

The Invisible Score: Phenomenology and the Excess of Dance Improvisation

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of embodiment, perception, and aesthetic experiences in dance through the lens of phenomenological theory. Drawing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's perceptual phenomenology, Jean-Luc Marion's notion of phenomenological excess, and Jean-Louis Chrétien's responsorial phenomenology, I propose variations of audiencing informed by my lived/living experiences as a dance improviser.

Audiencing reveals dance improvisation as a response to a call that urges one to transcend personal boundaries. This call is felt in ways that resonate with a developed phenomenology of audiencing as an act of responsiveness. The paper posits that dancing inherently exceeds any effort to fully comprehend or encapsulate it. Beginning with the contextualization of audiencing within media and performance studies, the discussion extends to a phenomenology of improvisational audiencing and an analysis of the dance's phenomenological excess. The paper concludes by introducing the concept of the ever-present invisible or intangible score: the excess of the dance that cannot fully be captured in words.

Keywords: audiencing, dance, excess

Introduction

Before you begin reading, I invite you to take a moment to connect with your body and the endless dances it offers us daily. Throughout this article, you will find instructions for your dances. Each is an invitation to yield, to listen, to attune to your body. Each movement becomes an invitation to open up a pathway to know yourself.

Dance score #1

Arrive
Free your toes
Find support
Take a deep breath

In this paper, I investigate the possibilities of *audiencing* dance improvisation from the performer's perspective. Building on the perceptual phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the radical phenomenological excess of Jean-Luc Marion, and the responsorial phenomenology of Jean-Louis Chrétien, I propose a series of audiencing variations that account for my lived/living experience as a dance improviser. As an artist-scholar, I engage in both writing and dancing as phenomenological practices. My aim is not to write *about* the phenomenon of dancing, but to embody the act of dancing itself through movement and text. Phenomenology invites us to dwell within the unfolding of experience, seeking meaning in what manifests in the act of retelling and writing. This process of meaning-making enables a deeper understanding of our lived and living experiences and our existence as humans. When I improvise, experience is evoked by sensing my body moving. Not only do I experience my relationship with gravity, constant shifts in levels, and an acute awareness of my body, but I also find that dance improvisation occurs in the space between the known (e.g., our body, movement patterns, and habits) and the unknown. The unknown is what takes us by surprise, opens us up to the unimaginable.

The notion of audiencing one's own dance allows us to connect kinaesthetically with that which dances in, with, and through us. Audiencing shows dance improvisation as a responsiveness to the call to move beyond one's own margins. We feel this call in ways that an elaborated phenomenology of audiencing can serve as a suitable responsiveness. The act of improvising in dance—hereafter referred to simply as dancing or dance—is a phenomenon that resists complete articulation. There is an inherent incompleteness in translating dance into language, rendering improvisation an excess in the sense of Marion's saturated phenomenon. Following Chrétien, our responses to a call always fall short: there is always more that goes beyond the limits of text and speech. Dancing is always *in excess* of any attempt to comprehend or capture it.

The binary distinction between *Leib* (lived body) and *Körper* (objective body) encounters a critical limitation when addressing phenomena that inhabit the blurred spaces between these categories. The habitual aspects of embodiment in dance remain only partially accessible to conscious awareness and, as such, to language. For Merleau-Ponty, embodiment is both the fundamental constituting activity of the subject and, paradoxically, something that is itself constituted. As Merleau-Ponty reminds us, the body resists objectification because it is inseparable from the self; its absence is inconceivable. Dancing heightens this realization. To dance is to sense oneself in the act of being—to dwell in a body that both performs and perceives, that reaches outward while folding inward. I conceptualize this notion as audiencing.

I begin by contextualizing the notion of audiencing within the context of media and performance studies. I then expand on this phenomenology of improvisational audiencing, the perceptual possibilities of Chrétien's notion of "call and response," and a phenomenological analysis of the *excess* of my dance. I conclude by introducing the idea of the always present invisible/intangible score: the excess of the dance that cannot fully be captured in words.

Audiencing

Dance score #2

*Close your eyes
soften your jaw.
Breath*

in...

out

in...

out

in...

out

Reflecting on my dance training, I realized that for years I had trained to be witnessed and judged by others. This approach made the dance (here identified as the act of performing for others) much more precious than the dances that occurred in the studio, or the dancing that happened for the pure pleasure of moving and shaking my body. I now understand dance as a way of inquiry. Ideas and concepts come in and fly out, turning into thoughts and words on the page.

Memories of my time in ballet school come up for me while I was dancing this score. It's like dancing a dance of thoughts. Move-away-move. An invisible guest: the presence of those who are not here. The ghost of the past. Pink tights, a leotard, a bun. My body reveals truths. Less is more.

The notion of audiencing that I propose considers the dancer's perspective. I use the term 'audience' as an active verb, one that encompasses the bodily motions and corporeal perceptions comprised in an active and interactive 'audiencing' of my own dance. The term *audiencing* originated in media studies as early as 1992 and has gained traction over the past decade in audience research (cf. Ginters, 2010), emphasizing the active role of spectators. The Online Etymology Dictionary defines audience as:

the act or state of hearing, action or condition of listening, from Old French *audience*, from Latin *audientia* "a hearing, listening," from *audientum* (nominative *audiens*), present participle of *audire* "to hear," from PIE compound *au-dh- "to perceive physically, grasp," from root *au- "to perceive. (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.)

This etymology supports the notion of audience as an active verb rather than merely a passive noun. The physical effects of *audiencing*—sweating, muscular tension, pupil dilation, or changes in heart rhythms (De Marinis, 1987)—attest to the body's active involvement in perception.

Dance researcher Karen Wood asserts that "audiencing is not context-specific but is something that happens in spectating situations" (Wood, 2015, p. 32). While the traditional understanding of perception emphasizes outward-directed grasping or physical attention, it often neglects the inner senses that afford perceptual access to the body as inherently motile. I reconceptualize audiencing (Bergonzoni, 2024) as more than "something that happens"; it is an embodied, active engagement with performance, one that involves leaning into the event—whether it be a dance or the flight of an eagle over a mountain—and perceiving through the skin, senses, and entire body. Deborah Hay (1988) describes her choreographic practice as shifting "from physical to perceptual challenges" (p. 22), emphasizing the importance of perceiving with the entire body. For Hay, this involves sensing the volume of one's body, making it permeable and "see-able," and inviting the experience of being seen (Clarke, 2011, p. 203).

My definition of audiencing incorporates this perspective, positioning it as a reciprocal act between the dancer and the audience, wherein both perceive and are perceived. Audiencing one's dance is a practice of moving away from an ocularcentric approach to dance: audiencing is an embodied form of witnessing. In this practice, I don't rely on mirrors, recordings, or anything that involves sight. Instead, I have presented and conceptualized three gradations of audiencing - shapeless, moulded, and spacious – that exist on a spectrum and involve different gradations of somatic awareness. When I audience my dance, I am constantly in the moment. I track the movement of my body in space, the changes in my breath.

I track an imaginary ball moving from my middle finger to my shoulder. I experience the rotation of my bones and joints. I sense the pathway of this ball moving up and down my limb. I continue to audience this dance, as I strive to move faster. I begin to audience my dance from a wider point of view. I am shifting between focusing on the small movement inside and tracking the movement of the arm in space. I don't know how this dance looks, but I know how it feels. I dive deeper into these sensations. Each moment is an opportunity to open myself to the unknown and learn something new about this body and this dance.

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012) anchors this idea of reciprocity, defining perception as the interplay between the body and its surroundings. Similarly, Don Beith (2017) emphasizes that "motility is not mere mechanism but is sensitive to the world, and perception is not merely receptive or disincarnated but always involves moving in the world" (p. 132). Moving and perceiving are two sides of the same coin. In dancing, this motility becomes intentional. Dancing arises when we shift attention to the body, transforming the habitual, everyday body into a dancing body (Bergonzoni, 2017).

Similarly, audiencing entails perceiving bodily, recognizing the somaticity - here defined as the state of being and having a body - of the act of audiencing. Dance becomes alive through shifts in attention. When I dance, I enact a dual engagement: I bring the dance into being through my movement while simultaneously embodying the role of the audience, performing what Reason and Lindelof (2016) term "the work of the spectator." Reason and Lindelof describe audiencing as acts of "attention, affect, meaning-making,

memory, and community" (2016, p. 17), emphasizing that spectators actively bring performances into being through their dynamic engagement with them.

To discuss audiencing and the role of the audience, we must begin by considering the audience as a body—whether singular, collective, or plural. The body is never an abstract entity; when I refer to *the* body, I specifically mean *my own* body. This perspective unsettles the notion of a universal or ideal body, instead foregrounding human variations as central to our shared yet diverse humanity (Garland-Thomson, 2005; Walmsley, 2019). In this variability lies the potential of audiencing to reimagine spectatorship as an embodied, participatory act unique to each body. Audiencing dissolves the boundaries between dancer and audience, movement and perception, self and world.

The concept of kinesthetic empathy, often associated with dance and performance studies, provides a valuable entry point into this discussion. First articulated by dance critic John Martin in the 1930s, it describes the phenomenon of “inner mimicry” or “the expectation of response to movement” (1939/1965, p. 55). Kinesthesia—our ability to sense the body’s position—has been described as “integral to perception, seen as not purely visual but active and multisensory” (Reason & Reynolds, 2010, p. 53). However, this idea has not been without critique. Susan Leigh Foster argues that kinesthetic empathy assumes a universal, neutral body and risks homogenizing the audience as a singular, collective body (Foster, 2011, pp. 158-159). Similarly, Martin Barker critiques the monolithic notion of “the audience,” emphasizing instead the existence of diverse audiences shaped by individual and collective histories. For Barker, audiencing cannot occur in a vacuum: “Audiences bring their social and personal histories with them. And these histories continue after the ‘event’ as the audiencing encounter is given a place” (2006, p. 124).

From this understanding, I define audiencing as an embodied engagement that centers on the individual bodily experience of each spectator. It is not the audience as a singular entity that matters but the pluralities within it—the specificities of perspectives shaped by individual histories, expertise, and socio-cultural positioning. Dance scholar Sarah Whatley (2007) identifies five ways audience members experience dance with disabled dancers. She describes an “immersion strategy” where spectators focus on how movement unfolds rather than on preconceived outcomes. For Whatley, this immersion is most accessible to those with an embodied understanding of dance and improvisation processes.

Audiencing reveals how we perceive and engage with dance on a sensory and relational level—how we “hear,” “sound,” “feel,” and “touch” movements while being enveloped within a multi-dimensional space. In dance improvisation, we interact with space, touching and being reciprocally touched and held by it. We experience time differently from the linear flow of daily life; we experience an “expectational time” (Chrétien, 2003, p. 12), which stretches and compresses as the dance unfolds. The somatics and tactility constitutive of this spatiality and temporality enable us to articulate the “responsorial” manner, only theoretically described by Chrétien, and to demonstrate how relations in space and time are formed when improvisation is inter-corporeally experienced. When I audience my dance, I constantly move in and out of the immersion strategy since I have an insider understanding of improvisation (see Bergonzoni, 2024, for more audiencing

strategies in dance). In this way, *audiencing* becomes a reciprocal practice of perception and movement—a dialogue between doing and perceiving.

The Excess of my own Dance

Dance score #3

*Sense the floor
tactile
sensing*

yield

*no longer a floor
a connector
with Earth.*

I enter the dance studio. The instructor asks us to feel gravity. I am lying on the floor, and all I can focus on is the cold temperature of the room. “Create space between your ears; feel the weight of your eyeballs into your skull, pay attention to what is happening between your ears”. I’m following instructions, but my attention is split between the temperature and the moment of dancing. I have a clear physical sensation of what it’s like to initiate my movement from my liver or what it means to lubricate my joints. I feel it. I experience it. I am in my body and in this dance. I am this body and this dance. Yet, I am lacking the language to fully articulate what this exact moment is.

Dance improvisation resists full articulation in language. As I illustrate in the vignette above, the “touch of translation” from the dancing body to text is “always too rough, too awkward, leaving traces, damaging delicate appendages, or knocking the structure off balance” (Yamaji Smith, 2014, p. 6). As dance phenomenologist Sondra Horton Fraleigh puts it: “dance exists in movement alone, not in language; and therefore does not parallel it” (1987, p. 71).

Engaging with the notion of audiencing phenomenologically requires me to constantly shift my attention, creating an improvised dance within the improvised dance. To be able to audience my dance, I must experience my whole body while I dance. This act of audiencing my body as I dance is the foundation for navigating between the tangible and intangible score that I describe in the next section.

I have only danced for 6 minutes. I feel empty, yet the pen keeps running. The dance keeps changing me from the inside out. I am becoming to be, maybe becoming whole? I am spreading into the floor. My writing is non-linear; it’s a disappearance. It’s a dance of the fingers, a dance of the pen. I’m not even thinking about what I’m writing, I’m just perceiving the writing, the flow of this pen running, dancing on the paper. I feel fully embodied in this experience. It’s no longer a pen; it is an extension of my body.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes how the body is not simply a collection of parts. In this integration, the “translation and assemblage” of parts doesn’t occur one by one, but rather, they “are completed once and for all in me: they are my body itself” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, pp. 150-151). In audiencing one’s dance, this embodied unity extends to how the body perceives the dance—sensing the body and the dance as they interact with gravity, space, and time.

As a dance improviser, I have often attempted the seemingly impossible task of practicing with an audience. I propose that we can become our own audience. To audience my dance is to actively navigate between the roles of dancer and spectator, a duality that requires constant attention shifting. As I dance, I do not simply dance; I also bring it to life phenomenologically. I witness it and make sense of it in the writing. I suggest that this process is a practice of care, a methodology that asks me to attend to my body with the same attentiveness I would give to an external audience.

As part of my research method, I have been dancing research questions and dancing the data (Cancienne & Snowber, 2003) that arise in my dancing body. In audiencing my dance, I reconnect and cultivate intimacy with my practice, creative power, and myself. This embodied intimate relation to self emerges in the dance. Audiencing involves fluid reciprocity between action and perception, where the body is both the mover and the observer, the researcher and the data.

The body, as I experience it, is not an objectified Körper (body as an object), nor a pure Leib (lived body) that is separate from the world; it is a continuous unfolding, a dynamic interplay of doing and sensing that cannot be fully captured or objectified. Somaticity, which I define as both *being* and *having* a body, is part of being human. In describing how we perceive our bodies, Merleau-Ponty talks about “a mode of unity” that is unique to “one’s own body” (1945/2012, p. 151). Even with the best of intentions, his definition of the body remains outward. My body—as the wholeness of its somaticity—is not simply a unity of parts; my body is the sweat, the droplets of saliva, the hair, and the heat left in the space after I dance. My body is the sensations of pain, pleasure, juiciness, flow, and staccato that I experience while I dance. My body changes breathing patterns, while simultaneously my thought process, and the ability to feel and sense the space and others within it.

Somaticity considers what is often dismissed as an excess. The body has frequently been conceived as the “too much”, the more-than of scholarship. *Excessus*, from Latin, means a departure, a going beyond, a surpassing of the limits (Hoad, 1996/2003). I suggest that somaticity has been overlooked in phenomenological and pedagogical discourse due to the lack and excess of evidence regarding body data. Body data is excessive in a radical phenomenological sense: it occurs and manifests in the experience itself. Including the excessive body, which is the body, allows us to track the evidence left over rather than dismissing it.

In analyzing the work of radical phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion, Steven Delay argues that Marion theorizes the “non-knowing” as both what “we know that we do not know adequately, because we experience the fundamental limitations of our finite powers to know when nothing is given” and as “the situation in which our abilities of

comprehension are overwhelmed by that which appears” (DeLay, 2019, p. 81). In both cases, we still possess a form of knowledge, but we don’t know it as an object. This excess of knowledge, defined by Marion as “saturated phenomena” (2002; 2008; see also Mackinlay, 2009; Delay, 2019), is what I experience when I audience my dance. For Marion, “saturated phenomena” are an excess that allows for “nonobjectifiable, even nonbeing phenomena” (2008, p. 121) to appear. He identifies them as follows: the event (which exceeds all quantity), the work of art (which exceeds all quality), the flesh (which exceeds all relation), and the face of the other (which exceeds all modality). Each of these excesses identifies a type of saturated phenomenon, which functions exactly like a paradox. (Marion, 2008, p. 121)

As Shane Mackinlay writes, “a saturated phenomenon is one that cannot be wholly contained within concepts that can be grasped by our understanding [...] there is always an excess leftover” (2009, p. 1). Like flowing water, body data are fleeting. The moment they arise, they are either gone or become the focus of our attention. Once the dance is over, there is always an excess of evidence of the dance: the energy, the sweat, the breath, the hair on the floor, and, at times, the blood that gets left behind. Simultaneously, there is a lack of evidence: the findings of my research—a research that centres the body at its core—are not tangible nor visible; the findings are the excess of data left in the body. This excess becomes tangible and visible when danced, sounded, written, or spoken. To account for those excesses to be part of my scholarship and not as something to dismiss, the body must be redefined as the carrier of an excess of data and research. Dancing allows the excesses of the body—the fleeting moments of sensation—to surface and be acknowledged without reducing them to mere objects or measurable outcomes. When we genuinely include the body as part of scholarship, the excessive phenomena (Chrétien, 2003; Henry, 1975, 1996/2003; Marion, 2002, 2008) that are the body and dance manifest themselves. What feels intangible and invisible comes to the surface and becomes tangible without the need to be reified.

The Invisible/Intangible Score

Dance score #4

A world inside you

*feel your lungs
hugging your heart
curves in the spine*

*water
runs through your body*

A phenomenology of excessive dance must consider the concept of an “invisible/intangible score.” This score is the in-between of the observable act of dancing and dancing itself. This score is not merely an external framework or a prescriptive set of rules but is something that emerges through the act of dancing itself. It is lived and living, not written—a phenomenon that cannot be fully anticipated or captured before its enactment. In other words, the invisible/intangible score is generated through dance. It is

a score that only manifests in the dancing. I must intentionally leap into the yet-to-be-known via my bodily inquiry, where the dance is oriented towards the emergent, unseen dimension of the score. This invisible score is a product of the dialectic between pre-reflective bodily knowledge and the reflective awareness that arises through movement. As mentioned, the somaticity of my body allows this score to manifest. I search and dance into the unknown, making dance (the familiar) strange in an ongoing process of embodying and rediscovering latent or forgotten knowledge.

We gathered on a rooftop to safely dance during a global pandemic. We are 8 dancers figuring out how to continue dancing together. We agreed on a set of rules, which in dance we refer to as a score.

*Begin out of frame. One dancer at a time enters the space to create a plateau.
Lizard (e.g., moving in response to the feeling of the sun on our skin)
Slow clock (e.g., slowly rotating on the spot in a clockwise direction)
Exit the frame*

We have practiced the lizard and the slow clock before, but we have never tried the transitions or what it is like to combine them into a choreography. I remain open to the unimaginable possibilities of the unknown.

I became lost rather quickly. I am still lizardling, and I noticed that everyone else has begun rotating. It is in this moment of unknowingness that the intangible/invisible score arises.

The invisible/intangible score is an ever-evolving research question that can lead to the discovery of a new intangible/invisible score. There is a score that works as a framework for the dance, but it also carries the intangible/invisible score. This score is already present and somehow tangible in its intangibility, visible in its invisibility. It only becomes visible and tangible in how it is felt, intuited, and anticipated. It is an excess of dance – it exceeds our bodily perception, pointing toward something always already present and yet constantly evolving. Bringing this back to Chrétien's (2003) notion of the excessive call in comparison to the finitude of the response, we can say that the invisible/intangible score is excessive. We are called to dance, and our response is limited: an external and prescriptive score. However, as soon as we begin to dance, a new call arises: the invisible/intangible score. This score cannot be articulated; it is excessive and incapable of the limits of our words.

While allowing new scores to arise, dancing carries profound pedagogical implications and opens up the space for a *sensing pedagogy*. Perception, as described in the opening of this article, is a bodily and somatic act that encompasses the relationality between the body and the world. The dancer must wait, listen, and let the new score emerge during this process. This process can inspire pedagogical practices that prioritize openness, responsiveness, and cultivate spaces where learners are encouraged to engage with the unknown.

The invisible/intangible score is a methodology for exploring the richness of lived experience. It calls for a deep attentiveness to the interplay between the known and the

unknown, the individual and the collective, the tangible and the intangible. By engaging with this concept phenomenologically, I uncovered the potential of dance as an ever-unfolding inquiry into being, knowing, and creating in the world.

Conclusion

Dance score #5

How do you reach for S

P
A
C
E
?

*find space in life
releasing
easing
into pain*

In this paper, I have explored the interplay between movement, perception, and the phenomenological excess present in dance improvisation. By reconceptualizing audiencing as an active and embodied verb, I have demonstrated how dancing extends beyond performance to become a reciprocal dialogue, blurring boundaries and fostering a deeper understanding of self and space.

The concept of the invisible/intangible score repositions dance as a phenomenon that arises through the interplay of the seen and the unseen, the felt and the intuited. This score serves as a pedagogical gesture, guiding us toward a deeper understanding of lived and living experiences and the generative potential that resides in the unknown and the ungraspable.

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