

Seeing & Being Seen

Unpacking the modalities of perception and experience in Nicola Elliott's *Run!* (2013)

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PART 6

While writing the analysis of Nicola Elliott's *Run!* (2013) my task, as is often necessary when writing *about* dance, was to pull apart, categorise, theorise and posit potential interpretations of the various layers comprising the overall choreographic enquiry. During this process of dissection and interpretation I became increasingly aware of my repeated use of the nouns "viewer" and "spectator", and of the verb "to read", and the genuine feeling of dis-ease I experienced each time I used these terms. The source of my dis-ease stems from my own understanding of the problematic application of these words (and the conceptions of theatre, performance and spectatorship that they represent) to a work that, at a fundamental level, questions and surpasses these modalities of perceiving live performance. As I continued the process of analysing the work, the reductionist effect of reinforcing these conceptions of how live performance is experienced through the *writing* about the work, became more and more problematic for me as the author. It is for this reason that I offer this discussion here as an attempt to extrapolate and clarify the kind of experience a work like *Run!* initiates with, and for, the audience.

My issue with the words "viewer" and "spectator" and the term "to read" lies in the fact that all of these imply a particular kind of experience that is situated and localised within the visual, and specifically, with notions of 'writing'. As André Lepecki (2008, p.1) has noted, there exists an historical relationship between the art of choreography and the practice of writing. This relationship is inherent in the word 'choreography' itself, fusing movement (*choreo*) and writing (*graphy*) into one "single linguistic sign" (p.1). In this conception, the movement of the body in space is likened to the writing of symbols on the page where the body becomes a codified signifier to be 'read' and understood by the reader or viewer. This conception of choreography is also often emphasised in the Western Classical dance tradition where ballets are often referred to as being 'written' by the choreographer. In contemporary choreography, however, with its history of modern and postmodern experimental practices over the last fifty years, it no longer seems appropriate to conceive of choreography as an act of 'writing', nor to speak about the process of experiencing dance and live performance as an act of 'reading'. This conception is reductive and ignores the complexity of the modalities involved in creating and experiencing live performance. The individual in the auditorium, 'watching' Elliott's *Run!*, is not simply 'reading' bodies and movements as texts written upon the stage, nor is the work made to be 'read' like a book. While there are certainly visual elements within the work that can be 'read' or 'interpreted' cognitively, this forms only one (small) aspect of the overall sensory experience.

Conceiving of choreography as a practice of writing and reading 'stable' texts seems to either ignore or subordinate the fundamental 'liveness' of a performance and the immediacy of its experience. Peggy Phelan (1993), in her exposition on the politics of performance, defines performance in terms of its ephemerality and its 'presentness', arguing that performance "honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward" (p.149). This definition vastly differentiates performance from the processes of writing and reading on the basis of its

inevitable 'disappearance'. To conceive of the body as a repeatable text, that can be read and re-read, denigrates the unique experience, in a particular time and space, of the body. The body does not leave traces to be read and interpreted after the fact – it is an immediate experience that occurs in the present and one that is perceived by more than just the eyes. As Di Benedetto (2003, p.106) affirms, "Performance is more than words or feelings, it is a web of cognitive and visceral reactions". The act of experiencing performance is therefore not solely visual but rather a "form of mediated sensory stimulation" where the "stage is a living, breathing organism" (p.101). To speak of the *spectator* who *reads* a performance, propagates a dual untruth. Firstly that 'seeing' is the sole activity and duty of an audience and secondly, that the *experience* of a performance can be gained through a cognitive interpretation of its visual texts alone.

The assumed correlation between dance performance and its visual perception is also an indexical phenomenon. Sally Gardner (2008, p.55) notes semantic limitations in theorising the perception of the body and its movement in performance by the exclusion, in the terminology regarding our ability to perceive performance, of the 'kinaesthetic' sense (the ability to 'feel' sensations within our own bodies from stimuli located outside of and separate from ourselves). She argues that, unlike the senses of sight and audition, the kinaesthetic sense has no term denoting its own apprehension. The audience member is capable of '*seeing*' and '*hearing*' performance, but no term or word exists to describe "kinaesthetically apprehending" (p.55) movement and motion. This semantic anomaly, Gardener argues, reinforces the problematic relationship between the 'writing' (of the choreographer) and the 'reading' (by the spectator) as a visual experience only, where the kinaesthetic sense – the ability of audience members' bodies to *feel* and *be moved* (both physically and emotionally) by external stimuli – is ignored within the process of perceiving dance.

In her paper *On Being Moved by Performance*, Anne Fenemore (2003) differentiates two modalities of perceiving performance, categorised by the integration or rejection of kinaesthetic apprehension, or what she terms "somaesthetic experience", namely "a sensation that is not localized to a specific (and specifically stimulated) sense organ, but one which can occur anywhere in the body" (p.107). She argues that the act of 'spectating' includes both active and passive perceptual processes – the active actions of seeing, hearing, touching and moving as well as the passive experience of *being seen*, *being heard*, *being touched* and *being moved* (p.108). Active processes in this understanding are relative to the interpretation of texts, where visual images, sounds, gestures and actions are perceived directly by the sense organs. Passive processes involve the kinaesthetic and somaesthetic senses and are 'felt' by and in the body of the spectator. These sensations are not 'read' or accessed directly through the sense organs but rather are "states of sensing" (p.109) resulting from the *potential* or *processes* of sensing. The audience member, for example, experiences the sensation of 'being looked at' or 'being touched' physiologically and corporeally, and this informs the experience of the work.

Fenemore uses the term 'optical-visual' to denote performance where the experience engages an 'active' perception by the audience member only, where "communication as a system of coding (visual semiotics, textual interpretation, metaphor) is made central" and where "a spectator's role... is normatively one of pleasure fulfilment via projection of the self onto the object that is the performance" (p.109). In this modality a somaesthetic experience of the spectator is denied because the audience is either "'not looked at' at all or are 'fictionally looked at'" (p.110). However, 'visceral-visual' performance, as Fenemore argues, presents a "differently spatially structured concept of spectatorial vision" where performer and spectator "share the same space literally, interactively and viscerally, with the overriding perceptual means of engagement between the two groups being one of social, spatial and temporal engagement". In this experience of 'passive' perception the spectator is engaged somaesthetically, resulting in an experience of the performance that is not located in the "*essential* structure of vision (you and I see the same story unfolding in front of us)" but rather the "*existential* act of viewing (generative, embodied consciousness of self and other as viewing and being viewed)" (p.110). Fenemore's conception of 'visceral-visual' performance, therefore, presents an alternative perceptual process often engaged by contemporary theatre

and dance artists, where the act of 'looking' is re-orientated from the purely 'spectatorial' to the 'experiential'.

It is within this mode of perception that I would argue Elliott's *Run!* operates. While there are a multiplicity of visual-optical texts within the work that encourage 'active' perception from the audience, the work itself is, on the level of form, a 'visceral-visual' performance. Elliott's aesthetic choices and her treatment of the performing body, the performance space and of the relationship between the performers and the audience, lays the foundations and potential for an experiential encounter on a somatosensory and kinaesthetic level for the audience. To investigate the specific choreographic concepts and structures engaged by Elliott towards facilitating this experience it is useful, first, to contextualise and consider the work, and indeed Elliott's own choreographic practice, within a broader discourse of contemporary choreography, and particularly, in relation to the rejection of choreography as the 'writing of dance'.

In his seminal paper *Concept and Presence: The Contemporary European Dance Scene*, Lepecki (2004) articulates the growing questioning of the ways in which dance is created and perceived in the work of various European choreographers prominent in the 1990s. He includes in this 'unnamed' group a number of contemporary artists including Jérôme Bel, Xavier le Roy, La Ribot, Vera Mantero, Meg Stuart and Jonathan Burrows. At the time of writing the paper (in 2004), Lepecki notes that "this movement does not yet have a name, and perhaps it is important (and even essential to its project) that it remains nameless" (2004, p.171) and that, despite differing aesthetics, lineages, backgrounds and social and national contexts, the choreographic work of these artists is unified by their dedication to questioning the role of dance in both art and society. Eleven years later, in 2015, this 'movement' of artists, connected by their common questioning, remains (officially) nameless, but we might today label their approach 'postchoreographic'.¹ It is in this conception of choreography that I would argue one might locate a work such as Elliott's *Run!*.

In theorising this 'movement' in European choreography, Lepecki identifies certain characteristics common to the artists' individual artistic practices and their 'uniformity' in the "recasting of the very nature and essence of choreographic work" (2004, p.172). This recasting, Lepecki observes, involves the creation of openness and possibility in performance-making through the rejection of any kind of historically inherited or "hermetically sealed" (p.172) definition of either aesthetic or disciplinary boundaries. This 'openness to possibility' is evident in the *Manifesto* of this unnamed group, formulated in Vienna in 2001 after a meeting facilitated by Bel, La Ribot, Le Roy and critic Christophe Wavelet (in Lepecki 2004, p.172):

Our practices can be described by a range of terminology, depending on the different cultural contexts in which we operate. Our practices can be called: "performance art", "live art", "happenings", "events", "body art", "contemporary dance/theatre", "experimental dance", "new dance", "multimedia performance", "site specific", "body installation", "physical theatre", "laboratory", "conceptual dance", "independance", "postcolonial dance/performance", "street dance", "urban dance", "dance theatre", "dance performance" – to name but a few.

In addition to this dissolution of artistic categorisation in conceptualising 'choreography' (and the subsequent separation between 'dance' and 'choreography'), Lepecki (2004, p.173) notes several characteristics, influenced largely by the postmodern legacies of Yvonne Rainer and Pina Bausch in the 1960s and 1970s, that are fundamental to the 'movement's' choreographic practice. These include,

A distrust of representation, suspicion of virtuosity as an end, the reduction of unessential props and scenic elements, an insistence on the dancer's presence, a deep dialogue with the visual arts and with performance art, a

¹ The term 'postchoreographic' is often conceived in relation to Lehman's notion of the 'postdramatic' as articulated in his seminal book *Postdramatic Theatre* (translated by Jurs-Munby, 2006).

politics informed by a critique of visuality, and a deep dialogue with performance theory.

What Lepecki proposes here is an alternative conception of choreography, one that defies historical limitations and inherited ideological constructions. A distrust of representation, or put differently, of the body's function as a text and signifier, problematises the positioning of choreography as a process of writing and reading. Similarly, the insistence on the presence of the dancer, as a real person as opposed to a symbol or metaphor for something else, further complicates the 'reading' and 'writing' of the body. By insisting on a material, 'real' presence, the dancer, who is traditionally the body-object separate from the viewer in the imagined space of the stage/page, shares space and common ground with the audience, complicating representation and the process of reading and interpretation. All of the characteristics and strategies identified by Lepecki in this approach to making performance, conspire to "move away from the illusion-machinery of theatre" (Lepecki, 2004, p.175) and into the "maniacally charged present" (Phelan, 1993, p.148) of performance. This in turn problematises a conception of choreography and spectatorship as a purely visual and interpretative endeavour because the audience member is not separate from the performance. The audience does not 'sit back and watch', instead they are incorporated into and complicit in the experience of the work, and this experience is one that extends beyond the reading of the body as a text to include a multitude of senses and modes of sensing.

It is indeed possible to identify these same characteristics, as noted by Lepecki, in the work of Elliott and, specifically, within *Run!*. Elliott's treatment of the performers in the work presents them as real people, distrusting and aware of their own complicity in the processes of representation. They are starkly present in the moment of the performance and affirm their material presence in the performance space. The dancers in *Run!* see the audience, look at the audience, acknowledge their presence and, in at least one instance, physically touch the audience. The performers' constant acknowledgement of the reality of the theatre space, through touching its barriers, mapping its shape and architecture and traversing the imagined boundary between the stage and the auditorium, reaffirms the spatial commonality of the performance experience. In this way, the experience of watching *Run!* becomes a perception that is both active and passive, and one that is formed from the dual sensing of both visual-optical stimuli as well as somaesthetic sensations.

I would argue that a visual-optical perception of *Run!* presents for the spectator an unfulfilled and incomplete experience of the work, and results in an interpretation limited, in many ways, to one dominant understanding of the work, which in *Run!*'s case, is a reading of the work only as a feminist expression. While *Run!* does indeed propose questions and challenge conventional conceptions of femininity and specifically, of the female dancer, the work is also an investigation of space and the experience of the moving body in space (as alluded to in the title).² The visual signifiers in the work constantly remind and reference questions of femininity, from the short tennis tunic-like costumes the performers wear, to the kind of de-feminised movement they perform, eschewing overt elegance and softness in favour of pedestrian nonchalance and animalistic assertiveness and attack. It is predominantly through a visceral-visual perception of the work that the audience is able to experience *Run!* as an exploration of the poetics and sensations of space. By affirming the presence of the dancers and rupturing the audience's ability to distance themselves as separate spectators of body-objects, the bodies of the audience are constantly 'being seen' and 'being moved' within the present moment of the performance, becoming engaged and complicit in the performers' explorations of space.

The somaesthetic experience of *Run!* is not located or localised in a clearly identifiable impulse, stimulation or direct touch provided by the performers but rather through their continual spatial engagement with the audience. Elliott uses close proximity in conjunction with

² The title *Run!* denotes a physical action that is in essence a spatial activity. To run implies an experiential progression through space over durational time, departing from one space and at one time and arriving in another space at another time.

spatial vastness and distance between the performers and the audience, creating the *potential* for direct touch, where the embodied sensation of moving or being moved can *potentially* be felt. This is not a sensation that can necessarily be identified, analysed or described, nor is it uniform and 'guaranteed' for the audience members. Elliott creates in *Run!* the potential and possibility to experience the work viscerally, and more specifically, to experience *space* with the performers, but this mode of perception requires an openness and willingness by the spectator, and as such, may or may not enter into the individual's perception of the work. As Fenemore (2003, p.110) notes, 'visceral-visual' performance can often create a level of discomfort for the audience due to its departure from traditional spectating experiences. She likens this discomfort experienced by the audience to similar situations of discomfort in 'everyday' and familiar instances of 'being heard or being seen', such as public speaking. The ambiguity, discomfort and unfamiliarity of the experience is either embraced or rejected by individual audience members. In a way the visual-optical elements of the work, and the potential feminist readings that they point to, also act as a kind of 'safety net' for the audience. By this I mean that if the discomfiting nature of the somaesthetic elements of the work prevent audience members from experiencing the work viscerally (which is often the case), a meaningful experience of the work can still be had through the interpretation of its visual elements and the location of these within feminist discourses.³

The modality of perception in Elliott's *Run!* therefore extends beyond the paradigms of writing and reading, seeing and interpreting. By encouraging a dual spectatorship, one that is active and passive, visual and visceral, seen and felt, Elliott creates an experience of performance that occurs in and is perceived through the body, engaging the audience as 'experiencers' rather than as 'spectators' only. Meaning and felt sensations thus contribute equally in creating an overall experience for the audience that is uniquely individual, intimately personal and, ultimately, beyond 'words' and fixed interpretations. After a performance of the work in Cape Town, I saw a student of mine who had been in the audience only moments before. She was crying and appeared visibly moved by what she had seen and what she had just experienced. When I asked her why she was crying she simply replied "I don't know what I am feeling", and that is perhaps the best description of the ineffable effect visceral-visual performance can have on those who experience it.

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³ Refer to the Interview (part 3 of this compilation).

