EXPERIMENTAL DANCE FILMS AND THE (MIS)USE OF URBAN SPACE

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INTRODUCTION

In the past 20 years, due to the increasing availability and affordability of cameras, a plethora of experimental dance films have been shot on location in cities. On the one hand, the recurrent use of cityscapes demonstrates an eagerness to catch movement in public space and to highlight the social choreography of everyday life. Dance becomes about finding pedestrian movement and gestures, in regular clothes, on sidewalks, benches, plazas and parking lots — a tradition that harks back to the 1960s New York art world. Crowds begin to move à la Busby Berkeley and somehow traffic flows to the beat. On the other hand, choreographers are pushing the dancers' endurance by designing athletic movements, treating the city not as a backdrop but as an obstacle course. As they defy gravity by leaping from rooftops, jumping over walls and climbing lampposts — such as in Parkour — these hyper-active bodies are conditioned to experience urban space on a different level.

In this article I explore the types of movement predicated by spaces in cities in a number of recent short experimental dance films. I will analyze a selection of films, moving through London, Paris, Montreal, Tel Aviv, San Francisco, Helsinki and Lausanne. I argue that in their attempt to master the daunting surfaces of the city, the crowds, the noise and the cost of public horizontal space, contemporary choreographers expose current borders between our skin and the built environment and give empty or abandoned spaces new life and energy, making the architecture vibrate.

Dance films, as I define them here, differ from recorded live performances and present choreography created specifically for the camera. I focus on those films shot on film, video or digital video dubbed "experimental", meaning primarily short, non-verbal films focusing solely on a body moving in space. These films, similar to music videos, are usually designed as collaborations between directors and choreographers but are also occasionally shot by the choreographers themselves, regardless of whether they have any formal filmmaking training. Experimental dance films are most often seen at specialized film festivals, in museum exhibitions or online (Youtube, Vimeo and Ubuweb) and typically produced on small budgets.1

At the moment, within contemporary dance, site-specific practice remains a subcategory, mainly due to the impracticality of getting audiences and technical equipment on-site. Few dance technique classes teach dancers how to move on grass, sand, rock, ice or concrete. Most dancers train and perform on a sprung wood floor. While aerial dance workshops (dance on wires) exist and an increasing amount of fitness practices such as Parkour (Free running) are exploiting the outdoors, the dancing body remains for the most part protected by four walls and a ceiling. However, with the presence of the camera, choreography moves outdoors and takes on new sites, proportions, textures and temperatures. Dancers are now confronted with the weather, natural light, dirt, rodents, crowds and noise. Challenged by this new environment, the dancers are urged to roll on the street, jump over
fences and climb walls, their active bodies now conditioned to overcome urban space. As the number of dance films grows, outdoor space is becoming a key component for choreographic practices and is pushing dancers to build newly resistant and responsive bodies.

But what does the city have to do with dance? How does the camera set up a dialogue between bodies and buildings, between skin, muscles, bones and cold solid architecture? What types of spaces are contained within the camera's frame? How does the dancing body come into contact with the site? Does the dance occupy or move through space? How many bodies does it take to shift the movement of the city?

LIGHT TOUCH: THE CITY AS BACKDROP

In the following two films the dancers approach outdoor space gently. While the location offers a fraction of confined space to explore, these bodies resist transgression and utilize the site primarily for its visual qualities. The dancers hover near the borders of their container, grazing the walls with their fingertips and barely covering ground with their feet. These bodies tread lightly on the ground: the space is left intact and the skin and bones unscathed.

Brighter Borough (London, 2012)

Shot on the outskirts of London, this film directed by Georgia Parris, takes place in a mint green neon lit underpass near a freeway. Three women dressed in silky printed dresses and black Grecian ballet flats move through the space à la Isadora Duncan, making elegant gestures with their arms and giving the fabric movement. The film's focus is pulled away from the bodies and the concrete linings of the space to the smooth and shiny texture of the fabric as if a commercial for detergent. The film is in fact part of a fashion portfolio and is meant as an add for the dresses designed by Louisa Parris. The music glosses over the sounds of high traffic, making it seem almost pleasant to linger in a space usually plagued by dreadful smells. One recognizes this superficial treatment of site from fashion photography: the backdrop feeds light and outlines the clothes but the body has no real reason to be there.

46 Bis, Rue de Belleville (Paris, 1988)

Shot in an inner courtyard in Paris, this black and white stop motion film by Pascal Baes features two women moving along a chalk drawn pattern on the floor. As if in a game of hopscotch, they skim the surface, never stepping out of the prescribed path. As they twist and twirl around each other, their feet rooted to a white line, the camera roams freely and moves in and out of this confined space. This gap between buildings is filled as if its floor were a chessboard, making the silent dancers queens with a select amount of potential moves.
STEPPING IN: ALTERED PEDESTRAIN MOVEMENT

Writing in the early 1970s, architect Lawrence Halprin suggests that the speed of pedestrians is the primary dimension to consider in designing movement in the city. He claims that "long linear vistas, overly great spaces, undifferentiated and uninterrupted streets, lack of color are dull and uninteresting, not so much because of their static visual qualities but because they are uninviting to move through at pedestrian speeds."² These next films take into consideration the range and speed of pedestrian
motion. No cars are present here, only the flow of humans and man-powered vehicles. Both films' small interventions in this routine motion highlight codified steps and their typical pace in the city.

**Who by Fire (Montreal, 2013)**

Directed by Jacob Niedzwiecki, this film combines an overhead and a lateral shot to reveal the floor patterns of a coordinated group movement in a staircase. As the people dressed in winter clothes, ascend and descend the steps with precision, they have the potential to halt the traffic of bodies in the city, to reroute their trajectory. Here this simple experiment highlights the dynamism of the staircase and its railings but also the movement of the crowd associated with spaces of transit. Only one young man dares to break the pattern by hopping over the railing instead, suggesting that while harmonious, this mass movement is stifling.

**Private I's (Tel Aviv, 2012)**

Shot in several locations throughout the city, this film, directed by Oren Shkedy, presents an instance of stalling in a space of transit. Under a bridge two men dressed in suits move in place against the flow of pedestrians, runners, bikes and boats. This location usually associated with the homeless population who use it as shelter or musicians who use it for acoustic properties, becomes host to these theatrical bodies, over-dressed for this drab setting. Vertically compressed between the bridge and the strip of water, the bodies are only allowed horizontal movement and yet they resist it.
SURFACE TENSIONS: BETWEEN SKIN AND CONCRETE

The next two films seek to fill vacant spaces by bringing awareness to angles, corners, nooks and crannies in the skin of the city. Displaying no apprehension of surfaces, the dancers embrace new proximities between their bodies and the environment, sharpening their tactile knowledge of visually mundane surfaces. Touching the city the way a child does, the dancers contrast the fragility of their skin and flesh to the solidity and roughness of the dirty ground.

Pedestrian Crossing (San Francisco, 2012)

Directed by Eric Garcia and Kat Cole, this film brings a human scale to public places, avoiding no space based on its surface. Rolling on a sidewalk or resting upside down on bench, the dancers reconfigure the arrangement of limbs in slow spaces such as a bus stop or a pier, suggesting that waiting or lingering can be seen anew. Each location seems to bubble up with collectively inscribed gestures and the dancers playfully emphasize these. The city is sunny, warm, colorful and the breeze sweeps through their hair and clothes. This utopic depiction of pedestrian activities comes close to the Hollywood musical: San Francisco looks smiley and almost clean.

Le Bassin (Lausanne, 2008)

In Philippe Saire’s film, three men dressed in green scrubs explore a small courtyard and garden behind a museum. Taking as only witness the natural elements (grass, water and stone) these flexible bodies measure architecture with limbs. As they test the flat surface of the rock it becomes a platform for the dance. Each horizontal surface meets a body part, softly at times and with greater impact at others. The smooth surface of the water in the basin begs to be probed. Once immersed in it the three men begin to gently blow bubbles underwater, giving the material a thick unctuous density, as if turning the water into a cloud. Taking as its score the sounds of birds and passing cars, the film gives
the sense that the environment is all that is needed for this dance to take place. The rhythm is to be found in the collisions between materials of the built infrastructure and the skin and weight of the human body.

Figure 5: Pedestrian Crossing

Figure 6: Le Bassin
THE CITY AS PLAYGROUND: URBAN OBSTACLE COURSE

As the city grows vertically and horizontal space becomes crowded and expensive, it seems one would have to fight to find a piece of horizon-line or blue sky. In the late 1980s, in a Parisian suburb, some found air and freedom in the practice of Parkour, or free running. Vincent Thibault, a practitioner, suggests that this discipline provides "skilled ways to overcome obstacles, to grow from our encounters with them and to 'play' with them, to have fun with them, rather than avoid them." Through rigorous training the "parkour athlete is able to take advantage of ramps and barriers, walls and rocks, facades and railings - and any other supports, surfaces or obstacles he or she encounters. The possible movements are unlimited."

In this last selection of films, urban space is finally mastered. Movements appear spontaneous because they are triggered by external stimuli. Material surfaces, poles, cracks, nooks and ledges provoke the body, coax it into testing their resistance. Sitting, walking, running, climbing jumping and rolling become rebellious actions through their transposition in the "wrong" place: transgression seems worth the risk. By moving against the grain of the location, by playfully misusing it, these bodies find air and freedom.

**Step Out (Helsinki, 2012)**

From split screen to composite image, from the rigid urban center to a park's green space with the relief of a horizon line, Arja Raatikainen's film suggests the need to escape the daily grind of the indoors. Grids, frames, road lines and a form fitting office suit confine a man to a deserted city, one with no people but merely orders. As he breaks free and begins running, the obstacles shift from road blocks to triggers for potential liberating movement. In a video-game-like manner, the camera tracks his run over fences, benches, ledges as he rolls on snow, grass and concrete and is finally able to breathe.

**Rue Centrale 17,19 (Lausanne, 2004)**

In another of Philippe Saire's films, three men and a woman are confined to a courtyard surrounding a building and a nearby staircase. This mundane space is pedestrian and vehicle-free but not without on-looking neighbors, who survey the bizarre activities of the group from balconies above. The dancers re-appropriate this relatively non-descript location through play, creating a utopia where the limbs wander freely. Corners, vectors, gaps in space are tested and probed through pressure and weight shifting. The bodies measure the proportions and potential of the building’s design suggesting that this courtyard is anything but boring. Horizontally constricted, the dancers push, climb and jump upwards, as if the enclosed courtyard's materials provoked defiant movement.
Conclusion

Writing in the 1990s, architect Bernard Tschumi asked "could the use and misuse of the architectural space lead to new architecture?" I suggest that the trend of location shooting in experimental dance films, which also peaked in the 1990s, illustrates a variety of potential uses and misuses of urban space. Tschumi continues, "fragments of architecture (bits of walls, of rooms, of streets, of ideas) are all one actually sees. These fragments are like beginnings without ends. [...] It is not the clash between
these contradictory fragments that counts but the movement between them." In this search for movement between fragments of architecture, between chunks of the city, I argue that dance films are responding to, and filling, empty, or vacant spaces in the urban topography. The space produced by the dance between the bodies and the buildings becomes voluminous, almost tangible, through film.

As the camera records the traces of pedestrian and rebellious motion it "invites everyone to become aware of the sensitive reality of the immediate environment" as Sylvie Clidière and Alix de Morant have put it in their study of site-specific dance in France. In their opinion the dancing body in urban space has "the ability to inscribe a gesture in relation to a context, the capacity to point out a detail, to underline the features of architecture, to occupy the emptiness, to join the flux, to participate in the re-appropriation of a landscape or of a space that filters through the skin as much as the eye". The films I have brought forth urge the viewer to reconsider the types of movement present in urban space and those predicated by architectural structures. Through their engagement with site, these choreographers heighten our awareness of the built environment and question the codification of movement within public and private space. Maybe now is the time to dance on the escalator, crawl down the stairs or spend a day cheek to floor in an apartment. How much can we really move in the city?

ENDNOTES

1For further information on the different categories in dance film see Erin Brannigan, DanceFilm: Choreography and the Moving Image, Douglas Rosenberg Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image, or the recently published Screendance Journal.


3Ibid, 38.


6For further study of the films shot in cities in the 1990s see Valerie Briginshaw, "Transforming the City Spaces and Subjects" in Dance, Space and Subjectivity, 43-56.

7Ibid, 95.

8Sylvie Clidière and Alix de Morant, Extérieur Danse: Essai sur la Danse dans l'Espace Public (Montpellier: L'Entretemps Editions, 2009), 184, translation from the French is my own.
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*Cartographie 5: Rue Centrale 17-19* (Dir. Philippe Saire, Switzerland, 2004, 10 min)

*Cartographie 7 – Le Bassin*, (Dir. Philippe Saire, Switzerland, 2008, 10 min)

*Pedestrian Crossing* (Dir. Eric Garcia and Kat Cole, USA, 2012, 19 min)

*Private I's* (Dir. Oren Shkedy, Israel, 2012, 22 min)

*Step Out* (Dir. Arja Raatikainen and Thomas Freundlich, Finland, 2012, 10 min)

*Who by Fire* (Dir. Jacob Niedzwiecki, Canada, 2013, 4 min)

*46 Bis, Rue de Bellville* (Dir. Pascal Baes, Belgium, 1988, 5 min)