

Dancing in the dark

Dance artist and PhD Candidate at Lancaster University **Ellen Jeffrey** talks about her movement practice that takes place outdoors at night, where she moves with and within an unpolluted night-time darkness



One of the first questions to arise out of a practice of dancing at night is – what is dancing if it isn't visible? Of course, this question makes some problematic assumptions equating movement with visibility and darkness with invisibility. Night's darkness is not a rendering invisible as such, but rather an obscuring and merging of forms which requires – and induces – a more-than-visual perception of the world. As dance scholar André Lepecki suggests, we assume that by taking place in the dark, dance simply “stops giving [us] something to view”. Rather, he continues, dancing in the dark “opts to give something other than its habitual image to view and offer[s] the eye another kind of vision, another substance for its appearing”. To conceive of movement that appears in darkness, that relies upon darkness as a means of manifesting its “substance for appearing” (1), is effectively to consider the dark as a condition for visibility; not a reduction of visibility. Night's darkness is not simply a lack of light, a loss of the visible, but rather a condition in which the visible is present yet actively resisting the notion of clarity which we so readily associate with light. If darkness therefore is indeed a condition for visibility but not a condition for clarity, then movement which takes place in the dark has the potential to appear without definition and without fixture of form.

At night, movement realises in its potential to become what Erin Manning terms “the seeming”, a mode of appearance which is “always alive with

the unseen in-between” (2). At night, we know that this unseen in-between is there: sometimes we can hear it, or touch it, and the mere possibility of the existence of that beyond what is visible is often anticipated with a thrilling mixture of both curiosity and fear. But there is more to it than this: to move in the dark is to move with the dark: to not only actively perceive night's seemingness but to become a part of that seeming, to become perceptible as motion rather than form – for the motion of the body to be tangible as lines of force rather than as the spectacle of its contours (3). This more-than-visual world of the night blurs the relationship between the seeing and the seen; to move within darkness (and perceive movement in darkness) is to unavoidably engage with what Lepecki terms the “unruly potentialities of imagination and speculation” (1) that characterises night-time experience. Night is a world in which what is visually perceived no longer equates to clarity and meaning: a world where the imagination anticipates form rather than recognises it. At night, movement holds within itself the potentiality to be beyond-form, as much as the dark is beyond-vision.

It is unsurprising then, that Lepecki describes choreographies that take place in the dark as “timely choreopolitical acts – acts that go beyond a mere aesthetic play with visual perception, but that indeed open up, through darkness, and build, as darkness, a much needed space of potentiality” (1). This “space of potentiality” affects not just the movement and choreographies of the dance but also the concepts and thoughts which inform and are produced by such dancing: in night's darkness lies the potential to move, with both bodies and thoughts, beyond any graspable coherency in form or meaning. In other words, at night we can encounter “a thought freed from the limitations of what it means to think, and a choreography freed from the limitations of what it means to make a dance” (1). This doesn't necessarily suggest that by dancing at night, and by dancing-as-thinking at night, we move forever in the realm of the incomprehensible; but rather, by moving in/with the dark we encounter and co-create a “space of potentiality” in which alternative ways of moving, and meaning-through-moving can become manifest, ones which do not adhere to the current structures and patterns which are produced and re-produced in spectral and visual realms.

Moving into the dark, moving away from visibility of form and towards the tangibility of motion, is certainly an attempt to overthrow pre-conceived conditions of visibility and what Jane Bennett – in paraphrasing Rancière – refers to as



“the regime of the perceptible” (4) that currently defines what (or who) is perceptible and what (or who) is not. Such disruption to perception equates to Manning’s notion of the seeming, which by its very definition does not require – or ask for – an illumination, or a translation, or to be “made clear” as such, in either form or meaning. Instead, dancing in the dark requires us to “open ourselves to new possibilities of attunement” (5), to re-evaluate our conditions of visibility: to step out of the illuminated spectacle of apparent clarity and towards the obscure unknown of night’s darkness.

A night-time practicing of dance has the potential for movement that is becoming-with the dark: movement that is formed and patterned by the unseen in-between. It therefore becomes possible to speak of a ‘noctographic practice’ in

Above:
Grubbins
Wood,
Cumbria.
Photo:
Ellen Jeffrey

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which we move not only in or with the dark but are moved equally by the dark: such a notion would suggest that movement is not merely obscured by night’s darkness, but rather is shaped by and through it. In non-illuminated nightscapes, we enter into a relational matrix where what emerges always does so with the potential to be re-defined, re-formed, and re-patterned. To consider this is to comprehend the movement of the dancer in the dark not as a single, solid form which carves through an environment but instead as a patterning of potentialities that compose and de-compose within the temporalities of that nightscape. We do not need to ask such a practice to come into the light, to reveal itself to us on our current terms of visibility – instead, it is a matter of re-patterning our conditions of encountering: to step out of the light and into the dark, towards the unknown, and towards conditions of visibility which disrupt those usually upheld values of clarity and illumination. And to accept that whilst there are structures and movements which disappear with the light there are many others which appear – and can only appear – within the dark. As Lepecki suitably suggests “this darkness-beyond becomes another name for full potentiality, and therefore, as we will see, another name for freedom” (1).

Info

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References

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