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Dancing Practices: Seeing and Sensing the Moving Body

Susanne Ravn

ABSTRACT
This article aims to explore the relation between body and space – specifically how the relation between the embodied awareness of movement and the sense of one’s body-space can be modified and changed deliberately in different kinds of dance practices. Using a multi-sited design, the ethnographical fieldwork, which formed the empirical ground for the study, was from the outset focused on acknowledging the diversity of the dancers’ practices. Each in their own way, the 13 professional dancers involved in the study relate to and experience bodied potentialities, body-space and the spatiality of movement differently. Through their practice, they indicate that the body image is shaped through a multisensorial process of reification, and that seeing is to be related to a broader perceptual engagement. Furthermore, they exemplify how seeing can be deliberately used to expand the sense of their body-space and thereby to affect the spatiality of the fields of their embodied interaction.

Keywords
body image, body-space, professional dancers, seeing, sensorial awareness, spatiality of movement

This article concerns the relation between body and space - specifically how the relation between the embodied awareness of movement and the sense of space can be modified and changed deliberately. With reference to how bodily matters have taken up a central place in sociology since the 1980s, Blackman states that bodies are to be conceived as ‘processes which extend into and are immersed in the world’ (2012: 1). The body manifests the physical factuality of a body-subject, but - as Blackman emphasises - this does not in any way mean that the body denotes a
privileged and stable centre of perception. Instead, and as is implicit in the notion of embodiment, the bodied carnality is best understood as a field ‘which only ever has a partial grip on the world and which constantly interacts with other fields’ (Crang and Thrift, 2000: 19). At the same time, cultural geographical descriptions of socialised practices have brought to the fore that space is to be understood as both process and in process (e.g. Crang and Thrift, 2000; Massey, 2005; McCormack, 2013). Space is loaded with political agendas, socialised behaviours and environmental restrictions on how to move. Accordingly, the dynamics enabling any production of the spatiality of the fields of embodied interactions also involves a ‘body-in-process’ undergoing qualitative changes (Massumi, 2002: 7ff.). In other words, an exploration of how space is produced necessarily also requests an analytical awareness of how potentialities of the body and the spatiality of movement unfold as space is taking shape.

Cases like sudden makeovers and cosmetic surgery (Featherstone, 2010), transplantations (Shildrick, 2008, 2010), amputations and processes of incorporating prosthesis (Sobchack, 2010) present cases of bodily changes which disrupt the way the body ‘normally’ functions as a silent backdrop for intentional actions (Shildrick, 2008, 2010). Because of deliberate choices or trauma inducing sudden changes, the body appears as an alien other. These processes of corporeal breakdown thereby precipitate a newfound awareness of the body (e.g. Shildrick, 2008; Sobchack, 2010). Described in depth by Sobchack in her analysis of her experiences of a leg prosthesis taking up the body-space of the phantom limb of her leg, boundaries of the body are created rather than fixed in an objective reality (Sobchack, 2010). Through her analysis, she makes us aware that our sense of space is not only based on how our bodied potentialities are related to the possible space(s) of otherness, but also how our carnal realities are experienced as a body-space. The alien otherness of the body induced because of sudden change thereby exemplifies how space is also grounded and literally incarnated through the body.
Less dramatically, learning a new skill presents another and more familiar situation that requires us to create another kind of awareness of our body compared to our everyday mode of taking the body for granted. Learning to swim, for example, demands that beginners involve themselves in consciously coordinating the movement of arms, legs and breathing patterns, figuring out, in a bodily sense, how the body can be worked to make the skills become a familiar way of using their bodies. Decades ago, Leder (1990) suggested that in the process of incorporating, for example, swimming skills, we ‘act to the skill qua thematized goal’ and when we have learned and incorporated the skill as a body technique, we can act ‘from’ the skill towards something else. The body technique has been incorporated and forms part of the structure of the body (Leder, 1990: 32) and, not least, how the spatiality of this practice is (expected) to unfold. Although these processual changes of how we sense our body are far less visible than bodily changes related to surgery and amputation, the newly acquired skill also induces changes to the felt ways of taking up a body-space. This calls for further exploration and description. With reference to Massumi’s (2002: 7ff.) description of the production of the spatiality of the fields of embodied interaction a more specific exploration of how such practice-based changes of the body-space can affect the spatiality of movement is, accordingly, required. In cases of expertise training, practitioners do not only show up for their training to learn new skills or repeat their incorporated body techniques at a specified physical intensity. They are also actively involved in a continuous process of developing different ways of examining – and thereby processing – their body and movement skills anew. As movement experts, they possess a mastery of movement, but this mastery is not only that from which they operate upon the world, as suggested by Leder. In different ways, their expertise entails an active involvement in embodied explorations of what might be optimised, modified and changed in the way they move and sense their bodies (Damkjær, 2015; Ingerslev, 2013; Legrand and Ravn, 2009; Ravn and Christensen, 2014). As philosopher and former dancer Montero (2010, 2013)
argues, for the elite athlete as well as the dancer on stage, the unexamined moving body will simply not be worth moving. Professional dancers present a domain of practices in which the potentials of the body are constantly questioned and explored, not only to optimise their performance, but also to be able to change their way of moving according to the different aesthetic and expressive demands characterising the performances of which they are part. Relating more explicitly to Sobchack’s descriptions, the dancers’ practices are accordingly expected to specifically involve an active exploration of what their body-space can be like.

The aim of this article is to explore how bodied potentials, body-space(s) and the spatiality of movement unfold in different kinds of dance practices. As will be made clear in the subsection on method, the practices of the 13 professional dancers involved in the study differ in relation to both the ideals of what the body is to be like when dancing and how space and interactional possibilities are addressed. Within the cultural domain of professional dance in Europe, the study has, from the outset, been designed to involve a diversity of dance practices. Before turning to a more detailed description of how this diversity was acknowledged in the design, method and analysis of the study, I will specify how the study is both indebted and connected to how the relation between body and space has been analysed and discussed in dance research.

Body and Spaces in Transformation in Dance Research

Undoubtedly, history, political discourses and local cultures have influenced how and where dances can be danced and how different kinds of dance training can unfold. Both the practices of dancing and dance performances are part of social spaces and present habitual ways of moving the dancing body (e.g. Buckland, 2006; Foster, 1996; Hammergren, 2012; Vedel, 2011). Dance, bodies and spaces are in that sense loaded with meaning before the dancers even begin thinking about dancing in the studio, on the
stage or at the sites. However, it would be a mistake to think of the dancers’ practices and their ways of unfolding their bodied potentials in performance only as a matter of displaying the outcome of a specialised socialisation and culturalisation of their bodied potentials. As indicated in the introduction, the artistic domain of dance is also characterised by the practitioners’ ability to challenge, break and confront habitual ways of conceiving themselves, sensing and being with others and the environment. Choreographers and dancers have continuously managed also to actively play with and challenge our expectations and experiences of what the body can be like in movement and how space and the bodies moving can be orchestrated (Briginshaw and Burt, 2009; Foster, 2002; Lepecki, 2004). Choreographers and dancers have, for example, highlighted and questioned how relational aspects of movement can be challenged and decomposed (e.g. Cunningham, 1991; Hay, 2000; Spier, 2011), experimented with how the conjunction between body and space – and the interfaces it creates – are in process (e.g. Briginshaw, 2001) and challenged our sense of place and space (e.g. Damkjær, 2015; Foster, 2011: 179 ff.; Hunter, 2015; McCormack, 2013; Rouhiainen, 2012).

In her genealogical analysis of choreography, Foster (2011) first highlights how choreography can be understood as the act of arranging patterns of movement and, second, links this act to how the body and the self–other relation has been thought of very differently from the 1700s and onwards. For the first generation of modern dancers,1 who found their feet in the first half of the 20th century, space was more specifically addressed as a universal medium of the dancers’ movement. As Foster highlights, with specific reference to the dancer and dance instructor Martha Hill, space was envisioned as ‘the void into which the body projected various shapes and energies’ (2011: 48). In this phase of contemporary dance, dancers were in different ways focused on challenging the ballet tradition of cultivating the dancer’s body and on finding alternative approaches to how the bodied potentials could be unfolded through deliberate training. The generation of
dancers from the 1960s onwards – often referred to as the postmodern dancers – focused on questioning when and where dance could be danced as well as which kind of bodies were to dance in a dance performance (e.g. Banes, 1994: 207–26). During the last two decades, dance practitioners have positioned themselves and their work as artistic research within the domain of academia. Relating to their embodied practices as fundamental to their research approach, they contribute to recent discussions regarding, for example, cultural geography (e.g. McCormack, 2013) and phenomenology (e.g. Kozel, 2007; Rouhiainen, 2003). In particular, artistic research related to site-specific events and performances has formed the basis for embodied considerations of how we conceive of place and space. For example, Gore (2010) and Kloetzel (2010) have indicated how this kind of explorative practice might potentially succeed in ‘unfixing’ places. Kloetzel further argues that the dancer from a practice-based perspective can trigger shifts in the limitations of the terminology of space and place, for example by testing how site-specific research can be used to actively invoke the connoted freedom related to the concept of space (2010: 137). Kloetzel thereby presents a practice-based academic position from which to challenge conceptual notions of space, place as well as the transitional characteristics of non-place. Grounded in both cultural geography and the practice of dancing, McCormack suggests we think of bodies as ‘relational matrices’ (2013: 2), which are composed of multiple capacities for making sense of the world. Furthermore, he pursues this way of thinking of the body in his practice-based research living in a corridor of a Dance Space² for a week. In accordance with Kloetzel’s insistence on performing her research in an embodied way, McCormack actively engages in a practice-based process of transformation, to learn to think through and within spaces produced for and by moving bodies, at the site chosen.

The ethnographical fieldwork in which I engaged to explore body-spaces in many ways resonates with McCormack’s (2013) descriptions of how he experiments with experiences in his site-specific fieldwork. In line with McCormack, the practice-based involvement of
the fieldwork aimed at capturing some of the non-representational aspects of the moving body. However, compared to McCormack’s site-specific work, the relation to place and site did not have a primary role. Instead, different kinds of dance environments, and different dance techniques and ways of approaching the body and movement in the daily practice of dancing, were the primary focus for my participation and observations. As will be explicitly presented in the following section, in a metaphorical sense, I used my own body as a laboratory to be able to follow the relational (and incorporated) infrastructure of the different dance practices. I experimented with experience in the sense that I used my own body to explore the ways in which the dancers intentionally handle their sensorial awareness in movement.

**Generating Descriptions of Different Dance Practices**

The ethnographical fieldwork carried out as multi-sited (Marcus, 1995). By drawing on my own training history in Rhythmic Sports Gymnastics at an international level and in different kinds of dance techniques in which I have trained to the level of professional dancers, the selection of sites and dancers was actively informed by my experiences and competences as an elite athlete and dancer.

Establishing the different fields of research thereby, quite literally, became a constitutional process, which actively demanded agency and choices, made by the researcher (Amit, 2000; Marcus, 1995). When performing the ethnographical fieldwork, I included my embodied competence. That is, except for the observations performed at the Royal Ballet, I participated in the workshops and training sessions on an equal footing with all the other dancers who had signed up for the workshops and classes. Besides generating observational notes from a practice-based perspective, this also meant that the interviews were developed from the starting point of the context of the interviewee’s experiences and aimed at inviting descriptions based on the particular environment and daily praxis of each of the dancers. To be more specific: through the active participation
in workshops and training, I gained access to the dancers’ process of verbalisation and conceptualisation in direct relation to their praxis of movement and ways of handling their body (Ravn and Hansen, 2013). Furthermore, in both the informal and formal interviews, I used descriptions of my second-person perspective of the dancer’s practices in combination with my own first-person perspective of participating in the same practice to create a creative tension for generating still further descriptions of how they use their embodied awareness, sense of movement and interaction in their practice (Ravn and Hansen, 2013).

The differences between the dancers’ practices also meant that I had to critically question and develop my own body techniques and related experiences of body and space in relation to each of the dancers’ practices. In accordance with ethnographical fieldwork in general, I used my dance experiences and my own body as tools ‘par excellence’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) throughout the process of generating data to follow how each dancer shaped the possible potentials of the ‘body-in-process’ differently. However, it should be noted that, in their on-going exploration of their body, the dancers scrutinise both their skills and their sensational awareness differently (Claid, 2006; Foster, 1996; Potter, 2008). Like the different kinds of movement skills characterising the dancer, the heightened awareness and trained ways of using embodied awareness are not to be understood as a universal kind of kinaesthetic awareness used in different degrees (Rothfield, 2005). Therefore, I considered it a central feature of my involvement in the fieldwork that I also aimed to use the differences between the dancers’ practices to actively question and re-question if or how I would have to disturb my own expertise to develop a still better embodied understanding of their experiences (Ravn and Hansen, 2013). In other words, I used the diversity of the dancers’ practices to constructively challenge my own embodied experiences and to question anew the way I tended to conceive of movement and use sensorial awareness. In that sense, I aimed at critically questioning how my own embodied competences implicitly framed the
generation of data. As presented in the previous subsection the idea was to use ‘my body as a laboratory’ - to experiment with experiences (McCormack, 2013) – to be able to constructively follow the dancers’ descriptions on the premises of their ideas, approaches and dance environments. As I have discussed elsewhere, to invite the diversity of practices to enrich the descriptions and the analyses requires the researcher to challenge herself, being aware that differences also unfold in unexpected ways. One has to be aware not only of the differences, but also the possible difference of differences, of the practices (Ravn, 2012).

All of the 13 dancers had an international reputation at the time of the fieldwork. Four of the dancers were employed as solo dancers or soloists at the Royal Ballet in Copenhagen. Another four were connected to the Magpie Music and Dance Company based in Amsterdam, as well as being freelance artists. Three dancers I met individually in Brussels, London and Copenhagen, respectively. They worked in the domain of contemporary dance, but related to very different training histories. The last two dancers primarily worked with techniques and performances related to Body Mind Centring (BMC) and Butoh dance. These two dancers were both living and working in Copenhagen when the fieldwork was performed. The participant observations and informal and formal interviews all took place over a period of 17 months. Generally, I followed each of the 13 dancers for a week on two or three occasions in the different cities and places where they trained and performed. In the phase of analysis, the dancers’ practices were handled as 13 single cases. This meant that observational notes and interviews with each of the dancers were read through several times to identify central themes of this dancer’s practices. The themes thereby denote certain ‘within-case generalisations’ (Stake, 1995: 7), which recur for the dancer’s practices. In a later phase, theoretically informed themes were generated across these within-case generalisations. For the analysis of this study, ‘space’ and ‘the sense of seeing’ became central themes across the cases. The following section presents descriptions of how space is thought of
and coped with very differently by the dancers involved in the ethnographical fieldwork. The presentation thereby contextualises the dancers’ practices and - so to say - sets the stage for the analysis.

**Different Kinds of Dance Practices – Different Spaces for Movement**

For the four ballet dancers and the three dancers working with different contemporary techniques, considerations concerning space were primarily related to the physical conditions of rehearsal and performance situations, for example when the rehearsals of choreographies were to be taken from the studio to the stage. One of the ballet dancers, CBAL, explained: ‘Space is more something you put on afterwards and it becomes more of a sense of how much you move’, while the contemporary dancer ECTMP related the concept of space to ‘geographical adjustments’. Across differences in their techniques, these seven dancers related to the concept of space as if space constitutes an external framework for orientating and figuring out the right timing of the distances to be covered in the choreographed sequences of steps and movement patterns. Their way of thinking of space seems comparable with the description of space as being ‘the void’ into which the moving body projects shapes and energies, as Foster (2011: 48) brings to the fore in her descriptions of modern dance.

In the improvisation-based performances of Magpie, the dancers often moved around between audiences and played with leaving and entering the set stage or area(s) for performance in different ways. For example, in one of their performances, the improvisation developed so as to include the bar, which, placed in a room in close connection to the stage, was partly hidden from the audience. In the same performance, the dancers also used the backstage exit to run out and around the building to enter the performance environment from behind the area where the audience was seated. The space of the performance was neither pre-set, intentionally created nor determined
beforehand, but became defined on the condition of the improvisation.

Each in their own way, the four dancers connected to the Magpie Company described space as already filled with the presence or reminiscences of presence of others. In that sense, space was conceived as defined through and inviting of relational possibilities and, accordingly, the Magpie dancers first of all thought of their moving body as actively forming part of an organic network of relations. In the interview, dancer HMAG emphasises: ‘Space is real. Time is perceived by movement in space. … It is in space I hear – it is in space I see – it is in space my skin works – within space every sense I feel is made real.’ Referring to his experiences in working with choreographed performances, another Magpie dancer, IMAG, explains that in a set choreography he is ‘measuring space’, while in improvisation he ‘is part of space’. In the workshops I joined, instructions about how to think of space in movement were, for example, expressed by HMAG as: ‘Keep the space moving – don’t think about how you move – space moves you.’

Some of the Magpie dancers also emphasised that space is first and foremost to be heard. As HMAG explicates: ‘Sound gives you a completely different extension of space … the ears extend through the walls – the eyes don’t.’ Through hearing, the spatial relation of their improvised movement was connected to, for example, the musicians playing in the room next door or the sounds from the street outside. Accordingly, still referring to a certain physicality of their sense of space, they used hearing to expand and go beyond the physical space that can be measured by the eyes.

Each in their own way, the techniques of BMC and Butoh dance are focused on working with transformative processes. In BMC, practitioners combine exploring and experiencing anatomical and physiological mechanisms of the body by turning to sensations stemming from an inner sensation of the body’s physicality. The explorations are based on the practitioners’ focus on moving with the qualities they sense originating from, for example, the different visceral organs and fluids of the body as well as the skeletal system. That is, a focus involving an active exploration of the body as a micro- cosmos of cells
organised into organs, fluids, bones and muscles. In practice, this means that a BMC workshop might begin with a thorough anatomical and physiological description of, for example, a specific visceral organ – such as the kidneys. Guided by the BMC teacher, practitioners would then focus on finding a felt connection to the kidneys and explore how this organ might inform their movement. The practice of BMC can involve partner work, for example a partner may place her hands on the skin covering the area of the lower back, where the kidneys are, to catalyse an attentional awareness in relation to the organ. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, who is considered the founder of BMC, explains the practice as a re-education of the body, in which process the practitioners become aware of what the body is and what the mind is (Cohen, 2008). In this sense, transformations derive from the process of working with an inner awareness of the anatomy and materiality of the body.

Butoh dance originates from Japan and is inspired by Zen Buddhist thinking. Often, performances can be characterised as dominated by relatively slow movements (Ravn, 2009: 108). The training is focused on transforming the energy and presence of the dancer (Fraleigh, 2010) and closely related to a striving towards a ‘hypersensitive’ awareness to make the dancers able to ‘tap into a universal consciousness, bridging a gap between “self” and “other”’ (Hassel, 2005: 16). One of the dancers working with Butoh dance focuses on working with processes of transformation by turning her awareness to different kinds of materiality, for example by moving with the weight of the stone or the weight of the mist (e.g. Ravn and Hansen, 2013). In both BMC and Butoh dance, practitioners focus on processes of transformation, but the two differ in relation to whether transformations are perceived as internally or externally related – towards the microcosm of the corporeality of the body or the macrocosm of the universe.

In accordance with the general descriptions of BMC- and Butoh-related training, energy transformation is the key focus in the daily praxis of the two dancers who work with a combination of these techniques. The focus on energy transformation means that
they consider the shape of the moving body as secondary to the transformation of energy. In performances, the movement sequences are set, but the length of each sequence is based on day-to-day variations as well as related to cultural and social variations of how the dancer senses the audience and her body in the actual performance. According to the dancers, they perform the movement sequences in an improvised way. The music, which is based on electronically sampled soundscapes, is played live and follows the dancer’s timing of the sequences. For both dancers, their ongoing exploration of movement and energy transformation is strongly connected to their understanding of space. In relation to the process of creating a performance, dancer LBMC emphasises that, for her, space is more important than anything else to define her sense of energy for movement.

It is a positioning in space that is also a defining of space, in other words what kind of space it is. This is something I then try to create in my imagination... It is various qualities of energy, for example under the sea, on a cloud, in the womb – wherever. In that way, then, space plays a part in defining the choreography’s quality of energy to a very, very, very great extent.

Each in their own way, these two dancers describe their body as a materiality in continuous interplay with different kinds of spaces. A shift in a sensed energy is thus closely connected to an experience of exchanging the sense of their body with a sense of a corporeal imaginary of spaces. As these imagined spaces are experienced as being rooted in and part of corporeality, their bodies are not just located in space. The space they relate to also originates from how they conceive the physical materiality of the body.

**Seeing and Sensing the Moving Body**

In daily classes, the four ballet dancers train their ability to manipulate movement by focusing their sense of movement around being aligned and placed, where ‘aligned’ refers
to an ideal balancing of the limbs according to a vertical line and ‘placed’ refers to how they sense their centre is connected to important reference lines within their body. As has already been described by different dance scholars, the ballet dancers’ sense of being aligned and placed forms a basic frame of reference for their internalised sense of movement, but at the same time the feeling of being aligned and placed is also part of a continuous process of hard work in which they constantly work on shaping their bodies to be able to control movement according to the ideal ballet body (e.g. Claid, 2006: 17ff.; Grau, 2005). Ballet dancers aim at presenting the body and ballet positions correctly, and are constantly measuring their movements against the ideal moving ballet body. Not surprisingly, the mirror is used as an important working tool for the ballet dancers and all studios at the Royal Ballet are equipped with mirrors on one, two or three of the walls. However, as should become clear in the further description of their practices, it would be a mistake to interpret the ballet dancers’ expertise as solely fixed on an evaluation of what they see in the mirror.

Ballet dancer DBAL describes it as a turning point in her ballet education when she realised that dancing ballet ‘was about sensing the sequence of movement instead of positions. To move from A to B in a way where the path between became important.’ The emphasis on movement also becomes evident in the ballet dancers’ descriptions of how they engage in the techniques of modern/contemporary dance, which are part of their education and the competences they are expected to master. The different contemporary techniques generally challenge them to let go of the vertical (and positional) control of their balance. Ballet dancer CBAL explains: ‘[in contemporary dance] something can be thrown, where in classical everything is placed and everything has a position and a frame that you can expand through.’ The latter part of her description hits a central point of the ballet dancers’ description of their practice: ballet ‘positions’ are never frozen or still. Any ‘position’ is handled as an extension of their body-space – a silent movement in which they shape the lines of their body to continue ‘out’ in space, loading these embodied lines
with intentional indications.

The ballet dancers also explain that they experience their body as they see it in the mirror as forming a counterpart to their ‘sensing from inside’. They emphasise that they combine their sense of sight and their internalised sense of movement to continuously nurse and correct what their movement should look and feel like (see also Ravn, 2009: 205–13). Again, standing in place at the ballet barre in front of the mirror in daily classes, the dancers are never ‘just standing still’ while being focused on seeing themselves as others see them. Massumi (2002) presents the mirror-vision on the basis of how Ronald Reagan sees himself on a screen exactly as the director sees him simultaneously. He notes that the camera as well as the mirror reflects the body from only one angle. In the register of the mirror-vision, there is thus only a single axis of Reagan’s body in sight. ‘Mirror-vision is by definition partial’ (Massumi, 2002: 48). However, the way in which Reagan, an actor (and not a very good one, as Massumi notes), checked out the look of his body does not easily map on to the praxis of the ballet dancers. When preparing as well as performing plié’s and tendus in front of the mirror, they cannot as professional dancers afford to get stuck in checking out the look of their bodies. As earlier argued, the competences of their movement expertise is for the ballet dancers – as for any professional dancer – grounded in a continuous experimentation regarding how to work with their sense of their body and their movement vocabulary. Massumi furthermore presents the concept of movement-vision specifically to connote the register of the felt body and it seems plausible to contend that, despite actively using the mirror, the ballet dancers’ practices are best characterised in accordance with the register of the movement-vision. Drawing on Massumi’s writing, Featherstone (2006, 2010) emphasises that mirror-vision relates to a reflexive evaluation of the appearance of the body and, in line with Massumi’s descriptions, Featherstone (2010) emphasises that the affective and felt body – and thereby the register of movement-vision – threatens to disrupt the way one sees the body. Seeing never works only according to the mirror-vision spectre, but is
always also informed and loaded with haptic sensations. Featherstone’s description – that ‘one does not see with the eyes but feels with the eyes’ - in many ways captures the ballet dancers’ descriptions of how they look at themselves in the mirror (2010: 205). However, I find it important to emphasise that the ballet dancers’ competences are not threatened with disruption by the felt body. Rather, the felt body is actively used as a constructive resource. In other words, it would be a reduction of the ballet dancers’ practice to refer to it as if ballet dancers check out one sensorial awareness and then measure and evaluate this sensation against another - like shifting registers between mirror-vision versus movement-vision. What is at stake in their practice is a sensorial awareness that works in a deeply intertwined way. The ballet dancers expand their sense of the lines they see in the mirror as well as look in the mirror to see the felt connection between body limbs, internalising the external eye and externalising the internal felt sense of their movement.

Obviously, ballet dancers are sometimes focused on checking out how they look in the mirror (like Reagan checking himself out on the screen). Still, the point is that this is not the way they use the mirror as a tool during their training. Rather, in their practice, they exemplify how seeing can form a constructive part of movement-vision. In his discussion of how the body is much more than surface and appearance, Featherstone also involves the concept of the body image, which he defines as the ‘mental image of one’s body as it appears to others’ (2010: 194). He indicates that the body image equals a visual ‘mirror-image mode’ and that it stands in contrast to the proprioceptive senses and intensities of affect related to the moving body (Featherstone, 2010). Obviously, analysing the body in consumer culture presents a different research interest in the body compared to analysing dancers’ practices of movement. Featherstone’s analysis focuses on bodily self-transformation and lifestyle transformation, and constructively criticises the idea that a new body image can be understood as ‘the key to a new positive self-image, exciting lifestyle and better quality of life’ (2010: 197). From the point of view of a dancer, who is constantly involved in experimenting with experience of
movement, it seems arbitrary to introduce an analytical divide between the body seen and the body felt. As the ballet dancers’ descriptions strongly exemplify, they reify their sensorial experiences of their body to be able to measure their sense of their movement against an ideal, but it would be a mistake to understand this process of reification as based on a dichotomy of a body seen versus a body felt. The ballet dancers exemplify that the reifying processes are neither bound to nor defined by seeing. Rather, the processes of reification are in complex ways related to multisensorial sensations of the body moving. Accordingly, the concept of body image, as presented by Featherstone, might be reconsidered if the concept is to be constructively used in analyses of movement expertise - such as professional ballet dancing.

Phenomenologist Shaun Gallagher (2005) offers a definition of the concept of the body image that is based on a constructive critique of how Merleau-Ponty uses the concept of the body image versus the body schema in a non-consistent way and of the diverse ways of defining the concepts in philosophical and neuroscientific related domains of research. Compared to Featherstone’s concept of the body image, Gallagher’s definition is not based on a critique of current sociological analyses of the body but on a critical exploration of the possible structures that might underlie our experiences. Gallagher emphasises that the body image originates in intersubjective perceptual experience and that it involves a partly abstract and articulated representation of the body as well as it includes conscious monitoring of movement and the possibility of taking an objective stance (2005: 25–30, 141). Like Featherstone, he thus emphasises that the body image is intersubjectively defined and contextually embedded. Still, I find that Gallagher is more successful in taking account of the multisensorial contributions to the reifying processes that underlie (dancers’) representational experiences of the body. Thus, according to Gallagher’s definition, closing the eyes and focusing on proprioceptive-kinaesthetic sensations to check one’s alignment in a ballet movement can be considered a possible adjustment of the body image. Furthermore, the body image also involves reference to
how the body should feel when performing a specific skill, just as the body image relates to how the boundaries of the body are to be felt and experienced when involved in different kinds of relational movements. The three contemporary dancers’ practices – presented in the following – further emphasise the need for understanding the body image as possibly including a representationally related experience of the body, which is grounded in proprioceptive-kinaesthetic sensations.

In different ways, the practices of the three contemporary dancers are informed by their way of sensing gravity working on their body. To initiate a sequence of movement, they create a kinetic relationship with space, for example by letting the momentum of a part of the body work on and affect the rest of the body, by using the relaxation and fall of some part of the body to create kinetic energy and by letting the centre of gravity pass beyond the surface of support. For example, dancer GCTMP describes:

> When I think space, then I think which direction to give a movement and that again has to do with weight. If I am to go in some direction or other, then I have to, like, direct my weight – give my body’s fall a direction. That also means that you don’t have to think as much about what the body is doing – in itself – but think more about getting your body going in space.

In another part of the interview, he further explains: ‘As an image – you can picture for yourself that you are building channels – just as though you were preparing to empty a pond. And in that way the material [minor movement sequence] I give in my classes, that’s like channel-building.’

Like the ballet dancers, this contemporary dancer thinks of his body as moving in space. However, instead of focusing on the verticality of his body to control space and to constantly check his positions in the mirror, he focuses on controlling and recreating kinetic-informed paths of movement. ‘Channel building’ works as a metaphor for how GCTMP focuses his embodied awareness on proprioceptive-kinaesthetic sensations and
measures his felt sense of the movement against former experiences of how proprioceptive-kinaesthetic sensations are to unfold to ‘build the right channels’ in space. Without being placed in front of a mirror, his practice includes conscious monitoring and evaluation of how the movement flows: how the momentum of one part of the body takes other parts of the body - and the whole body - into a longer combination of movement. In that sense, the proprioceptive-kinaesthetic sensations relate to a ‘partly abstract and articulated representational idea of the body’. The contemporary dancer GCTMP guides his sense awareness by using kinaesthetic and proprioceptive sensations as the primary sensations to control the way he takes the weight of his body into sequences of movement. In this sense, the proprioceptive- kinaesthetic sensations are central to the dancer’s body image and thereby his evaluation of what his body movement should be like when dancing.

Exploring and Transforming the Body-space

When the Magpie dancers work with seeing in workshops, instructions and exercises are specifically focused on how they see. That is, the dancers focus on adjusting and experimenting with how different ways of seeing when moving within an environment can be used actively to initiate or invite certain qualities of interaction and movement. Seeing is, for example, described as related to ‘long, middle and short’ distances of seeing and, in workshops, the dancers were asked to work in pairs while adjusting their seeing to one of the distances and to maintain this mode of seeing while improvising ways of moving across the floor together. The participants were encouraged to investigate how movements and interactions with their partner changed according to the different modes of seeing – and how they could change between these modes to use them as a tool for playing with ways of interacting when improvising.

Similarly, but also differently, the two dancers working with Butoh- and BMC-related
techniques include different sensorial strategies to deliberately use seeing as a way of changing their sense of their body. The two dancers describe how they work on making themselves transparent to the energies as they experience these energies in relation to environments by changing their way of seeing, or rather: how the body sees. When dancer MBMC works on a sense of transparency in relation to a site-specific environment, she describes how she will change her way of seeing into what she describes as a defocused mode in which she aims to see everything at once. When the same dancer works with a sense of transparency related to imagined spaces, she closes her eyes to be able to sense the space appearing and to move from a feeling of being in and with the kind of inner landscape that appears as connected to the imagined spaces. The two dancers also work with a sense of ‘sending’ their eyes to certain parts of the body with the intention of strengthening their sense of extension and expansion outwards in space so that their sense of the body does not end at the surface of their skin. For instance, they worked with a sense of ‘seeing’ from the spinal column by either sending their eyes to their feet or sending them up and out through their skull. In that sense, they practise seeing as a way of extending and expanding the body itself.

Using vision according to different modes of seeing or using seeing as an affair of the whole body, as exemplified by the Magpie dancers and Butoh- and BMC-dancers, respectively, indicates that we are to be aware of seeing in an even wider sense - and not least of how the sense of seeing is used to actively shape and expand interactional relations. The dancers not only exemplify Featherstone’s point that we also feel with the eyes, but indicate that the sense of seeing can be unfixed from being directly linked to reflexive evaluations of the body. They exemplify that seeing can be related to expanding and outreaching potentialities of the body – and thereby to how the body-space can be sensed differently.

Grosz (1995) has drawn attention to the notion that the conceptions of space and time necessarily correlate with an exploration of corporeality. She specifies that the process of
mimicry correlates with one’s ability to locate oneself as the point of origin or reference in relation to space, which connects very closely to the way space is perceived. The apparent immediacy of here-and-now is an effect of the necessary fact that we live and move in space as bodies in relation to other bodies. Grosz continues by arguing that space, accordingly, has become a mode of apprehension of exterior objects, while time has become a mode of apprehension of the subject’s own interior (1995: 98). Additionally, she brings to the fore the notion that mimicry is the consequence of a representation of space. When the two Butoh- and BMC-related dancers explore their sense of energy, they are involved in processes of transformation by turning to imaginative capabilities through the materially informed conditions of the body. The two dancers illustrate an alternative to the process of mimicry. In their practice, they demonstrate how space can be handled differently than as a medium of here and there, and thereby the one versus the other. In their practice, space is handled as a medium of ‘sharedness’ and movement is thus not experienced as a way of relating, but a way of forming and taking part in a sharedness. Whether focused on the body as a microcosm of interaction or the macrocosm of the universe, these two dancers take their consciousness of their bodies beyond its physical presence. These dancers thereby contest the normative structure of embodiment in a way comparable to Shildrick’s description of how prosthetic replacement of lost and damaged limbs contests particular ‘forms of social imaginary’ of what the body is (Shildrick, 2010: 13). They potentially unfix a social imaginary of how connections and boundaries of the body are expected to be handled and re-enacted in movement. Seeing is thus not strictly an affair of the eyes used to demarcate what is internal versus external, but first and foremost an affair of the whole body. They potentially unfix their sense of the body-space, not because something happened to the carnal realities of their bodies, as in the case of amputation and incorporation of a prosthesis (Sobchack, 2010), but because of their practice-based exploration of movement.
Conclusion

If the body is best understood as a capacity or a set of potentials surprisingly rich in the possibilities of inter-corporealties (Blackman, 2012; Shildrick, 2008), these potentials necessarily also involve a richness in how the spatiality of movement unfolds. Each in their own way, the dancers demonstrate that the interaction between dancer and environment is a subtle matter of how the dancers attend to their experience of otherness when moving. Compared to the different cases of sudden bodily changes and traumas, the professional dancers exemplify how potentials of the body can be unfolded as part of a process driven by the way the dancers intentionally handle their sensorial awareness in movement and thereby actively recast the ‘body-as-process’.

Both the ballet dancers and the three contemporary dancers presented in this article work in relation to set choreographed dance pieces. Whether they relate to an ideal of how the ballet body is to move or aim at ‘building channels’ of movement flows, these dancers relate to their body and measure their movements up against a pre-set orchestration of what their movements should be like when performing on the stage. Despite the differences in how they use embodied awareness, all seven dancers aim at performing a certain control of their body to be able to move in space. Whether they focus their embodied awareness on controlling the verticality of their body or the flow of momentums of body limbs, the spatiality of their movements can be characterised as connected to a continuous demarcation of the boundaries of the body. In their training practices, both the ballet dancers and the three contemporary dancers thereby actively draw on reifications of proprioceptive-kinaesthetic sensations – to register and possibly evaluate what their body is to feel like and what movements are to be sensed. Accordingly, the dancers thereby also exemplify that the sense of the felt body moving constitute a central and very active part of the body image.

Each in their own way, the Magpie dancers and the two dancers working with Butoh-
and BMC-techniques, think of themselves as moving as part of space. Furthermore, rather than being engaged in controlling how the shapes of their bodies and energies of their weighted movements are projected out in space, these dancers actively engage in connecting their movements to the interactional possibilities of other dancers and in transforming their sense of connectedness. Seeing is explored according to different modes – that is, how the eyes can be tuned towards relational interaction by changing the (distance) mode of seeing, or by sending the eyes and the sense of seeing into different body parts. In that sense, seeing becomes an active affair of the whole body. Especially the latter way of sending the eyes into different body parts exemplifies how sensorial awareness and imaginative capabilities can potentially unfix boundaries of the dancer’s body – or, more precisely, their sense of their body-space. To change the mode of seeing can thus be used as a way of gearing oneself differently towards otherness and recasting the possible interactional fields of movement.

As I have indicated and discussed elsewhere (Legrand and Ravn, 2009; Ravn and Christensen, 2014), the experience of dancers is not alien compared to the experience of non-body-experts. Obviously, the dancers’ practices and experiences cannot be straightforwardly generalised to our everyday life. However, when it comes to the understanding of how we come to perceive our body and space as we do, I take these specialised dance practices to highlight potentials of how we can deliberately change our sense of our body-space and thereby the spatiality of the fields of our embodied interaction.

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Notes

1. The conceptualisation and classification of historically and culturally related characteristics of dance and dance performances is – of course – problematic (see for example the discussion by Hammergren, 2009). I use the classifying terminology of different phases of theatre dance in a pragmatic way – drawing on the most common ways still in use – to address the different phases. Accordingly, I use the term contemporary dance as an umbrella notion to denote theatre dance genres other than ballet. Modern dance is primarily used to denote the practices and ways of thinking of dancing characterising the generation of modern dancers performing their dance pieces especially in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s.


3. Ravn’s history of training and expertise as a dancer includes more than 10 years of competing in rhythmic sport gymnastics on an international level, followed by three years of training in classical ballet (five times a week) and on-going training in various contemporary dance techniques for more than ten years.

4. For further presentation of the training histories of these three dancers, see Ravn (2009).

5. BMC is heavily based on the work of dancer and therapist Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (2008). Like, for example, the Alexander technique, Mindfulness and Feldenkrais, BMC is categorised as a somatic practice aiming at re-educating sensing and moving based on certain premises of the body itself. Butoh originates from a Japanese performance practice, which developed as a specific performance form in the post-war period and has spread worldwide within recent decades. The ideas and practices of BMC and Butoh are further described in relation to the sections presenting the practices of the dancers.

6. Besides the theme ‘space’, the themes of ‘the sense of weight as a physical materiality’ and ‘self-consciousness in movement’ have been analysed and discussed elsewhere.

7. Interviews were performed in Danish or English, depending on the preference of the interviewed dancer. The quotes from interviews carried out in Danish have been translated as closely to the spoken word as possible – with the assistance of a professional proof-reader.

8. Plie` and tendu denote specific basic ballet movements – bending and stretching in the standing leg(s) and moving one foot out to a stretched position, respectively.

9. Long, middle and short modes of seeing in praxis relate to how one adjusts the distance to what is to be seen clearly – for example, when holding the hand up in front of the eyes at a distance of about 30 centimetres, one can choose to either focus on the hand (short distance), which means that the background appears fuzzy, or one can choose to focus on what is hanging on the wall 2 metres (middle distance) away, which will make the hand appear fuzzy. Normally, in our everyday life, we make these kinds of adjustments
without any particular sense of awareness. When beginning to deliberately play with how seeing is attuned to different distances, the focus of seeing shifts from being first of all about what one sees to the way – or mode – in which one choses to see.

10. In general, all dancers in the workshop closed their eyes when directing their awareness towards experiences of inner landscapes as these landscapes appeared to them in their imagination.

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