

Poetic Phenomenology in Thierry De Mey's Screendances: Open Corporealities, Responsive Spaces, and Embodied Experiences

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Musician, composer, director of experimental dance films, creator of (video) installations, and collaborator of many contemporary choreographers, Belgian multidisciplinary artist Thierry De Mey likes crossing aesthetic boundaries. However, his diverse works also register a certain homogeneity: they are all permeated by his fascination with the plasticity of the body, the poetics of space, and the musicality of movement. These artistic touchstones are particularly evident in his dance films, as they all display malleable corporealities, rhythmic choreographic and cinematic movements, as well as poetic and responsive spaces. De Mey's screendances are often praised for the extreme precision of their composition and framing, their dazzling editing, and their highly musical qualities. This undeniable technical virtuosity largely explains why his films often bewitch and hypnotize their spectators. However, the critical emphasis on this particular facet of his screendances portrays them as only being concerned with artful creativity, (over)stylization, and aesthetic perfection: through this lens, his films are seen merely as an expression of brilliant formalism.

In this essay, I will try to point out another aspect of De Mey's films (including his collaborations with choreographers such as Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker) as constructing a poetic vision of the world in which bodies and spaces closely interact and entwine. Indeed, De Mey's screendances always pay close attention to how dancing bodies *inhabit* and are intimately related to the various environments in which the film medium allows them to be immersed and to evolve. This is one of the most fruitful possibilities that the site of screendance opens up to the choreographic art: a strategy of "deterritorialization"¹ that provides alternative settings to a stage, including complex milieus that can induce new kinesthetic qualities and original corporeal states. De Mey's films take maximum advantage of this possibility, which explains why the location is paramount in them. His film locations are always carefully chosen for their poetic and aesthetic characteristics that echo, or more often further or even renew, those of the dance by giving the movements a new universe and hence new qualities, significance, and connotations.

The natural environments or architectural sets in his films are not, therefore, shot as mere backgrounds. De Mey is concerned with capturing the relationship between locations and bodies, between spaces and beings: the environments he chooses often appear to alter dance movements and bodily states so much that they create unprecedented choreographic qualities that could not be achieved in the flat, geometrical stage context, which is at once spectacular and neutral (plain and

featureless). Reciprocally, dancing bodies in his screendances are shown to affect their environments in visual, haptic, and aural capacities, sometimes to such an extent that they modify or reshape them. These close, mutual interactions between dancing bodies and their spaces of perception and action evidently call for a phenomenological reading: more particularly, I will argue that De Mey's screendances represent poetic illustrations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories of the body as open to the world (or to its environment), being both receptive and responsive to it, impacting on it and influenced by it. Ultimately, I will examine how this induces the highly sensory and embodied qualities of De Mey's cinema.

The Importance of Going Off Stage: Making an Autonomous Film by Decontextualizing, and Restaging Dance in Cinematic and Poetic Sites

First of all, it is important to note how much going off stage—that is, deterritorializing the dances he films—is key for De Mey, a point underscored by Imbault's observation that space is paramount in De Mey's works: "*Genius loci*. The location first and foremost."² Relocating the dance to original and cinegenic spaces enables the director and the choreographers he works with to restage the dance specifically *for* the screendance medium, to re-place it in a new context, which, by generating new atmospheres, kinesthetic qualities, and bodily states, ultimately gives birth to a new creative work. The settings of De Mey's films are thus often chosen for their visually striking and poetic scenery, that is for their capacity to dramatically decontextualize theatrical choreographies and thereby distinguish his films.

Be it the industrial warehouse and the geometrical layout of tables in *One Flat Thing, Reproduced* (2006), the black coal heaps and the hills of broken tiles in *Love Sonnets* (1993), the stern school in *Rosas danst Rosas* (1996), the dried-out Aral Sea in *Prélude à la Mer* (2009), the eight-armed sandy crossroads in *Fase* (2002), the nightmarish forest in *Tippeke* (1996), the steep rocky mountain in *Dom Svobode* (2000), the bucolic clearing in *Counter Phrases* (2003), or the oneiric, fantastic forest in *Ma Mère l'Oye* (2004), spaces and environments in De Mey's films are always the bearers of a peculiar visual universe and a poetic charge that either enhance, renew, or contrast with the original choreographic works. Transferring the dance to scenic or singular sites thus appears as a crucial condition for creating an independent work, as De Mey often points out in interviews:

The choice of the location is a fundamental question. I cannot think of making a film if I don't know where I will shoot it. I never film dance on stage to avoid confusion with straightforward recordings. I have nothing against this but it's something that does not interest me: I conceive my films as autonomous works.³

To create original films that depart from the often pre-existing choreographic works created for theatrical contexts, De Mey brings new elements to them by employing a wide range of cinematic techniques such as specific shooting angles and (de)framings, original lighting that re-sculpts bodies and movements, elaborate montages, and

various visual and sound effects. Yet, the cinematic possibility of relocating theatrical works to original sites appears to be one of the most efficient ways of enabling screendance artists to make a creative dance film that is emancipated from being a mere dance recording. Not only does this strategy impose a restaging of the dance *for* the camera, but it also permeates the choreography with a new particular world which can only exist in the screendance medium.

De Mey loves both natural and urban environments, both wild and architectural spaces. In *Love Sonnets*, for instance, which features choreography by Michèle Anne De Mey, Thierry De Mey explores the relationship between the dancers and their various mineral environments:

For *Love Sonnets*, I did intense location scouting of quarries throughout Europe. I wanted to make a film in mineral environments devoid of vegetal elements. The idea was a negative choice: no green. I wanted a relation with matter, with something very raw, natural: from Charleroi's black slag heaps to Catalonia's white and salty ones, through red tile quarries.⁴

The result of this location choice is a highly poetic and terrestrial film in which bodies brush against sandy expanses, rub against rough, stony grounds, and hurtle down heaps of tiles that break loudly and collapse. In contrast, in *Ma Mère l'Oye*, De Mey's intention was to "focus specifically on the interactions between bodies and vegetal elements"⁵: the dancers, with their wild movements that seem directly inspired, induced by the fantastical atmosphere of the forest, appear to merge with the lush scenery so much that they alternatively evoke plants or animalistic creatures. Surprising associations, poetic metaphors, and metamorphoses spring from these encounters between the bodies and the natural environment: a female dancer seems caught in a process of hybridization with a branch of fern that visually constitutes her spine and ribs; an unfurling hand looks like a blossoming flower; two arms resemble the branches of a tree they are sliding along and entwined with, and so forth.



Figure 1:
Ma Mère l'Oye (2004, dir. Thierry de Mey).
Courtesy of Thierry De Mey.

De Mey films natural spaces as a composer and as an architect as well as a visual artist—that is, with a fascination for rhythmic structures and geometrical compositions. In *Counter Phrases*, for example, the camera often lingers on structured gardens and architectural landscapes in order to capture lines and curves which provide the film with striking compositional forms and rhythms. Also key in understanding De Mey's fascination for natural sites is his evident cinematic interest in colors: for example, his attention to the chromatic variations of the forest and its lighting according to the change of seasons in *Ma Mère l'Oye*. Similarly, the highly contrasting colors of the sites in *Counter Phrases* are visually echoed by the colorful costumes, and cinematographically heightened by the use of chromatic filters and specific lighting, especially in the "Green, Yellow and Blue" sequence. Therefore, natural locations provide De Mey's films with original, striking, and poetic visuals and atmospheres, which differentiate his films from the live works from which they are adapted.

De Mey's choices of location also reveal his fascination for architecture, as evidenced in *Rosas danst Rosas*, which features Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's choreography of the same title, and for which the director chose the modern Rito school constructed in 1936 in Leuven by the architect H. Van de Velde, one of the founders of Bauhaus. Beyond its highly structured appearance which furthers the choreography's aesthetics, De Mey also chose this building for its disciplinary ambiance which brings new elements of fiction to the choreography. Moreover, the location, with its succession of spacious, all-glass classrooms, allowed the camera to travel freely and track the dancers. The architecture here is both a cinematic and fictional frame: it is the bearer of striking visuals and a particular atmosphere (austere and rigid) which brings new snippets of stories and poetic elements to the dance.



Figure 2:
Rosas danst Rosas (1997,
dir. Thierry de Mey).
Courtesy of Thierry De
Mey.

Ultimately, De Mey's spaces, be they natural or architectural, always carry and reveal the dance and give it new qualities and significance, as their characteristics impact the bodies of the dancers, influence their movements, and create particular corporeal states. His films construct a complex dialectic between architecture and gesture, environments and movements, spaces and beings. His filming locations are not mere backdrops; they are *milieus* that form a matrix of original corporealities and

particular kinds of movements as the dancers are imbued with them, have to adapt to them, and insert themselves and unfold their movements in them. Indeed, the spaces the dancers are immersed in are an important part of the *mise-en-scène* and the dancing: they are a springboard for new meanings, connotations, kinesthetic qualities, body states, interactions, aesthetics, and poetics.

Powerful Spaces, Receptive Bodies

If spaces generate so many new elements to De Mey's films, it is because they are shot as both active and sensitive—as phenomenological environments. Caught in the “flesh” of these spaces, the dancers are influenced and informed by it, but, as part of it, as flesh amidst the flesh of the world, they also impact it, imprinting on it the marks of their actions.⁶ Indeed, if De Mey's films can be read through a phenomenological lens, it is because they pay close attention to these mutual interactions between spaces and bodies and because they show environments and beings as both receptive and responsive, sensitive and active.

I will now examine the first polarity of this reversible experience and influence displayed in De Mey's films, when spaces are shown as powerful and bodies as impressible. This particular interplay between environments and beings is particularly resonant in *Ma Mère l'Oye*, in which, as mentioned before, the forest seems to inspire the dancers with instances of vegetal and floral movements. Along these lines, in *Tippeke*, the dark, dense forest causes a state of disorientation and anguish—both physical and metaphysical—which takes over the dancer, De Keersmaeker. As she gets lost in the bleak forest, she seems to lose her mind as well as the control of her body: the environment induces her state of being, both physically and psychologically. Her chaotic, disordered movements are further altered by the uneven ground of the forest, which affects her stability; and the cold, as well as the frightening, almost threatening atmosphere of the forest, makes her shiver, exacerbating the convulsive aspect of her gestures.

In *Rosas danst Rosas*, the austere, disciplinary architecture of the Rito school appears to weigh down on the body of the young women and repress their leaning for rebellion and their evident sexual drive. The massive, almost menacing, architectural frame of the building seems to enforce discipline, and the transparency of the all-glass rooms as well as the inquisitiveness of long tracking shots function as a *panoptic system* that constantly surveils the girls, preventing them from having any independency or privacy. Indeed, this brings to mind the architectural model of the Panopticon, a type of institutional buildings analyzed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* as a symbol for modern disciplinary societies and their insidious but pervasive strategies of surveilling, controlling, and normalizing people's behaviors.⁷ Here, it is both the spatial characteristics and the filmic strategies they enable that work as a means of controlling the girls. Pillars, doors mounts, windows frames, the all-brick, metal and glass structure, the tiled floor—everything in the architecture of this gigantic, rectilinear building is squared, cold, rigid and, as such, participates in burdening the dancers. As the girls seem to incorporate and internalize the discipline

imposed on them by the architectural environment, the film evokes dystopian interactions between powerful contextual forces and impressionable bodies. This is evidenced by the highly structured, repetitive movements of the dancers and their tensed bodily states which seem to be directly inspired by the location. However, it is worth underlining that the dancers also try to escape this restraining, prison-like configuration: for instance, they are sometimes seen running in the corridors, hurtling down the stairs, or going up on the roof. As a result, in certain sequences, the impact of the location on the bodies is counter to what one might expect,⁸ as it also seems to trigger movements of rebellion and attempts at emancipation.

In *One Flat Thing, Reproduced*, the layout of the tables forces the dancers to perform sinuous, devious movements: the dancers have to adapt to and compromise with the restrictive, obstructive spatial configuration at hand, which induces specific forms and qualities of movement. In *Dom Svobode*, the rocky cliff, on which the dancers move horizontally by means of cables, confronts the dancers with extreme gravitational conditions. This particular location imposes new ways of moving and thus original body states: for instance, certain ordinary movements become surprisingly difficult to be executed in this horizontal position. However, this specific condition also opens up new possibilities for movement, especially jumps which are given unprecedented aerial and spectacular qualities.⁹



Figure 3:
Dom Svobode (2000, dir. Thierry de Mey).
Courtesy of Thierry De Mey.

De Mey also devises influential environments in his screendance installations in order to trigger particular bodily states for the “spect-actors.”¹⁰ For instance, the *Barbe Bleue* installation (2006), which combines images of people reading Perrault’s tale with those of women representing Barble-Bleue’s ex-wives, “should ideally be located in an enclosed, secluded space (a cellar, basement, the boiler room of a theatre or museum, an archives room, etc.).”¹¹ The suggestion that the installation be located in a dark, confined space is clearly intended to bring about feelings of claustrophobia and anxiety. This underscores the paramount importance of spaces in De Mey’s works in generating particular bodily states for the dancers as well as the spectators. Space also powerfully impacts spectators’ states in the installation mode of *Prélude à la Mer*, a triptych projection in a Kazakh yurt. The spatial configuration of the installation and the shooting location of the film projected in it cause the visitors to experience a

spatial shift or tension as they enter the intimate, confined space of the yurt, which then opens out onto the endless panoramas of the film, displaying the immense, desolate, sandy expanse relinquished by the dried-out Aral Sea.

In other words, De Mey's settings are not only visually striking and poetic, but they are also somatically powerful: they heavily influence the dancers and specta(c)tor's body states and they form a matrix of particular movements. Far from being a mere piece of scenery, they form complex milieus that the dancers confront, to which they must adapt, and, hence, by which they are informed in their very flesh.

Performative Movements, Sensitive Environments

Bodies also influence their environments and have an impact on the interactive and sensitive spaces that De Mey stages. This is the second polarity, or reciprocal balance of power, in the reversible interactions between environments and bodies displayed in his films, where bodies are portrayed as more active and where environments seem less influential and more sensitive to the dancers' powerful movements. Indeed, dancers are often seen leaving the imprint of their movements on their space of action, hence modifying it. In *Love Sonnets*, the dancers act on the sequence of Mediterranean landscapes they go through: under their steps, the coal crunches, the tiles break in a musical clamor, the salt spins, dust is lifted and swirls. Their energetic movements transform the still masses of the black slag heaps, the desert quarry, the piles of shattered tiles, or the mountain of dust into moving, almost dancing, and musical elements. By activating movements as well as an entire musicality by their dance steps in the various milieus they pass through, the dancers are thus seen projecting and embedding their physical presence in the terrestrial elements that surround them. Their enthusiasm for doing so betrays the delight they feel in experiencing their transformative power over their environments, the responsiveness of the world to their actions: just as children enjoy skimming stones on water to express their impact over the world,¹² the dancers take pleasure in transforming their environment by unleashing an avalanche of tiles beneath their steps, by making the dust fly, etc. These reciprocal interactions between the dancers and their space of action are underscored, and often heightened, by various filmic strategies: De Mey frequently shoots the scenes in fixed, very wide shots in order to clearly show the interplay between the moving bodies and the diverse environments, but he also includes close-ups of the dancers' feet to emphasize the points of contact between the dancing bodies and the natural elements. Also, De Mey often positions the camera quite low to enhance the physical and terrestrial qualities of the film:

The position of the camera, especially the height from which you film, is crucial. I don't want to film from an overhanging eye perspective, which overlooks the carnality of the bodies, and intellectualises and rationalises what is shown. I want a bodily perspective that respects the centre of gravity of the dancers: that is why I usually shoot from a belly level.¹³

As a result of this camera height, the film focuses on bodies and earth (the sky is not shown very often), how they meet and mix, and how they act with, impact on, and react to each other. The soundtrack is also key in conveying the materiality of these interactions on screen: aural close-ups and emphases heighten the earthly sounds of the coal crunching, the tiles breaking loudly under the dancers' steps, and the sandy and stony grounds being rubbed and brushed by the dancers.



Figure 4:
Fase (2002, dir. Thierry de Mey).
Courtesy of Thierry De Mey.

In the “Violin Phase” sequence in *Fase*, the eight-way crossroads of Tervuren’s arboretum seems to inspire the rosette De Keersmaecker etches, which is also the symbol of her company. As she doggedly imprints the trail of her steps on the floor, she gradually converts the voluminous expanse of white sand and dark floor beneath into an enormous drawing traced by her movements. For this sequence, De Mey and De Keersmaecker devised a sensitive, interactive space—a dark stage covered with white sand—and thus a space that is literally impressible, on which one can leave an imprint. In a similar vein, in the *Rémanences* video (2010), dancers inscribe the mark of their body and movements on the floor with the help of a thermal camera which captures the traces left by their body warmth. Here again, the body becomes a writing device, capable of leaving a lingering imprint on its environment. In these sensitive spaces, the dancers’ movements become “performative,” to quote and adapt J.L. Austin’s concept to a screendance context. Austin demonstrated how some words are not mere linguistic statements but can also “perform” an act when they are said or written.¹⁴ Similarly in De Mey’s dance films, the dancers’ movements often accomplish something: they inscribe their trace in space, alter, and even transform it. Dancing bodies are not usually destined to produce an effect on their milieu; movements are usually their own finality in theatrical dance. Yet in De Mey’s films, movements often become “performative” as they have a tangible impact on their environments. While they are not everyday, pragmatic actions that are bound to produce useful results, they nonetheless produce a concrete, albeit aesthetic effect. Indeed, it is a recurring feature of De Mey’s films, from *Fase* to *Rémanences*, that the trace of the dance lingers after the movements are performed: that is, the trail of the choreography becomes inscribed in the space the dancers reshape and (literally) redraw.¹⁵



Figure 5:
Rémanences (2010, dir.
 Thierry de Mey).
 Courtesy of Thierry De
 Mey.

Examples of bodies impacting their environments are also found in De Mey's interactive video-installations, where participants make choices that alter the scenography or spatial configurations. In *Top Shot* (2002), for instance, participants are encouraged to imitate the movements of De Keersmaeker in *Fase's* "Violin Phase" sequence, described above. Following the dancer's example, visitors are led to engrave the trail of their dance in the sand. In so doing, they modify the appearance of the installation. In *From Inside* (2007), participants enter a black room where films are projected on the walls. Parallel to the screens, three bright areas detect visitors' movements; these sensitive areas enable participants to impact the projected images, the editing, and the soundtrack according to pre-determined patterns. The installation almost works like a juke-box as the visitors/actors, through their actions detected by systems akin to those used in video games, can choose to activate a given filmed scene, choreography, or musical sequence. They are thus given the capacity to select the visual and aural atmosphere they want to be immersed in. Space in De Mey's installations is always conceived as a plastic, malleable site that is sensitive and responsive to the dancers' movements.

Poetical Phenomenology

From the previous analysis, it is clear that De Mey's films emphasize the phenomenological truth of bodies, demonstrating that bodies are both felt and feeling, that environments influence bodily states, and that, conversely, bodies have an impact on their environments. Therefore, it is particularly relevant to draw on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological conceptions in reading De Mey's dance films. The corporeal experience is at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's reflections: the philosopher does not focus on the objective body as studied in conventional medicine, for instance, but on the *lived* body, which, he emphasizes, is the condition and medium of all our experiences, of our constitutive and essential *openness* to the world. Indeed, according to Merleau-Ponty, our bodies are not merely *in* space but *inhabit* space, especially through our movements and actions. As part of the *fabric* of the world, the body is open to the world; it is both a receptive and responsive *flesh* amidst the *flesh of the world*.¹⁶

This phenomenological conception of the body finds poetic expressions in De Mey's films, which, as well as staging bodies and environments that influence and impact one another, show bodies as part of the same *fabric* or *flesh* of the world. Indeed, in some of his films, bodies seem to expand or dilate themselves in space and, reciprocally, environments appear to pervade bodies. For instance, in *Counter Phrases*, in the "Green, Yellow and Blue" sequence, a dancer who wears a flower-printed fabric seems to merge with the blossoming garden she dances in; another, dancing in tall grass in a yellow dress, looks like a flower blown by the wind. In *Tippeke*, with her green dress, De Keersmaecker seems caught in the "flesh" of the forest. Similarly, in *Love Sonnets*, the dancers' costumes are often of the same tints as those of the landscapes they go through. In one of the early sequences, the dress of the girl who is entering the frame is of the same dark ochre hue as that of the heap of tiles she is walking on and, in the following sequence, when the dancers are evolving on a lighter, dusty landscape, they are all wearing stern, faded clothes. This erases, or at least renders porous, the boundaries between the dancers and their environments: again, spaces and bodies seem caught in the same "fabric" of the world. In the same vein, in another sequence, a man, addressing the audience directly, announces that someone is about to eat the broken pottery that is seen in the shot: "To Amarili, who is about to swallow the broken pottery that is in her mouth." Referring to someone who literally incorporates the natural elements of her surrounding, this line can be read as a metaphor of the vision of the body displayed in De Mey's works. Transforming its environment, the body projects itself on it; reciprocally, being influenced by its milieu, the body also incorporates it.

As such, and contrary to the medical, organic conception of the body as a self-regulating, stable structure, as well as the myth of the body as a fixed and radically unassailable, closed and intimate entity,¹⁷ De Mey's phenomenological films present bodies that are not fixed but transforming. Indeed, in films such as *Rosas danst Rosas* or *Ma Mère l'Oye*, the body appears open (to its surroundings), and the world-body boundary porous. Ultimately, this emphasis on the permeable relations between space and body calls for abandoning the philosophically obsolete notion of "the body" as a supposedly closed entity, in favor of *corporeality*. This terminology is more adapted to a discussion of these screendance bodies, which appear open and versatile as a result of their interactions with their milieus, as it takes into account our reversible experience of *inhabiting* the world (feeling and being felt, impacting and being influenced) and the openness and adaptability (to various environments; to others) of our physicality.¹⁸

Embodied Experiences: A Cinema of Sensations

Finally, I would like to highlight how this emphasis on body-space interactions in De Mey's films naturally induces highly embodied experiences for the spectators. By focusing on bodies and movements, and on interactions between the dancers and their sphere of action, screendances in general, and De Mey's in particular, offer a highly sensory cinema. Indeed, in the absence of a proper narrative thread to develop,

on what else besides physical, kinesthetic, spatial, or rhythmic sensations could these almost exclusively silent dance films focus? Unlike many film productions that prioritize character and psychological development, De Mey's screendances give precedence to bodily experiences and sensory qualities: his close attention to bodies leads him to capture organic and physical images, and his shooting of spaces evokes sensations of distance, scale, texture, surface, temperature, and so forth. This creates a cinema of sensations: a cinema that captures sensations and addresses the spectators' senses.

Thus, by bringing to the fore cinema's sensorial (and sensual) impact, De Mey's films offer spectators multisensory experiences with an emphasis, of course, on kinesthetic sensations, but also on tactile feelings. Certainly, it is a self-evident truth that all his films suggest kinesthetic sensations, as they all explore choreographic works. That said, it is worth examining a few instances where this evocation of kinesthetic sensations is heightened, either because it induces a particularly strong kinesthetic empathy, triggering a bodily reaction in the spectator's body, or because these sensations are so eloquent that they can suggest snippets of stories and embody discourses.

As for the suggestion of micro-fictions and discourse, *Rosas danst Rosas* provides striking instances. The richness and complexity of sensory effects and kinesthetic qualities in this film suggest embodied thoughts and micro-fictions that are not channeled through classical, word-based, explicit narrativity, but instead are interwoven into the sensory effects, in the very fabric of the *mise-en-scène*, and conveyed by the dancers' eloquent movements. For example, the film succeeds in evoking the women's sexual drive through their movements and the way they are underscored on screen by filmic techniques and strategies. The women are seen compulsively touching their crotches, running their hands through their hair, pulling down their tops to reveal their shoulders and cleavage, and tossing their hair. This sexual tension is cinematographically enhanced by De Mey: he captures these gestures in close-ups, repeats them many times in the editing, and includes cut-ins that focus on similar carnal details. In the same vein, the sound of their panting, heightened by De Mey in post-production through aural close-ups and superimpositions, also hints at their sexual arousal. The location of the film, the stern Rito school, adds layers of significance to this: as I mentioned earlier, the massive, disciplinary architecture of the building weighs down on the body and seems to repress their sexual and rebellious leanings. Again, De Mey echoes this repression via his filming techniques: the long tracking shots in the corridors, the circular dolly shots in the classroom where the girls are sitting on chairs, and the long sequence shots also seem to embody a surveilling, controlling entity. In this film, the movements, the space, and their filmic treatment are thus the bearers of micro-fictions: they express sexual and insubordinate desires repressed by an exterior authority that, although unwillingly, the bodies seem to internalize. Hints of stories or discourse and expressions of feelings are thus embedded in the flesh of the dancers, in their movements and gestures, in the particularity of the space, and in the mode of filming

them. Therefore, this film can be read as a form of embodied story, a screen narrative told through sensory effects, body-space interactions, movements, and film strategies. This suggests that screendance can develop forms of narratives and thoughts which do not rely on logocentric modes of understanding (based on words: that is, on dialogue, on densely written and rational plots, on psychological characterization, and so on) but on more embodied, sensorial, and empathic ways of grasping what is at stake.

As for the strong kinesthetic empathy triggered by De Mey's films, a striking example is again to be found in *Rosas danst Rosas*: because of the throbbing rhythm of the music and the dance, the relentless, heady repetitions of some sequences of movement, as well as their speed, occasionally increased in the film through extremely accelerated editing, we are induced to feel in our very flesh the kinesthetic qualities of this structured though playful dance. Similarly, in *Fase*, the two female dancers and their series of endlessly repeated, hypnotic movements, combined with the obsessive music, inspire corporeal sensations of flowing qualities, kinesthetic trance, and physical exhaustion in the audience. The kinesthetic empathy generated by these films is an invitation to feel the dance in our very flesh and, ultimately, an invitation to dance.

More unusual physical and kinesthetic sensations are also conveyed by spaces. For instance, in *Prélude à la Mer*, the kinesthetic qualities of the dance are enhanced, made especially legible by the flat, unobstructed location that increases the visual impact of each movement. The space induces here a "hyper-radiance" of the movement.¹⁹



Figure 6:
Prélude à la Mer (2009,
dir. Thierry de Mey).
Courtesy of Thierry De
Mey.

Moreover, certain sites give some of De Mey's films a sense of immensity and vertigo that could not be achieved in theatrical settings. In *Prélude à la Mer's* opening sequence, the seemingly endless tracking shot that crosses the arid site relinquished by the Aral Sea gives an impression of its immensity; this, the lack of landmarks, and the boundless, empty horizon provokes a feeling of disorientation and a sort of lateral, spatial vertigo. In *Dom Svobode's* spectacular six-minute final sequence shot by De Mey, the sheer, rocky cliff conveys a more literal sense of vertigo: the dancers have to defy the laws of gravity by moving along the cliff (with the help of a rigging system), and the camera's viewpoint, shooting from an opposite cliff, exacerbates the sense of

danger, making the spectator dizzy by turning upside down his points of reference, especially as it alternates long, medium, and medium close-up shots at a rapid pace. De Mey's films thus engage and affect their spectators physically, generating specific corporal states and kinesthetic sensations.

De Mey's films do not only convey kinesthetic sensations, however: they also suggest a plethora of tactile sensations, evoked through the rich interactions between the dancers and their spaces of action. For instance, *Prélude à la mer* suggests the roughness of the vast expanse of sand by capturing the crumbly, stony texture of the ground, crackled by the dryness. Similarly, the way the dancers—who represent two fauns—are solidly grounded on the floor as they walk on all-fours, roll-up, and rub their bodies on the sandy expanse, suggests, especially through the sounds produced by these contacts, the roughness and dryness of the site. Here, the sound of the steps evokes the texture of the ground; in *Rosas danst Rosas* the echo of the movements suggests the vastness of the building; in *Love Sonnets*, the loud noise of tiles breaking under the dancers' feet conveys the impression of the strength and energy of their movements; and so forth. Space takes on haptic qualities. Indeed, in these films, De Mey fully draws on the capacity of images and sounds to evoke the other senses, that of touch in particular, and hence they seem to invite the audience to adopt a “haptic gaze” or “haptic visuality,” which “encourage[s] a mode of visual perception akin to the sense of touch, where the eye ... becomes responsive to qualities usually made-out through skin contact.”²⁰

The combination of all these sensorial elements creates atmospheric and embodied scenes and constitutes a poetic frame for an intensified sensuality: this “hypersensoriality” is an invitation for the audience to experience the film with all its senses. By exploring the screendance medium as a medium of the senses, i.e. as a privileged site for capturing and suggesting rich sensory qualities and complex corporeal states, De Mey's films move their audience physically and intellectually: they create embodied fictions and thoughts (that are both to be felt and deciphered) with bodies, their relationship to space, their sensations, and the very texture of the filmic images and sounds.

Notes

1. I use this concept both as a reference to Deleuze and Guattari's notions of “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization,” which account for any process that decontextualizes a set of given relations and actualizes them in other contexts, as well as to the geographical sense of the term (a displacement into other territories). If the stage is dance's traditional context or space (“territory”), video dance “deterritorializes” and “reterritorializes” dance in another (technical and aesthetic) context. For Deleuze

and Guattari's concept of "deterritorialization," see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

2. Charlotte Imbault, "The Place to Be," *Mouvement* cahier spécial Thierry De Mey (2011): 31.

3. Thierry De Mey in an interview conducted by Dick Tomasovic, "Thierry De Mey," in *Filmer la Danse*, ed. Jacqueline Aubenas (Brussels: La Renaissance du livre, 2007), 230, my translation.

4. Ibid.

5. Unpublished interview with the author, March 2013, my translation.

6. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "flesh of the world" is deeply linked to his theory of the primacy of embodiment and encapsulates his idea that our perception does not merely filter in information from our surrounding environment. Rather, our body and its environment are inevitably engaged in dialectical, entangled, interconnected interactions. Our body is caught in the "tissue" or in the "flesh" of the world; but, conversely, the world (since we perceive it through our body and since our body can impact and reshape it) is made of the "fabric" (*étouffe*) of our body. That is to say that the body and that which it perceives (the world) cannot be disentangled from each other. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) and "Eye and Mind," in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159-190.

7. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

8. Imbault, "The Place to Be," 28.

9. Tomasovic, "Thierry De Mey," 82.

10. This term was coined by Augusto Boal. It refers to the dual roles in certain theatrical works in which the audience is encouraged to participate both as spectator and actor, i.e. both observing and creating dramatic meaning and action.

11. "Barbe Bleue," Charleroi Danses, accessed September 8, 2013, <http://www.charleroi-dances.be/>.

12. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), 36.

13. Unpublished interview, March 2013.

14. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). An obvious example of such "performative utterances" is found in the course of marriage ceremonies when, for instance, a woman says: "I take this man as

my lawfully wedded husband." Just by saying this, she does something: she performs the act of taking a man for husband.

15. This echoes the etymological significance of *choreography*, as the art of writing dance, and addresses the possibility for this ephemeral art and its fleeting movements to leave a trace in memory. Of course, this is also a *mise-en-abîme* of the operation of the film itself which constitutes a durable trace of the dance.

16. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology and Primacy of Perception*.

17. These particular conceptions or "myths" of the body are explained and debunked in Michel Bernard's highly phenomenological theories of the body. See Michel Bernard, *Le Corps* (Paris: Seuil, 1995).

18. For a discussion of the notion of *corporeality*, see Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* and Bernard, *Le Corps*.

19. Camille Guynemer, "Mouvement intérieur," *Mouvement* cahier spécial Thierry De Mey (2011): 5.

20. Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and The Art of Transgression* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 66. For the notion of "haptic visuality," see also Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

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Media

Love Sonnets (1993). Dir. Thierry De Mey, chor. Michèle Anne De Mey. 29:00 min, color, sound.

Tippeke (1996). Dir. Thierry De Mey, chor. Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. 18:00 min, color, sound.

Rosas danst Rosas (1997). Dir. Thierry De Mey, chor. Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. 54:00 min, color, sound.

Barbe Bleue (1999). Dir. Thierry De Mey, chor. Cie Rosas. Color, sound.

Dom Svobode (2000). Dir. Thierry De Mey, chor. Iztok Kovac. 6:00 min, color, sound.

Fase (2002). Dir. Thierry De Mey, chor. Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. 58:00 min, color, sound.

Counter Phrases (2004). Dir. Thierry De Mey, chor. Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. 61:00 min, color, sound.

Ma Mère l'Oye (2004). Dir. Thierry De Mey, chor. Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. 28:00 min, color, sound.

One Flat Thing, Reproduced (2006). Dir. Thierry De Mey, chor. William Forsythe. 26:00 min, color, sound.

Prélude a la Mer (2009). Dir. Thierry De Mey, chor. Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. 19:00 min, color, sound.

Rémanences (2010). Dir. Thierry De Mey. B&W, sound.

La Valse (2010). Dir. Thierry De Mey, chor. Thomas Hauert. 13:00 min, color, sound.