD 2013). In his historical populist

account of animation techniques, filmmaker and hip-hop impresario Michael Holman states that for African American youth, the imitation of robots allowed them to “escape to a world where everything is perfect, sharp and in control” (Holman 1984). Animation techniques emulate a metaphorical body without biological or material limitations, achieving images usually only witnessed through the treatment of the television edit.

Peridot’s mastery of corporeal illusion, framed in a technological narrative, is but one example where animation techniques are used to create the impression of technologically enhanced beings within crew performances.¹⁰ In this example, the emphasis is firmly placed on the technological enhancement of the body through these techniques. Instead of displays of athletic flair, Peridot demonstrates the “going beyond” the body through the portrayal of micro-technologies: the corporeal control over the micro-circuitry and micro-isolation of the fast-twitch muscles and joints that create the illusion of technologically enhanced cyborgian beings.

Posthumanist and transhumanist discourse situate the relationship between the body and technology as seeking to reconceive the concept of the human (Badmington 2000; Gray 1995; Hayles 1999; Holland 1995; Shilling 2005; Tomas 1995). These discussions arise from an increased reliance on digital communication, a continued engagement with interactive digital environments, and the physical and abstract presence of the organic body in virtual spaces. Donna Haraway’s 1985 seminal feminist essay, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” describes the fusion between human and machine as a cyborg: a hybrid that crosses between social reality and fiction (Haraway [1985] 2000).¹¹ Haraway argues that the physical distinction between reality and fiction has been blurred and demands a

reconsideration of corporeal boundaries. In Western popular literature, science fiction, and Hollywood films, hyper-robotic and CGI (computer-generated imagery) manifestations are imagined through futuristic characters and have become the basis of a populist understanding of the cyborg. This cross between human and machine is visualized through contemporary film portrayals, including the *Terminator* series (1984, 1991, 2003, 2015), the *RoboCop* series (1987, 1990), *Blade Runner* (1982), and *The Matrix Trilogy* (1999–2003). Cultural studies theorists David Tomas (1995) and Samantha Holland (1995) argue that these mediated human–machine hybrids highlight the concern and fear surrounding the technological body. These technological manipulations put into question the status of the material body in this blurred space, and raise questions regarding the loss of the self and the departure of traditional dualisms, such as gender and the mind–body split.¹²

The technologically enhanced aesthetic of crew performances alludes to the relationship between technology and the corporeal, or the techno-corporeality of the body. Rather than reflecting the mechanical, as stated in Brandstetter’s analysis of virtuosic excess, Peridot embodies the contemporary digital. The performance of micro actions, such as arm or leg pops, or the controlled isolation of small or complex body parts, including ribs, shoulders, and fingers, suggests a concealment and internalization of power, rather than an overt and aggressive display of machinic strength. In her research into technology and the body, film and gender theorist Claudia Springer (1996, 39) states that “mechanical technology, with its engines, gears, pistons, and shafts, has been joined and in many ways superseded by the increasingly miniaturized micro circuitry of electronic technology.” Thus, street dance crews, such as Peridot, utilize animation

techniques as a form of virtuosic excess, creating a fusion between the anatomical form of the body, the mechanical, and the digital.

Synchronization

Alongside the use of animation techniques, examples of this techno-corporeal fusion can also be observed in the continuous use of perfectly executed group synchronicity that creates the illusion of digitally produced duplicate bodies. Across all duet and crew choreographies in street dance crew competitions, emphasis is placed on the use of multiple bodies performing identical movement sequences. Crews face the studio audience and mirror the tempo and rhythmic structure of the accompaniment through their gestures and actions. These choreographies are rehearsed and refined through drill-like studio training to the extent that human error is removed and the crew members appear to be identical copies of each other. Such synchronicity holds currency in the televised talent show competition, as crews who do not achieve tight unison, precise stunts, and honed bodily technique will not achieve home viewers' votes and will be eliminated from the competition.¹³

Flawless, as implied by its name, achieves a “flawless” performance in their audition through the dancers' choreographic and spatial precision. Rather than the controlled gliding of the A Team, Flawless's accuracy lies in the speed of execution and the fact that every crew member's movement is identical, regardless of complexity or speed. From the beginning of the audition, a static fixed shot captures the nine dancers in their triangle formation as they perform a combination of arm pops and waves that spread out into various directions, while remaining perfectly synchronized in their timing. They gradually build up the texture of the choreography, with only three dancers performing in

unison, and then introduce several others to join, with the same sequence. The equal spatial distance between each member in a symmetrical design creates the impression of one single body digitally duplicated several times in a kaleidoscopic pattern, while the filming of the crew from a wide shot and 45-degree angle masks any individual mistakes or differing facial expressions.

In anthropologist Marcel Mauss's ([1934] 2006) analysis of bodily techniques, he draws parallels between military organizational systems and the assembly of a machine to show how both systems strive to achieve efficiency. Additionally, Springer's (1996, 17) study of humans and machines also notes that Victorian industrialization saw the shift from an exploited human labor force to machines that "improved on what they saw as the deficiencies of human workers." In the example of the street dance crew, Flawless achieves such machine-like efficiency through the use of multiple dancers, physically multiplying the body across the stage. Dancers appear to embody the mechanisms of the machine to eradicate "human" deficiencies, achieving high levels of strength, speed, and endurance to simulate the gears, pistons, and motors of the crew "machine." While illusionary in quality, the multiplication of the body across the television screen amplifies both the number and the status of the crew. Bodies appear to exceed corporeal possibilities through their labor, and human attributes of pain and exhaustion are replaced by machine-like invincibility. These virtuosic performances of carbon-copy unison therefore conjure up representations of technologically enhanced beings, with the crew unit presented as the perfect machine, tirelessly working to create the overall product of the dance.

Meta-bodies

In the opening to its final performance on *BGT*, Diversity uses fluid body waving and a shift in group formation to smoothly morph into a three-tier robot with claw-like legs and eight spider-like arms. Each dancer creates the legs, limbs, and/or heads of the creature/robot, accompanied by the sound of a whirling mechanical engine that mimics the transformational sound of robots from the children's cartoon series turned Hollywood blockbuster, *Transformers* (2007). The Diversity robot marches and strikes its arms out to the side, accompanied by five heavy, rhythmic mechanical beats. Later in the choreography, dancers stand behind each other with their arms overlapping the front dancer. As the soundtrack says "breathe," three six-limbed, armored aliens are revealed through claw-like hand movements, achieved through the opening and closing of each of the dancers' arms. These meta-bodied structures continue, with the crew playfully recreating the buzzers of the judges with dancers' heads, and finally creating the image of an airplane in flight, emphasized by the background digital screen effects of shooting images of light.

Through the manipulation of the human form and the morphing into mechanical and monstrous beings, crews such as Diversity appear to exceed the limitations of the corporeal form, transforming into helicopters, bicycles, racing cars, elevators, and telephones. Similar to the digital computer-generated creatures in live-action cinema, street dance crews create menacing and enhanced lifeforms through their embodied live-action performances. This is achieved without the aid of scaled-down models, computer scanning, 3D modeling, key frame animation, or animatronics (Whissel 2014).¹⁴ I describe these figures as meta-bodies: mechanically and digitally enhanced lifeforms created through the careful layering of several dancers within a gymnastic stunt. Each

dancer within the crew becomes the building block of a larger structure through the layering, balancing, and eventual abstraction of body parts. The results of these stunts are mechanical, monstrous and zoological beings that transform individual dancers into a single collective.

In her study of cinematic special effects and, more specifically, digitally enhanced lifeforms in cinema, film and media scholar Kristen Whissel (2014, 93) highlights the multiple definitions of the term *vital*. She associates the term with “organic life and death as well as the optimal functioning of technology” and describes digitally enhanced creatures on screen as holding “excessive . . . vitality” due to their surplus bodily excess and the vital spark or flame that brings them to life (Whissel 2014, 92). While already alive, crews exceed their humanity and their human form by reimagining this vitality through the careful composition of several bodies to create a hyper-body. Similar to the cinematic process of creating compelling digital beings through animation, crews “remediate embodied, live-action performances into persuasively vital digital beings,” but achieve this through virtuosic excess, rather than through digital intervention (Whissel 2014, 91). The spectatorial fascination with these figures lies in their ability to combine human performance with digital and mechanized movement qualities, blurring the line between the “animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, material and code” (Whissel 2014, 92).

Diversity and fellow crews use the choreographic device of meta-bodies to go “above and beyond” the possibilities of the solo dancer through the distortion of the human form and forge an alliance with the technological through excessive vitality. This continuous staging of the techno-corporeal reflects the contemporary era of mechanical

and digital intervention, and again demonstrates the crews' physical negotiation of human virtuosity within a heavily digitized age. Brandstetter (2007, 191–192) states that, in the context of the twentieth-century shift to image and sound, “one reads again and again that performing artists now find themselves competing with recordings, that they find themselves in the unfortunate situation of never being able to live up to their own ‘ideal’ productions.” In her research on the competition body, dance scholar Alexis Weisbrod (2010, 98) also observes the rivalry between the stage body and the mediated body, stating that “audiences have a strong reverence for these extreme physical abilities, and anything the competition body can accomplish to meet similar superhuman criteria is met with acceptance and acclaim.” By achieving the same feats as cinematic bodies, including the creation of cinematic style meta-bodies, these crew performances demonstrate physical prowess and the capabilities of the organic body in a competitive and mediated environment.

Diamonds in the Ruff

Alongside the street dance crews' affinity with technological enhancement, the exaggerated narrative of television talent shows allows further potential for performances of excess. These programs encourage viewers to engage with crew performances by voting for their favorite contestants to remain in the show. The panel of judges educates and guides the audience's decision, and doubles as a vital source of entertainment due to the opportunity for conflicting opinions. This potential for conflict ties in with the narration of the programs, which is purposefully structured to enhance the competitive themes of risk, opportunity, and chance. In the case of Saturday night peak-time talent shows, these programs become event television: “television that attracts huge audiences

and becomes part of the popular discourse of everyday life. Like soap operas, the action . . . is contextualized and amplified by excessive media commentary including chat shows, interviews, tabloid newspaper coverage and the circulation of participants' images as celebrities" (Biressi and Nunn 2005, 11).

Unlike the big-budget production capabilities of Hollywood street dance films, such as the *Step Up* film series (2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014), the lower budget international television franchise model cannot replicate the same level of digital intervention with regard to CGI and blue screen slow-motion capture. Despite these lower production values, the emphasis on special effects and the technological enhancement of the human body is still prevalent within these choreographies. The home viewer thus experiences crew performances through the design of the producer/editor, whereby the zooming and panning of the camera, as well as the post-production manipulation of live and pre-recorded footage, augments and amplifies the street dance body.¹⁵

In Ruff Diamond's semi-final performance on *GTD* series four, a low camera positioned at the foot of the stage creates the impression of a dancer's aerial routine almost flying into the camera lens. The close-up positioning of the camera at the foot of the circular stage captures one dancer executing a front flip over another dancer, and the camera angle amplifies the height of the drop to the floor. The camera cuts from a front-facing mid-shot that encases the entire crew and depicts one dancer preparing to perform a gymnastic sequence upstage. The camera then quickly cuts to a side camera and reveals the dancer in midair, then zooms out to reveal the same dancer completing another back flip over another dancer. Here, the fast cut between cameras provides multiple

perspectives of the stunt in full flight, and the movement of both the camera and the dancer enhances the speed and dexterity of the stunt's execution.

Pre-recorded VT¹⁶ segments additionally enable the amplification of crew performances. These pre-performance segments squeeze hours of raw footage of interviews, previous performances, and judges' comments into thirty-second sequences to quickly grab the viewer's gaze in a short space of allotted time. Prior to their semi-final performance, Ruff Diamond's VT segment is first introduced by rapid frames of motion spliced together, bombarding the viewer with pre-recorded aerial corkscrews, split leaps, falls, and the final image of the crew with fists in the air as the words "RUFF DIAMOND" shoot out from the screen. Using post-production digital editing techniques, including slow motion, rapid overlaying of footage, and high color saturation, producers construct the image of crews as superhuman beings.¹⁷

It is the narrative of ordinary versus extraordinary that feeds into the notion of excess and going above and beyond judges' and the public's expectations in the competition. In their interview prior to their semi-final performance, the members of Ruff Diamond are interviewed in their home town of Hartlepool, a coastal town in northeastern England. The crew describe themselves as "stranded from the rest of the street dance scene," with accompanying footage of them rehearsing at an unused pier and in a small apartment. The crew state that "because of where we're from, we have to work a lot harder than crews from, say, London" and "we've not got any teachers, we kind of have to figure it out for ourselves."

These interviews continue the reality television model that portrays popular dance as a means of transformation from the "ordinary," increasing the contestants'

opportunities for fame and increased economic worth. In both *BGT* and *GTD*, the productions present crew members discussing their competition experience in a stationary interview or through the situation of the crew in everyday geographical environments, such as small terraced homes, street corners, or empty parking lots. Crews describe their experiences using colloquial language, and the everyday location of the interviews continues the working-class-based construction of the “ordinary.” As highlighted in sociologist Jade Boyd’s (2012, 264) analysis of *SYTYCD*, “the ordinariness of the extraordinary performer is emphasized through out-of-studio and backstage camera shots, the close ‘capturing’ of seemingly private moments of frustration, expectation, insecurity, joy, and failure through the fetishization of emotion.” Through personal accounts and the selling of the self, televised references to the contestants’ home life and their economic and cultural backgrounds situate the reality contestants as “ordinary” and ready to make the transition to the “better” life of celebrity.

These pre-recorded interviews are interwoven with the rapidly edited clips of digitally enhanced virtuosic stunts. Such prosaic “human” response, achieved through the close-up positioning of the camera, jars against the indestructible and machine-like images of the crew witnessed seconds earlier. Producers re-present these dancing bodies by editing together high-affect moments or “jolts” of previous performances, which include high kicks, spins, flips, and a series of aerial stunts (McMains 2010, 263). In the case of *Ruff Diamond*, a crew member discusses the town being stranded, while another member performs a backward somersault off the pier ledge in slow motion. High-affect moments from their audition, such as one dancer being hoisted horizontally into the air and caught by the feet of a supine dancer, are woven into images of the gray, drab

background of the pier location. Additionally, the interview ends with slow-motion, high-color images of breaking power moves and a synchronized suicide drop. While ordinariness is conveyed through the crew's location, status, and content of their interviews, the viewer is continuously reminded of the crew members' extraordinary physical ability and their potential to transition to a new and improved self through their dancing talent. This post-production editing contrasts rhetorics of ordinary human struggle, as presented by the reality television competition, against the extraordinary, machine-like, and superhuman performances of these techno-corporeal bodies of excess.

Individual versus Collective

Within the analysis of synchronicity and the formation of meta-bodies in crew performances, the importance of the crew structure over the individual dancer becomes more apparent. In terms of virtuosic performance, Osterweis (2014, 71) observes that such an excessive performance quality originated through "the trope of the soloist," as witnessed in Western concert dance and the rise of the principal dancer. This was a virtuosity driven by individual capitalist ambition to surpass competitors and achieve uniqueness by being positioned in front of the *corps de ballet*. As witnessed in popular music concerts, music videos, and YouTube clips, the celebrity positioned at the front of the supporting back-up dancers continues to reaffirm this depiction of hierarchical status. Street crew dancers complement, mirror, and mimic their movements at the front of the apex triangle or crowd scene, duplicating the physical presence of the celebrity (Bench 2014). Even in cinematic portrayals of hip-hop dance, "dance crews exist only in the background [behind the leading actors], with uncertain and uninterrogated fates" (Arzumanova 2014, 178).

This strive for individual gain is replicated in the neoliberal capitalist format of the reality television show. Jen Harvie (2013, 12) describes neoliberalism as a political ideology that “recognizes and prioritizes the individual’s right to seek self-fulfillment and to do so in conditions unrestricted by state-institution end regulations.”¹⁸ In neoliberal capitalism, the individual is free to generate self-reward, but this self-reward in turn produces and increases the profits of private organizations and governments through open market capital circulation (Harvie 2013). This right to self-fulfillment and reward lies at the core of reality television formats, with the individual striving to achieve fame, fortune, and social mobility. Participants endeavor to win the desired rewards and prize money offered by the competition, while also increasing their celebrity status through media coverage to ensure future employability after the competition. Yet these rewards are diminutive in comparison with the profits of the production companies.

In the context of street dance crew competitive performance, the concept of virtuosity as capitalist ambition moves away from the emphasis on the individual to one of coalition and partnership. The continued emphasis on the crew structure of the performances, or the collective identity of the group, challenges the “cult of individualism” that operates in the television talent show (Osterweis 2014, 71). In her study of the film *Save the Last Dance* (2001), communications scholar Inna Arzumanova (2014, 179) describes hip-hop dance crews as “the closest image of coalition politics, of collective mobilization and group identity enactment.” This politics of cooperation emerges through the shared labor of the performance and, via rehearsal, repetition, and improvement, dancers achieve a collective synchronization in striving to construct a shared vision. Like cogs in a machine, each crew member is vital in creating the overall

choreographic effect. The crew format in the television talent show places emphasis on no single dancer, achieving the visually spectacular aesthetic through collaboration, cooperation, and power in numbers.

Rhetorics of community and friendship are also emphasized verbally through VT segments and interviews with hosts and judges. *Flawless* presents the crew members as a close-knit unit by describing themselves as “a family with a passion for dance,” stating after their audition that they are just “happy to be on the stage with my brothers and my friends” (2009). *Diversity* emphasizes the importance of community over the desire to win; one member states that “to be doing this with my brother and my best mates, it’s just the best feeling in the world you know” (2009). When receiving their final comments from the judges, all crews hold on to each other, demonstrating a united front and conveying the message of “whatever happens, we’ve got each other.” This emphasis on the cooperative community unit, as well as the brotherhood of the crew over the individual, jars against the reality television rhetoric of individual gain. Here, the experience of dancing with family and friends is depicted as holding higher value than that of the success of any particular member of the crew.

By performing complicated polyrhythmic sequences in tight unison, as well as reinforcing their collective identity in interviews, crew dancers thus present a strong community unit within the neoliberal capitalist agenda of the televised competition. These performances of virtuosic excess create not only powerful images of bodies moving in congruence, but also a collective whose economic success is only determined by the individual performances of its counterparts. In her recent study of gadgets, bodies, and advertisements, dance scholar Melissa Blanco Borelli (2016, 427) states that “the

collective action of dancing together creates new communities that negotiate different ways of being autonomous in capitalism” forging a “politics of togetherness.” This emphasis on the collective over the individual through the shared labor of the crew challenges and disrupts the construction of individual capitalist gain.

It should be noted that this choreographic “politics of togetherness” is still ultimately rooted in the desire to succeed, in terms of potential media exposure offered to the crews, as well as the opportunity to win the competitions’ cash prizes. After judges have delivered their feedback to the crews in the semi-final and final performances, digital telephone numbers appear on screen next to the crews, enabling remote spectators to advance crews in the competitions through telephone, text, and web voting. The dancers enhance these sales pitches in order to increase their appeal to the home voter. Crews including the A Team, Flawless, and Diversity perform choreographed unison sequences of telephone gestures with their hands, nodding and smiling directly into the camera lens as the numbers and terms and conditions of the competition are read out by the television hosts. Self-fulfillment and financial reward continue to be linked to the neoliberal capitalist discourse of the reality television competition, but are masked by the performance of collectivity.

Aspiration through Perspiration

The concept of transition and transformation from the ordinary to the extraordinary is at the heart of the reality television competition structure, and manifests within performances of virtuosic excess that create the illusion of transcending the corporeal. Through their need to achieve maximum exposure on the television screen, street dance crews physically contend and compete with cinematic digitally enhanced bodies through

their performances of techno-corporeality. In order to be seen (and to compete within) the media spectacle of the competition and the context of the television show, street dance crews perform excess by way of their labor, technical aptitude, personality, and the reimagining of the corporeal form into machines, animals, and monstrous lifeforms. Crews labor beyond corporeal limitations and create the appearance of transcendence to a higher level of ability, despite the restrictions of the organic corporeal form and the television format of the competition.

Aspiration, as the corporeal struggle to achieve economic success, becomes an essential performance quality in a competition format. This ambition drives the crew to become more than just another reality television act, but rather to create a hybridity between human and machine. Through their emphasis on the collective, crew performances not only exceed corporeal limitations through a collegial choreographic approach, but at the same time challenge the reading of virtuosity as performances of individual excellence, putting into question the neoliberal strive for individual gain.

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Notes

¹ The windmill is a breaking power move in which the dancer rotates the torso in a circular path on the floor, leveraging from the upper chest, shoulders, and back, while holding the legs in a V-position.

² Herein, I use the following abbreviations: *BGT* (*Britain's Got Talent*), *GTD* (*Got To Dance*), and *SYTYCD* (*So You Think You Can Dance*).

³ In popular media, dance crew performances in television talent shows are labeled under various umbrella terms, including “street dance,” “hip-hop,” “urban,” and “commercial.” Such terms are problematic in their reduction of complex artistic forms to stereotypical sound bites. This varied lexicon is reflective of several areas of confusion: the unwritten and historical context of multiple forms, genres

and subgenres of African-diasporic cultural practice; the cultural appropriation of these diverse practices; and the lack of research surrounding the transnational cultural flows of hip-hop culture. While the historical origins of breaking (sometimes known as “break dancing”) and its early dissemination are prevalent subject matters in academic literature, contemporary UK hip-hop dance culture, the commercialization of hip-hop dance, and the emergence of the term “street dance” are all under-researched areas. In recognition of these fraught issues of classification, where possible, I use precise stylistic terminology in line with popular histories of their origins. These include locking, popping, roboting, and electric boogaloo (funk styles); breaking and hip-hop party dances (hip-hop); house, voguing and waacking (club styles); nuskool hip-hop choreography, krump, and jerking. Where unavoidable, I refer to these vernacular practices through the umbrella term “hip-hop dance.” This differentiation between street dance and hip-hop dance purposely removes the hierarchy that surrounds these performances in relation to their deemed inauthenticity in comparison with “authentic” vernacular practices of hip-hop dance.

⁴ DeFrantz’s (2004) analysis of hip-hop dance practice in his article, “The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power,” also highlights the importance of black social dance as a form of identity construction due to its “corporeal orature”: the production of meaning through the speech-like quality of the movement. Instead of inscribing meaning onto the dance from an outside perspective, DeFrantz discusses how black social dance requires a physical embodiment in order for the dance’s full communicative meanings to be apparent.

⁵ The suicide drop is a power move in which the dancer suddenly drops on his or her back.

⁶ The preceding research findings are supported by informal conversations with dancers, crew members, and production editors between 2009 to the present. My position as a dancer, dance professor, and dance development manager has led to many discussions with dance artists who have been involved with reality television competitions, including *SYTYCD*, *BGT*, and *GTD*. During conversations with dancers involved in television talent shows, they revealed that in some cases the production team worked with the choreographer to select appropriate camera angles. In other instances this was decided purely by the television production team.

⁷ In the final scenes of the film, Nina physically transforms on stage by growing black wings instead of arms.

⁸ A detailed list of the varying techniques can be found at

<http://www.hiphopunite.com/index-styles.html>.

⁹ Here I use the term *pedestrian* to describe everyday/ordinary movements as pioneered by the Judson Dance Theater (Burt 2006).

¹⁰ Other crew performances include Back2Back (Back2Back 2011), Bionik Funk (Bionik Funk 2011), Cerebro (Cerebro 2011), L3gacy (L3gacy 2012) and Antics (Antics 2012). In particular, popping duet Static Movement states in the VT segment prior to their audition that “we want [the audience] to question the reality of what they are actually seeing,” making them question “what’s going on and how did they do that” (Static Movement 2012). The duet draws upon the techniques of robotics,

popping, ticking, waving, and extreme isolations of the head and chest cavity to create the illusion of cyborgian lifeforms.

¹¹ She comments that “late twentieth century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and eternally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (Haraway [1985] 2000, 52).

¹² The Cartesian split is developed from the work of René Descartes and describes a dualism between the mind and the body. Holland (1995) argues that cyborgs on film put into question this conceptual dualism, where hybrids take the form of humans but lose their human individuality, suggesting that the human mind equates to humanity.

¹³ In the case of *Abyss* on *BGT* series five (*Abyss* 2011), their audition fails to impress the judges due to the crew not demonstrating the same level of precision of other previous dance acts.

¹⁴ See Whissel (2014) for a full explanation of cinematic techniques.

¹⁵ In cinematography, zooming is the smooth transition between a long shot and a close-up shot in television. Panning refers to the horizontal rotation of the camera from a fixed position.

¹⁶ Despite the shift to digital recordings, the term *VT* stands for “videotape” and refers to pre-recorded and edited footage.

¹⁷ In particular, *Got to Dance*’s time-freeze technology, introduced in 2013, involves a hi-tech camera technique that captures spins, flips, and twists in 360-degree motion,

creating the “so-called Matrix effect” (Fletcher 2013). These camera shots not only suspend the dancer, but reveal a 360-degree perspective of the stunt.

¹⁸ Harvie (2013) notes that neoliberalism has been cultivated by both the United Kingdom’s New Labour and Coalition governments. She maintains that neoliberal capitalism was spurred on by mounting state debt and the British financial crisis in 2007.