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Corporeality of Space vs. Spatiality of Bodies: Site-Specific Dance on Film

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**Corporeality of Space vs. Spatiality of Bodies:
Site-Specific Dance on Film****Attila Antal**Institute for New Theatre, Novi Sad
Mozarteum University, Salzburg**Abstract**

In site-specific performances, architectural spaces play an important role, becoming performative entities rather than a passive backdrop for an action. However, the narratively rich and environmentally overpowering spaces that inspire site-specific dance interventions can easily overpower the action or the bodies, giving the impression that everything works because of the strong aesthetic presence of the space. As a direct consequence, from an initial intention to performatively engage the spaces into becoming an equal participant of an action, spaces may be reduced to an overwhelming backdrop – an aesthetically pleasing and visually dominant element of the performance, yet, lacking the essential dialogue between the space and the body/bodies. Exploring the corporeality of spaces through the presence and the actions of the bodies interacting with them, we infer that in an ideal performative setup, without the bodies, we cannot not experience the space, and without the space, we cannot not feel the presence of the bodies. Through the analysis of a short dance film, which is a part of the immersive multimedia performance, *Skopje, the Great Escape*, filmed in the burnt-out main hall of the Central Post Office in Skopje, North Macedonia, I discuss strategies of bodies as mediums through which we can strive to address this fragile equilibrium. Within the film, the spaces of this powerful sculptural architecture, which became even more visually engaging through the visible traces of the catastrophic event, had multiple roles: from inspiring the movements through the space by reacting performatively to its morphology, rhythms, shapes and levels, to the way the direction and the cinematography were conceptualised. Avoiding both the approach of an architectural film and the filming of choreography in space, the bodies and their movements function as a medium through which the audience can explore and get a tangible experience of the space.

Keywords: embodiment of space; contemporary dance; architecture ruin; site-specific choreography; dance film; discovering space through movement

Corporeality of Space vs. Spatiality of Bodies

In site-specific performance, the relationship between bodies and architectural spaces should transcend mere aesthetics, evolving into a performative dialogue that shapes the action, the space and the audience's experience. Using the example of a dance film, which is the final sequence of the immersive performance, *Skopje, the Great Escape*,¹ I will focus on the *translation of the bodily experience*, exploring three possible levels of perception in this process. I will look into how the site-specific choreography interacts with the dilapidated space of a powerful architectural structure, abandoned and inaccessible for the general public, and how this interaction can be transferred into a bodily experience for the audience through the two-dimensional virtual reality of the screen. As one of the authors² of the aforementioned performance, I will give a more experience-based insight into these notions.

Level One: Direct Interaction

In the process of translating of the bodily experience of the space, the main focus is on the interaction between the architectural structure of the space and the human body within it, where two interconnected artistic challenges are encountered.

Challenge #1: The Interaction between the Architecture and the Bodies in Action

During the work on the choreographic intervention in this specific space, we had to be aware of two problems:

- how not to be overwhelmed by a narratively rich and environmentally strong architectural space, and
- how not to “abuse” the space with new, external narratives.

In the first case, we had to find the balance between the actions and movements of the bodies within the space that are “strong enough” to compete with the visual and emotional

¹ The performance, *Skopje, the Great Escape* is a part of a series of immersive, site-specific multimedia performances developed and produced in three cities (Novi Sad, Skopje and Tirana) within the framework of the two-year international project *Spa:Re – Public Spaces Reclaimed*, developed by Attila Antal and Višnja Žugić. The main thematic focus was the reclaiming and revitalisation of public spaces through artistic interventions. In these post-socialist, neo-liberal societies, public spaces, understood as spaces where “we can do silly things together freely” (Daniel Wetzel, Rimini Protokoll, personal communication, 2022), are disappearing and becoming increasingly commercialised. Through these series of performances, the audience can re-experience familiar parts of their cities in a new light. This may lead to new ways of active engagement with the social fabric of these cities. Read more about the development and the results of the performances in the publications about the project on: <https://spa-re.info/brochure/> and <https://spa-re.info/strategy/>

²*Skopje, the Great Escape (2023)*. Directed by Attila Antal. Conceived by Attila Antal and Višnja Žugić. Choreography by Ivana Balabanova. Cinematography and editing by Kiril Shentevski. Original music and soundscapes by Attila Antal. Text by Ljupčo Jovanov, Attila Antal, Višnja Žugić.

power of the space. In the second, we had to avoid using the site as a mere (albeit magnificent) backdrop for the choreographer's and director's visions. We had to find the equilibrium, where *without the bodies, we could not experience the space, and without the space, we could not feel the presence of the bodies.*

Figure 1

The Central Hall of the Post Office Building. Still from the video; directed by Attila Antal, cinematography: Kiril Shentevski



According to Merleau-Ponty (2012)³, our bodily experience shapes how we perceive our surroundings; thus, the corporeality of space is intrinsically linked to the corporeality of the body. The bodies acting within the space should bring life and immediacy to it, grounding the abstract qualities of the environment into a visceral experience. This interplay can extend beyond the superficial engagement with the space to invoke a deeper dialogue between the performers and their environment. This dialogue can encapsulate the subtleties of physical movement as a means through which dancers not only interact with but also reinterpret their surroundings. Throughout the duration of this interplay, the bodies and the space inform and shape each other in a pursuit of reaching a multi-layered experience. Through the concept of the “lived body,” Merleau-Ponty asserts that the body is not merely an object in the world but a primary means of relating to it. In our choreographic intervention in the abandoned

³ Merleau-Ponty (2012) posits that human perception is fundamentally embodied; it is through our physicality that we encounter the world. He proposes that consciousness is rooted in our bodily experiences. This theory extends to the perception of space, suggesting that our understanding of environments is deeply influenced by our bodily engagement with them.

central hall of the Post Office⁴ building the dancers occupied and inhabited the architectural space with a physical presence and emotional intent. The architecture, with its scars from the past, became a participant in the performance, as visible traces of trauma and decay prompted responses from the dancers. Their movements echoed the emotional resonance of the space, creating an intimate relationship that transformed both the bodies and the environment they engaged with.

Figure 2

The Telephone Hall of the Post Office building with the dancers. Still from the video; directed by Attila Antal, cinematography: Kiril Shentevski.



Challenge #2: The Translation of the Character of the Space into a Performative Action

Dance mediates between the aesthetic of the architecture and the intimate portrayal of human emotion, creating a rich tapestry of experience. This mediation occurred between the dancers' bodies and the architectural structures; between the choreographer and the dancers; and between the director's overall concept and the choreographer. As highlighted by Benjamin (1969), environments can significantly influence the perception and reception of art, positing that a space imbued with historical and emotional resonance can actively

⁴ The Main Post Office building in the centre of Skopje, North Macedonia, a Brutalist centrepiece in the city's post-earthquake urban landscape, was built in two phases in 1974 and 1982 (architect: Janko Konstantinov). The central hall burned down under dubious circumstances in 2013. Since then the general public does not have access to this part of the building, although the rest of it is still in function. Initiatives to reconstruct or use this part of the building (e.g. as a space for artistic interventions, performances, etc.) usually hits the walls of political power struggles.

shape a narrative. Site-specific dance embraces this notion, allowing the dancers' bodies to engage with their surroundings as equal partners. In our case the dilapidated architecture presented a backdrop steeped in historical trauma, which could easily overshadow the movement. The risk was that the expressive potential of the dance might be eclipsed by the visual dominance of the space. The work of the director and the choreographer was essential in avoiding this reductive outcome: they had to drive the dancers to probe deeper into the corporeal relationship, i.e. their bodily response to their environment.

Level Two: Two-Dimensional Space

The embodied experience cultivated by the dancers allowed the viewers to resonate with the space's emotional and historical weight. The architecture was recontextualised from a static element into a dynamic participant that shaped and was shaped by the movements within it. The dance acted as a form of social commentary, a critique of the unfolding narratives represented by the architecture. By embodying the space, the dancers weaved together a story, prompting audiences to confront the emotional burden carried by the remnants of the past.

In our case this experience had to be confined to the two-dimensional space of the video format, where we had to choreograph the camera movements to capture the essence of the visceral interaction developed between the dancers' bodies and the elements of the space. The tools we used to convey the bodily experience into video format were: the interaction between the space; the dancers and the camera movements; the specific angles of the shots; the lengths of the action; the rhythm and the tempo of the editing; and the overall soundscape of the film. During this process, we had to be careful not to be overwhelmed either by the movements, the space or the technical interventions at our hands, and to create an audiovisual work that invites the audience to experience the space virtually.

Level Three: Virtual Spatial Experience

Finally, as this dance film was an integral part of our immersive performance, we had to highlight the translation of the two-dimensional space of the screen into the bodily experience of the audience in the final segment of the performance. How is it possible transport the audience into a space that they cannot physically enter, in a way that makes them not only *stare into it* but also truly *experience it*? We had to make the audience feel as if they were immersed in the space together with the dancers through the eye of the camera. There were two levels of engagement : (1) the physical presence of the audience in front of the building itself, where they stopped and were instructed to find a spot where they could focus comfortably on the subsequent audio-visual experience; (2) the aural space of the video. Until this point, the audience walked around the city, experiencing its spaces through audio narrations

and soundscapes with the occasional video interventions, thus getting used to the additional aural layer of the walking experience. In this final segment, where we chose not to use field recordings, or actual sounds from the space, but only a very imposing musical score, the same aural space enveloped the dancers who experienced the space directly with their bodies, and the audience who were invited to watch them, thus creating a common aural space where this transportation into the exclusive space could happen on a personal, intimate level.

Figure 3

Bodies in Eternal Spatial Loops. Still from the video directed by Attila Antal, cinematography: Kiril Shentevski



Conclusion

Exploring the corporeality of spaces through the presence and the actions of the bodies interacting with them, we infer that in an ideal performative setup, without the bodies, we cannot experience the space, and without the space, we cannot feel the presence of the bodies.

A performance can foster an understanding that blurs the lines between space, body, history and memory, evoking a dialogue with? emotional meaning. The dancers' movements serve as catalysts for re-examining our relationships with environments defined by trauma, beauty, and resilience, ultimately deepening our awareness of how we inhabit and are shaped by the spaces in which we find ourselves.

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