

Exploring The Body–Landscape Relationship Through Dance Film

Flavia Devonas Hoffmann

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I reflect on the body–landscape relationship based on my experience with directing and choreographing my dance film *Human Habitat* in which a dancer takes us on a journey from a sustainable to a destructive relationship with the Arctic landscape. I outline the background and thoughts involved in producing a dance film in the Arctic and analyse the characteristics of the dancer's bodily interventions with the landscape. I investigate the properties of being embedded in a processual landscape and examine the consequences of these properties for choreographing movement in a landscape. I further outline how the film evokes kinaesthetic empathy and therefore fulfils my intention of bringing the Arctic into people's awareness. My examination has a phenomenological approach, and I draw on processual theories of landscape, material specificity and kinaesthetic empathy.

ABSTRAKT

I denne artikkelen vil jeg reflektere over forholdet mellom kropp og landskap basert på min erfaring med å regissere og koreografere dansefilmen min *Human Habitat*. En danser tar oss med på en reise fra et bærekraftig til et destruktivt forhold til det arktiske landskapet. Jeg skisserer bakgrunnen og tankene om å produsere en dansefilm i Arktis og analyserer egenskapene til kroppslige intervensjoner med landskapet. Jeg undersøker egenskapene ved å være innebygd i et prosessuelt landskap og undersøker hvilke konsekvenser disse egenskapene har for å koreografere bevegelser i landskap. Jeg skisserer også hvordan filmen fremkaller kinestetisk empati og derfor kan oppfylle intensjonene mine om å bringe Arktis til folkets bevissthet. Min undersøkelse har en fenomenologisk tilnærming, og jeg trekker på prosessuelle teorier om landskap, materialspesifisitet og kinestetisk empati.

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Photos: Ken Are Bongo

In January 2020, my dance film *Human Habitat* premiered at the Tromsø International Film Festival in Norway. *Human Habitat* has its origin in the clash between untouched nature and the growing industry in the Arctic and explores the oscillation between human resilience, resistance, vulnerability and fragility through the use of dance, film and music. It shows a female dancer moving in the snow-covered Norwegian Arctic landscape and takes its audience on a journey from a sustainable to a destructive relationship with the landscape she is moving in.

In this paper, I reflect on the body–landscape relationship based on my experience with directing and choreographing *Human Habitat*. First, I present the background and synopsis of the film before analysing the characteristics of bodily interventions with the landscape. I then investigate the properties of being embedded in a landscape and the consequences of these properties for dancing in a landscape. Finally, I outline how the film evokes kinaesthetic empathy and therefore fulfils my intention of bringing the Arctic into people's awareness.

My research has a phenomenological approach, and I draw on processual theories of landscape, material specificity and kinaesthetic empathy.

Background

The Arctic is relevant to all of us because, as Sheila Watt-Cloutier (2018) puts it, it is the health barometer of the globe. Based on meteorological processes, negative trends in the world have a bigger impact on the Arctic than other places on the planet. The issue of persistent organic pollutants (POPs) illustrates the interrelation

of the Arctic and the rest of the planet: synthetic chemicals that are used in agriculture and industrial processes in the south accumulate in the Arctic. POPs can therefore be found in the Arctic snow even though they have never been used in the Arctic. An originally healthy, clean and sparsely populated habitat such as the Arctic has thus become heavily polluted. As POPs are liposoluble, they can be found in the fat of fish, seal, reindeer and even humans, causing the breast milk of Inuit mothers to become highly contaminated with dioxins (Watts-Cloutier 2018; Johansen 2002). It is clear that we should be aware of the fact that all our actions have very far-reaching consequences.

For thousands of years, the Arctic has been a healthy, clean living place (habitat) where humans – in this case, indigenous communities such as Sámi people – have interacted with the landscape in a strongly bodily connected and sustainable way. As a result of industrialisation, colonialism and globalisation, there has been a power shift in the determination of the Arctic landscape. Decision-makers in offices far away from the Arctic are impacting the very same landscape as the indigenous people, although their focus is on increased economic activity through industrial operations such as mining, oil drilling, fish farming, cruising tourism and cargo shipping. These decision-makers are disembodied from the landscape, which means that they do not *feel* the impact or consequences of their actions *on their own bodies*; however, the people living in this landscape very much do. As a dancer and choreographer who has lived in the Arctic since 2014, I felt the need to make a dance film because I could feel *in my own body* the frustration about the destructive developments in the Arctic.

By using the media specifics of film, *Human Habitat* allows me to address the viewer on a physical, affective, pre-reflective and prelinguistic level. I thereby hope to sharpen people's awareness of our bodily connection to, and dependence on landscapes in general and to the Arctic landscape in particular.

Synopsis and movement analysis

Human Habitat lasts 8 min 29 sec. It does not have a classical narrative, but as a filmmaker, I tried to create an associative collage of the dancer's intrinsic and extrinsic relationship with the landscape. The dancer is trained in contemporary dance, but her movements are not strictly tied to any specific dance technique.

In the beginning, the film shows the dancer harmoniously integrated with the landscape, and all her movements are smooth, fluid and confident. We see her walking along a shoreline and on a plateau with steady, soft, secure steps, neither hurrying nor hesitating. Sometimes she stops, and her body lines follow the lines of the landscape.

The harmony is interrupted by distant industrial noise. At no point in the film do we actually *see* any

industrial activity, such as machines or manufacturing plants; we only *hear* them, and the intensity of the industrial noise increases during the course of the film. Parallel to this, there is a shift in the dancer's integration with the landscape. While at first she is a natural, integral part of the landscape, acting *in* and *with* the landscape, she now starts to act *on* it, shifting to become external, transforming into the «other» of the landscape. Her movements become more space-consuming, rough, abrasive, destructive and incomplete. She starts to work the snow with her hands, digging in it and throwing it up (i.e. she starts using the materiality of the landscape). I chose to focus frequently on the dancer's hands based on the idea that our actions emanate from our hands (i.e. *handlings*).

While the industrial noise is only connected to the landscape in the beginning, the uncomfortable, disharmonious, metallic sounds now emerge through the dancer's movements, which are machine-like and flat with sharp stops. Her whole body has a very serious and target-oriented expression.

Having lost all the lightness of the initial movements, she starts to lose her balance, which in turn leads to her running in very stormy weather. This scene





relates to the acceleration of industrial developments and the destructive behaviours of human beings. As if she looks for technological facilities to handle the more-or-less uncontrolled situation, she climbs on a wind shield, but she cannot hold herself and falls off.

The film now increases even more in tempo and tension, with the dancer rolling, cramping and stumbling between razor-sharp stones on a harsh shoreline. She brushes the small plants on the ground very harshly. Her hectic, impulsive and fast movements

are interrupted by hyperextended positions.

We see her face grimacing with pain, and she starts running in order to flee all the problems caused by the destructive ways of using the land. Suddenly, she falls into dark water. This fall marks an abrupt shift in the film's tempo. The dancer now floats gently under the surface, holding her breath for a very long time, thereby giving the viewer a sense of suffocation. Even though she is under the water, we hear industrial activities, and the dancer is horrified by the sound of





sonar explosions. Again, she tries to flee, but there is no way out.

In the last scene of the film, we see her lying in the snow, tired and dulled, like a wounded animal. After rolling over into a foetal position, she pushes herself slowly and languidly forward, creating a circular pattern in the snow. In shooting this scene, the camera was slowly lifted higher and higher until we only see her as a small dot in the gigantic landscape. However, even though we cannot see the human body anymore, we can see the traces of humanity left behind.

Bodily interventions with landscapes

In *Human Habitat*, I do not perceive space and landscapes as linear/metrical or as a collection of given data as they are usually defined in Western understanding, so I used a processual understanding of the landscape concept that is both rational and dynamic. A landscape «is a process in continual evolution, occurring in the interaction between the environment (with the complexity of its affordances and invariants) and the perceiver: a body in motion using its physical and cultural agency [...], in order

to establish a relationship with and a boundary for the environment» (Menatti and Rocha 2016, 13). In processual understanding, a landscape is a field of directed awareness that has its origin not in a cognitive examination, but in a processual corporeal experience (i.e. an actual bodily interaction). For me as a dancer and choreographer, dance seemed to be the most appropriate art form for articulating the dynamic, non-conceptualised experience of the processual affordance of landscape, and the Arctic landscape therefore became an embodied articulation through my dance film (in contrast to a conceptual, verbal articulation).

Even though the film as a work of art does not have any performative processual character (since it is a set in the presented unchangeable work), the work during shooting had a strong processual character, and eventually the final edit of the shoots defined the film as artwork. Drawing on the terms of Henri Bergson's process philosophy, there was an immediate, non-conceptualised experience of the landscape that was transformed into dynamic content (i.e. the movements of the previously created choreography transformed into new movements based on the interfacing of the self and the world) (Bergson 2001). The shooting

process was an ongoing dialogue with the landscape as no single choreographed sequence from the studio could be transported to the landscape (as a matter of course, a transposition of the studio material to the screen was to be avoided); there was a continuous adaptation process with its own artistic value. Our awareness of the constantly changing features of the landscape (i.e. our interfacing of ourselves with the world) forced us to react to the ecological otherness immediately and in non-conceptualised ways. Many times we started with the set choreography but ended in a fruitful improvisation process where the dancer, the cinematographer and I just reacted to our bodily experiences of being embedded in the landscape.

I tried to de-hierarchise the relationship between the dancer and the landscape by positioning the dancer *in* and not *on* the landscape (i.e. by embedding the dancer in the landscape). I therefore used landscape dramaturgy as a guideline to create «wide, composite, and tentative spaces of cognition, affection, and sensation [...] multiplying personal views, challenging of the one-point view, and propositions for sharing a view» (Vujanovic 2018, 3).

Using the processual understanding of landscape, I also hoped to embrace the indigenous concept of landscape, which contrasts with Western conceptions. We shot the film in Sápmi, which means that we had to respect the land of the indigenous Sami people. Importantly, there was not only an *intervention in* the landscape through the dancing body, but first and foremost, an *integration of* the body with the landscape (Vitaglione 2016). This effect was obtained by using the lines and dynamics of the landscape in the movements of the dancer and through the movements of the camera, as well as a very basic awareness of environmentally responsible decision-making. All the members of the crew⁷ live in the county of the filming location (Finnmark in Norway), so we were already a part of the land and did not put ourselves into or onto it while producing the film.

Being embedded

The embodied relationship with the landscape is connected to the dancer's sensorimotor approach to the landscape. The dancer's perceptions embrace the whole landscape, and through her movements, the landscape emerges out of the «process of codetermination between the agent (the perceiver) and the structure (the environment)» (Menatti and Rocha 2016, 12). There is a continuous feedback loop of a two-fold cognition: there is the self-reflexive embodied cognition of the dancer's own embodiment and the cognition of her embodiment relational to the landscape. Block and Kissell (2001, 8) pointed out that «being *embodied* implies being *embedded* as well – embedded in a society, a culture, a language.» My experience with *Human Habitat* revealed that being embodied likewise means being embedded in a processual (as opposed to a linear) landscape.

The dancer's movements were not predetermined by meaning, but – in line with the processual character of the landscape – by breaking up or following the shapes and dynamics of the landscape. As a choreographer/filmmaker, I was therefore following the affective turn in theatre, having to «focus on the embodiment and the bodily experience of a situation» (Vujanovic 2018, 1). The bodily experience of the materiality of the landscape led to a mimesis through dance. For example, the dancer pursues shapes of diagonal schistous rocks with a position similar to the downward-facing dog. Her arm opens up at the same time and in the same dynamic as a wave breaking on the coastal cliff, and she literally *uses* the materiality of the snow by digging, tramping, lying and rolling in it.

By letting the dancer move in the snow, away from infrastructure and any daily settings, the film is deeply connected to the materiality of the landscape. Using her whole body, the dancer had physical contact with the materiality of the snow, stones, heather and water, so the materiality of the landscape became an integral part of the choreography. As Vitaglione (2016)

pointed out, we are in fact speaking of a material specificity in contrast to a site specificity because the materiality of the landscape is in focus while the exact site of the landscape remains irrelevant. In *Human Habitat*, it does not matter if it is an Arctic landscape in Norway, Canada or Greenland. To catch the material specificity, I used several medium and long shots of the site without the dancer being visible.

Similarly, as Vitaglione indicated, sound also intensifies the material connection of the body and the landscape. Sound is a vital component of *Human Habitat* and conveys a large part of the narrative, eventually building a bridge between the body and the landscape as we *hear*, but do not see, the destructive, industrial interventions of humans on the landscape. Apart from the camera as the orientation point, the dancer and myself as the director only had the landscape to refer to, not only spatially, but also as the initiator of movement quality as there was no music the dancer could use to guide the rhythm of her movements. It was the landscape that empowered the dancer's movements and my directions to her so that she was able to adapt her movements in terms of impulse, tempo, rhythm, dynamics and strength.

To choreograph in the open, white winter landscape was an interesting undertaking as there were no restrictive walls or divisions between the strong and weak spots as there are on a stage, and even the use of *en face*, diagonals, downstage and upstage (i.e. most of the spatial features a dancer usually refers to) were dissolved in the landscape. The snow-covered landscape had low contrasts as the colour of the snow, sea and sky were very similar, meaning that the visual orientation of the dancer was less informative and less important than her embodied, sensorimotor perceptions. Particularly in the very stormy weather, it was barely possible to keep our eyes open as most of the time the dancer had to face her body towards the wind so that the long skirt could embed in the landscape. The always-changing wind directions required the

whole crew to make very quick and spontaneous changes in spatial orientation.

Kinaesthetic empathy

Dance films allow the viewer «to sense their own bodies interacting with the places highlighted in such films. [...] the surroundings become 'not merely settings' [...], but partners in dialog with a responsive, phenomenal body» (Kloetzel 2014, 18). Even if the addressed landscape is absent in the place where the dance film is presented, the viewer can still connect bodily with the landscape as a kinaesthetic response to the dancer's movements, which are embedded in the landscape. Consequently, from an artistic and conceptual point of view, I had to contextualise my message in the addressed site and materiality (i.e. dancing and filming in the Arctic landscape).

As Dan Zahavi (2011, 220) wrote, «all kinds of interpersonal relations including action understanding, the attribution of intentions, and the recognition of emotions and sensations rely on automatic and unconscious embodied simulation routines», meaning that the motor schema of the observer becomes active when watching a moving body. The dancer's phenomenological body and her movements in the landscape allow the viewer to empathise with or even *feel* the intrinsic relationship between her body and the landscape (i.e. the viewer responds physically to that relationship and thereby relates to the Arctic landscape presented in the film).

The viewer connects with the emotions that the dancer expresses in the film – not as a conscious attempt to replicate the emotions, but as an «automatic, unconscious and prelinguistic simulation» of the dancer's mental states (Zahavi 2011, 221). Thus, through the dance film, the viewer has the opportunity to accompany the dancer in her experience of moving in and with the landscape and to join her on her journey through her different emotional states, which are connected to the change from a sustainable to a

destructive relationship with the land.

I am aware of the risk that the viewer of the film could derive a different message from what I originally intended, especially as there is no classical narrative and the movements are abstract. However, thanks to the viewer's mechanism of kinaesthetic response and kinaesthetic empathy, an affective, prelinguistic reflection process is likely to be stimulated, and as soon as the viewer feels *something* related to the landscape in the film, I will have accomplished my aim for bringing the Arctic into their awareness. From then, it is, as in all dance performances, up to the viewer to draw personal insights from the experience of having seen the dance film.

Conclusion

A dancing body in a landscape is an interesting object of investigation for both philosophical and artistic research. Philosophically speaking, the embodied and spatial awareness of the dancer can inform us about our own embeddedness in the landscape and therefore in the world. From a choreographic perspective, dancing in an open landscape offers some challenges regarding traditional reference points, and the material specificity of the landscape can be an inspiration for choreographic research. However, and more importantly, the medium of film in connection with dance has the ability to evoke feelings and a reflection process on a level other than that of a theatre production or a site-specific performance. The *mise en scène* or embeddedness of the dancer in a processual landscape, together with the mechanics of kinaesthetic empathy, allow the viewer to connect with the landscape on an emotional, pre-reflective level. In *Human Habitat*, the anonymous, open Arctic space is thereby transformed into an articulated landscape, and hopefully when watching *Human Habitat*, the audience is able to connect with and appreciate the Arctic.

Generally, I consider dance film as an appropriate

artistic expression to address current social and environmental issues as the medium of film makes it possible to contextualise the dance in the addressed site. The message may also reach a larger audience as the presentation of the film is not dependent on the simultaneous physical presence of the performer and the audience. Once the production of the film has been financed, it is possible to present it at a low cost all over the world. The media-specifics of dance appear in film in a similar way to stage performances, meaning that the dance film offers – but also limits – approaches to interpretation. Bearing that in mind, one should reflect on the reasons for choosing dance (and not a verbal art form such as literature or theatre) before producing any dance-related artwork.

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- Photos 1–4: Photographer: Ken Are Bongo. Performance: Dance Film Human Habitat. Performer: Marthe Engdal. Location: Nordkyn Peninsula. Date: 13 February 2019

BIOGRAPHY

Flavia Devonas Hoffmann holds a Master in Philosophy from the University of Vienna, a Bachelor in Dance- and Theatre Studies from the University of Bern, and Certificate of Higher Education: Dance Education from the Royal Academy of Dance. She works as dance artist, pedagogue and festival producer. She is employed as a teacher at the College for Social Pedagogy in Ilulissat, Greenland, and as an administrative director for Arctic Culture Lab, which is an international research platform for cultural and artistic practices in the Arctic.

The main cast of Human Habitat

Dancer: **Marthe Engdal**. Writer, director, choreographer, costume designer: **Flavia Devonas Hoffmann**. Photographer, editor: **Ken Are Bongo**. Music: **Tapani Rinne**. Sound design: **Flurin Devonas**. Producer: **Aleksander Olai Korsnes**.

Shooting location: Nordkyn Peninsula, Norway, at 71°N