



Ashton, H. and Banks, M. (2017) Step into the zone: career dancers, cultural work and intensity. In: Jordan, T., McClure, B. and Woodward, K. (eds.) *Culture, Identity and Intense Performativity: Being in the Zone*. Routledge: Abingdon, pp. 95-111. ISBN 9781138185920

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Step into the Zone: Career Dancers, Cultural Work and Intensity

Citation: Ashton, H. and Banks, M. (2017) **Step into the Zone: Career Dancers, Cultural Work and Intensity**, in Jordan, T., Woodward, K. and McClure, B. *Culture, Identity and Intense Performativity: Being in the Zone*. Routledge, London

Introduction

Writing in the 1920s at the height of the Weimar Republic, the social critic Siegfried Kracauer saw the rise of mass industrial society replicated in the mechanistic forms of entertainment that were being offered to the public. In a society where everything appeared increasingly standardised and systematised, Kracauer saw that art and entertainment were also becoming formulaic, mechanical and predictable. The example he chose to illustrate this came not from music or film, but from popular dance, and in the form of The Tiller Girls, the most famous dancing troupe of the early 20th Century. In his 1927 essay '*The Mass Ornament*' Kracauer polemically argued that:

These products of American distraction factories are no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics (...)
The hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls. The mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires' (Kracauer 1995, pp. 75-79)

Here, the Tiller Girls were envisaged to embody the demands of the industrial age; nameless bodies moving in a spectacular unity of production. The individual Tiller Girl (or 'girl-unit', as Kracauer preferred) was imagined to be like a labourer on Henry Ford's car production

line: a worker-drone divested of her own individuality; an organic cog in the ceaseless flow of mechanical production. For Kracauer, the spectacle of the 'mass ornament' - the collectivized aesthetic expression of industrial rationality - required an abandonment of recognition, since the procession of creative work rested on organising dancers into productive 'mass gymnastics' that stripped them of their individuality and dignity. The Tiller Girls' outward appearance of engagement and pleasure seemed to mask a world of destruction where 'community and personality' were destined only to 'perish' (1995, p. 78) and the prospect of feeling or expressing authentic human emotions was being undermined by the accelerated advance of commercialised life.

Yet, while Kracauer may have had a point about industrial capitalism, he was too hard on The Tiller Girls. 'Girl-units' they may partly have been, but equally they were individual and co-operating *people*; possessed of their own thoughts, desires and passions - many of which were no doubt carried and animated by their relationship to work ¹

.So while Kracauer's analysis of dance-work might seemed to apply at the visual level (ironically, at the surface of appearances), it failed at the level of subjectivity, experience and affect. Work in dance, then, as now, is much more than nameless bodies moving in a choreographed unison and performing 'mass gymnastics', even to the extent, as we'll see,

¹ For example, Lucy Hefferman who joined the Tiller girls in 1937 recalled "It was very exciting and glamorous but terribly hard work," (quoted in Della-Ragione, 2013). Especially for women from working class backgrounds, becoming Tiller Girl offered an escape from the inevitability of factory work:

'I didn't have any academic qualifications, but have managed to go on and achieve what I have done [travelling the world and performing at prestigious venues such as the Royal Albert Hall and London Palladium with celebrities of the time]...In our village, there wasn't much to do. The only work available was mining. My grandfather and dad both worked down the mine. For the women, there was only really factory work (...). Once I got to live my dream, I have never stopped dancing. (Fay Robinson, ex-Tiller Girl, quoted in Manning, 2015).

that there might be experiences of ‘being in the zone’ associated with such performances. Of course, this complexity has long been recognised. Since Kracauer’s time a whole host of approaches to understanding dance have come to the fore – many revealing the more positive and engaging – as well as damaging and degrading - experiences of dance-as-work (e.g. Aalten, 2004; 2007; Chandler, 2012; Reed, 1998; Wainwright and Turner, 2004; Wainwright, Williams and Turner, 2006).

For the purposes of this chapter we want to cite one particular example of social science writing that offers a direct challenge to Kracauer’s understanding; one that views dance-work as an act of conscious agency, as much as unconscious reproduction of structure. In her article entitled ‘*The Moment When it All Comes Together*’ written in 2004, the social anthropologist Anna Aalten analyses the complex ambiguities of (ballet) dance work – a world where, on the one hand, women are especially subject to intense demands for technical and aesthetic excellence, and often repressive bodily and beauty norms, which they both articulate and suffer, while on the other hand dancers will themselves convey and express strong feelings of independence, freedom and autonomy as creative workers or artists. This tension is brought most clearly into view in the quest for what she terms the perfect ‘moment’ on stage; an illuminating intensity of transcendence and magic which is both the dream and the binding mechanism of dance work, as she describes:

Dance, maybe more than any other art form links physical movement with expression, both physical and emotional. In ballet women learn to control their bodies, but they also experience, even for a moment, the synchronizing of physicality, willpower and emotionality (Aalten, 2004, p. 274)

This special ‘moment’ is both the product of discipline and control but also a vanishing point where all forms of control are forgotten, and where only the gratifying sensation of personal

accomplishment and escape remains. Here, then, Aalten shows us that dance is a necessary contradiction – both ordinary work and a higher calling; a practice of constraint premised on the notion of freedom; a subjection to technique in order to provide the illusion of a natural capacity; and a reduction of the body to instrument and object while striving always to transcend the body’s objective limits. Like so many practices of cultural work, dance is both constraining and enabling, simultaneously. The ‘moment when it all comes together’ is therefore a special moment of labour *intensity* that reveals a contradiction that might otherwise be less acutely felt or recognised.

While drawing on Aalten’s analysis, we want to move in a slightly different direction. We seek to illuminate further the relationship between special ‘moments’ of transcendence and the routine, lived experience of dance work. This is not simply to make the obvious point that the ‘special moment’ relies upon the more mundane commitment and subjection to discipline that prefigures it – that without ordinary sacrifice there can be no extraordinary transcendence. We also want to suggest that to work in dance is to inhabit what we will term an all-pervasive and consuming *economy of intensity*. To us, this describes a world of striving marked by constant demands for heightened and exceptional bodily performance, psychic immersion and a tolerance of pain-in-work, partly (and sometimes only) sustained by the enduring promise of not simply reaching some special transcendent state, but of embodying the routine character of a true professional. It is this *permanent* intensity in dance work – the constant requirement, necessity and desire to be intense – that this chapter seeks to address.

Being in the Zone, flow, the moment

The necessity of intensity we want to link to the fundamental concern of this book – to understand the social character of ‘being in the zone’ (hereafter BITZ). In cultural work, such

as dance, BITZ is often invoked to describe the possibility of attaining a state of effortless, productive grace – a moment where one is performing at the peak of one’s powers, apparently without thought or consciousness. Previously, one of us has written about the zone in cultural work, and its double articulation with respect to capitalist work and organisation (Banks, 2014). On the one hand, BITZ offers a means of managing; it is invoked as a rhetorical device to encourage workers to apply themselves to their prescribed tasks, and in cultural work especially, used to bind people through their self-generated capacities and passions. In such work, possession of a free creative subjectivity is the *sine qua non* for cultural industry labour, and surrendering oneself to the demands of the art the best guarantee for the production of an authentic object or commodity. To get into the zone, therefore, is simply a route to doing the best kind of work. The reward for the worker is attainment of what Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1997) calls ‘flow’ – an exceptional state of ecstasy, where there is perfect alignment between ‘physical and psychic energy’ (ibid., p. 32) and work is at its most productive peak. For flow theorists, BITZ tends to be presented as an unqualified good. As Csikszentmihalyi further has it: ‘...flow makes us feel better in the moment, enabling us to experience the remarkable potential of the body and mind fully functioning in harmony’ (2003, p. 63). That BITZ requires workers to exceed their usual limits – by working harder, longer, more intensely – and to abandon concerns for ordinary workplace convention (including its systems of remuneration, time-space organisation, practices of self-care and care for others), is usually overlooked by those managers and enthusiasts who stand to benefit most from having workers apply themselves to excess. The growth of BITZ management literature (e.g. Brusman 2013; Carr, 2011, see also Davies, 2015) and its links to positive psychology (and now related innovations such as ‘mindfulness’) might be taken as symptomatic of an advanced capitalism that now demands workers adopt a more total and

immersive relation to their job, and a commitment to its more pernicious, psychological demands.

However, on the other hand, we might view BITZ as offering workers something else – (say) a sense of personal pleasure, gratification or enlightenment; or a feeling of having usefully extended one’s own human capacities or powers. It’s possible also to think of BITZ as having the potential to extend the shared ‘internal goods’ of a cultural practice – since modes of intensive work can lead to improvements in the standards of excellence and professional qualities that characterise the activity of (say) dancing, making music, writing or painting, that can be shared within the community, regardless of their ‘external’ (commercial) value or benefit (MacIntyre, 1981). We might also want to argue that a capacity for excess contains its own intrinsic potential for a more explicit workplace critique. If – as autonomist writers such as Hardt and Negri (2000) have argued – the capacity of labour is always in some way ungovernable and in excess of the commercial purposes imagined for it, then the potential for BITZ to intensify the release of certain kinds of ‘spontaneous movement’ (ibid., p. 399 or ‘creative energies’ (p. 294) that can offer a challenge to capital, might be one of the unintended consequences of pushing workers to more fully extend their own physical and mental limits. Further, if BITZ describes a state of ecstasy, or timeless time, a moment of transcendence or removal from the norm, then this too might be interrogated for its more radical potential. As Drew Hemment (1997) argues in his discussion of rave culture and (public) dancing, the modern word ecstasy derives from the ancient Greek word *ekstasis* – meaning ‘to stand outside’. Dancing (and we presume BITZ like activities of similar kind) offer the prospect of a removed state of being that cannot so easily be measured or organized. BITZ is in some sense both invisible and unlimited – a condition that precludes easy calibration or capture for a commercial purpose. It is in entering this ‘crack of time’ that Hemment suggests there is the possibility of a ‘fracture between past and future that is the

condition of creativity and change' (Hemment, 1997, p. 5). The wider question here perhaps is whether intensive modes of *work* might allow people to in some way remove themselves, 'fracture' time, and to live or imagine a life beyond the confines of the present.

Using these considerations as a starting point, we turn now to the specific case in hand – the lives of career dancers. We want to show how dance work is routinely premised on a quest for heightened BITZ-like moments in performance (the 'synchronising of physicality, willpower and emotionality' that Aalten describes) but is *also* based on experiencing and reproducing a more mundane and abiding intensity that now pervades all aspects of working life. In this respect, BITZ, or 'flow', or the special 'moment' exists less as a state of exception, and rather more as an intensification of a continually present intensity. We suggest that it is the everyday material organisation, culture and structures of (at least some kinds of) dance work that demand workers adopt a more constant orientation to intensive engagement and concentration beyond the norm that one would expect, even in other forms of cultural and creative industries work. BITZ is perhaps simply the pinnacle that marks a more abiding condition – the need *always* to work in an intense way.

In this respect dance might appear to be *hyper*-intense when compared with other kinds of cultural and creative work, which tend to require and demand similar repertoires of discourse and practice, but in less concentrated and excessive form. It might represent a kind of exceptional or limit case of intensity by which others kind of cultural work might be compared. This is an empirical question that we cannot address here. But we also want to propose something more provisional and daring – that dance work might offer an exemplar for the way post-industrial and knowledge-based work is transforming *more generally*, into an all-consuming activity more fundamentally driven by demands to be always ready, immersive and intense.

The Case

The empirical basis of our study is a number of in-depth interviews carried out by one of us (Ashton) during the course of ethnographic research into the working lives and practices of freelance dancers. Unlike company dancers who have relatively stable, long term employment, freelance dancers are reliant upon numerous short-term contracts interspersed with periods of unemployment or alternative (non-performance) work. They are a nomadic group travelling extensively for work across a number of dance genres such as classical, jazz, contemporary, tap and street and in a variety of contexts including television, theatre, film, the music industry, and public and private events and ceremonies. As they are a difficult group to define, the selection criteria used for the sample was that they were adults, had trained professionally as dancers, and had experienced a period of paid employment as a dancer. The sample of 43 dancers (25 in London, UK and 18 in New York City, USA) was found by snowballing from personal contacts developed during Ashton's career as a dance professional. Ages of dancers ranged from 21-44, so providing a wide range of professional experience. There were 28 women and 15 men which is reflective of an industry which has an abundance of women relative to men, but also tends to offer a roughly equal number of jobs for each of these genders.

Living Intensely: Making a Dance Career

The following section draws on the accounts of our participants to highlight some of the issues involved in the everyday undertaking of immersive and intensive work. Throughout, we try to highlight the routine and systemic demands of dance, how these are framed around

certain norms and expectations regarding how dancers should behave and be, as well as the institutional or industry settings that help shape such expectations. But we also aim to give voice to the experiences of ordinary dancers. Our aim is to show the desire to ‘go the extra mile’ in terms of physicality, psychological commitment and personal sacrifice is often what marks out the professional identity of a dancer - albeit a desire that is not simply freely chosen, but also socially directed and shaped.

Training and Education

Working in dance is understood to be demanding, absorbing, passion-driven, and marked by an apparent lack of separation between the person and the work; as many would remark, dance is ‘who I am’, not a job. This begins long before a professional career is fully obtained or realised. Most professional dancers began their training at a young age, often 3 or 4 years old, in local clubs and schools. Of course not everyone who enters at that stage becomes a professional, but for those who aim to, the training quickly becomes absorbing and all encompassing:

I don't think you realise at that age [3 years] how much it just very quickly becomes part of your life but it does (Rebecca, UK).

By the age of around 11, the training is intensifying. Many pro-dancers reported they'd danced most nights in the week after school, in addition to weekends and holidays. The training itself took various forms in group and solo classes which are disciplined and structured to exams, rehearsals and performances, all of which echo and aim to replicate the working lives of professional dancers. Dance education is therefore designed as a kind of

proto-labour – a form of preparation for the rigours of a possible career to come. Although teachers are pivotal in this training and socialisation process – with dancers explaining how they were encouraged and ‘pushed’ - this tended to be seen as something that was beneficial and desirable; partly because dancers wanted to push *themselves*:

I mean I remember when I got a bit older. I’d be there almost every evening and all day Saturday as well. I just loved it. Like, you couldn’t get me away from it. If there was like a friend’s party or something, I’d always choose my dancing first. Like, I just wanted to go all the time. And it would almost be if I’d done something naughty at home, my punishment would be ‘you start behaving or else you’re not going dancing’, you know? (Ria, UK).

As children, these professionals formed an intense and abiding attachment to dance, quickly accepting the understanding they must work hard and sacrifice other commitments, given the rigours and demands of the practice. In this way, as our sample described, they quickly learned to separate themselves from other children, and adopt a more ‘focussed’ orientation to their dancing. Nevertheless, these dancers reported gaining an immense enjoyment from dance and from becoming more and more involved in the dance world. This required a consistent commitment to regular rounds of classes, festivals, performances, rehearsals, workshops and so on, that also required the financial and emotional support and co-operation of parents and families². As a result young dancers found themselves favourably immersed in a dance community, a separate world where only dance is central, and that offered an overriding priority and identity:

² The ability to pursue and fulfil a career in the arts is seen generally to strongly favour the more socially advantaged and privileged although the dancers in this particular sample were from very diverse socio-economic backgrounds. We do not have space to address the issue here but see Tsitsou (2014) for some specific discussion on the issue of dancer’s social origins.

You're so impressionable when you're that young, you're like a sponge and you just absorb it, so it becomes like...it's in your brain, 'I'm a dancer' (Beth, USA).

The conventional next stage of training in the UK³ is to audition for entry into a professional, vocational college at the age of around the age of 16-18. Gaining a place is challenging, not only because of limited funding support, but also because competition for places at the top institutions is so intense. At this stage, aspiring young dancers reported being 'focused' and 'driven' - often in contrast to their school peers who seemed much less certain about their future career:

I was always shocked at people's lack lustre attitude to their future because I was so driven. And I think I almost felt alienated in that way because I couldn't talk about my passions, not just because of what it was, but about anything that made your heart alive, you know. People didn't seem to have that (Ben, UK).

At this stage, dancers were also aware that gaining entry was the next step in realising their dream of a professional career and they were determined to get the most from this advanced training:

I did every extra class that I could, and worked the hardest I could work because you are only going to get that opportunity once. And you know you can't afford to waste any of that time. If you have got the opportunity to go, because not everyone has, I

³ In the USA there are two routes into the profession; more formal routes through vocational training and alternative routes via apprenticeships and work-study programmes. In the UK the vocational training route is seen as essential, as the top training establishments have strongly established industry links, which provide the main pathways into work.

knew from the auditioning process that if I was lucky enough to be given a place that I had to make the absolute most of it (Nala, UK).

The training at dance college (again) mirrors the work of professional dance labour, and its intensive physical and artistic demands. Thus, as a result of early socialisation, enculturation and training, the traditional idea of a staged separation and transition between school, family, education and work is not especially marked in the case of professional dance. For the dancer, these ‘transitions’ are now perhaps better understood as coterminous experiences (Ashton and Ashton, 2016). In this way, those who enter a professional career can already be said to have been intensively immersed in dance work (albeit informal and unpaid) almost their entire life. If one of the more broadly accepted aims of (all kinds of) schooling is to socialise and entrain students into positions where they are ‘ready for work’, it seems clear to us that dance education is more geared than most towards early installation of the value of a labour-focussed subjectivity and an immersive professional ethos.

Pushing and Competing

In their ethnographic study of the Royal Ballet, Steven Wainwright and Bryan Turner (2004) found professional dancers (typically) working 12 hour days, as a result of requirements to attend multiple classes, rehearsals and performances, and usually working six, sometimes seven days a week. While not ballet company members, our sample of dancers reported similar requirements to work long hours and – as freelance professionals – adapt to the contingent demands of the job market and opportunity:

I think that's the most intense thing I've ever done – '*Hair*' at The Gate [the name and venue of a production], because it was for no money at all, it was like £200 a week - or £180 a week. We were in this tiny confined space; it was above a pub, from 9 until like 9 at night just constantly re-working this show. It was gruelling. But we performed for 6 or 8 weeks (Luke, UK).

It was crazy I mean I would go...I worked as a waiter so I would have class say (...) three classes in a row, Monday through Friday, an hour and a half each starting at 9 a.m. and then we would have rep rehearsal, and then I would literally still be sweating put on like my shirt and tie, and run like maybe twenty-five blocks to a restaurant and wait tables for like... you know until late at night (Adrian, USA).

Our dancers reported on the highly competitive nature of contemporary work, and the constant need to 'push' oneself professionally in order to maintain status and secure opportunities:

You have to push for it and I knew right from the off how difficult it was going to be out in the real world, so you may as well set yourself up from the beginning and, you know, and fight for it right from the off (Freya, UK).

It always used to be the same circle of people getting work, and the people that are not getting work kind of just get left to the side or don't really get noticed in any way. So I kind of just wanted to push myself as well, instead of getting disheartened and not carrying on (...) and I have gotten quite a lot of work, so that kind of, I suppose, proves my point to myself that if you work hard at it people will notice at the end

If you're there all the time and you work hard you will definitely get the work, no matter what (Joe, UK).

Although dancers might work collectively, as part of a cast of performers, at the same time it is highly individualised work. Participants not only revealed how they were employed as individuals, as freelancers for hire, but often reported on the sense of personal responsibility they felt towards their work, in terms of its physical performance. Having trained to work so intensely under inspection and examination from a young age it was normal for our dancers to internalise a constant (sometimes near-pathological) sense of self-monitoring, disciplining and criticism:

I don't think they [outsiders] understand about how passionate we are, and how upsetting it is if something goes wrong (Suzie, UK).

In dance, your individual physical abilities and limitations are always quite visibly exposed – so intensifying both acute and chronic anxieties about individual work performance.

Pain-in-work

Writers such as Aalten and Wainwright and Turner have described how professional dancers must endure the constancy of physical pain in work. The relentless and rigorous demand to contort and shape one's body into exceptional states tends to make 'permanent injuriousness' (Wainwright and Turner, 2004, p. 321) more or less inevitable. For many dancers, however, pain is not simply an imposed or unwanted condition, but actively *sought out* – since to feel pain is often regarded as 'a sign of improvement' and a marker that reinforces the idea that 'if you want to be good you have to suffer' (Aalten, 2007, p. 112-114). Pain is a sign of

sublimation – a sign that one had transcended those corporeal limits that must be broken if one is to attain the artistic excellence that the best kinds of work demand. To recognise the necessity and inevitability of pain – but to find a way to live with it and control it - is an accepted occupational norm. For our sample of dancers a forced or willing acceptance of physical pain, and bodily endurance, was also taken as the norm:

I think it is a different mentality as well isn't it, I don't know, I think we have to be so focused in what we're doing and I think it kind of.... I mean we tend to talk about the normal jobs as being something other than what we do, but it's not normal is it to put yourself through that much pain and go "yeah I loved it" (Neo, UK).

But there are also other kinds of pain and professional pathology. With the dance profession so closely linked to constant rounds of auditioning, physical scrutiny, individual evaluation, and waiting for personal acceptance or rejection, then 'pain' is often expressed in psychological, emotional or even spiritual terms, rather than the merely physical. Amongst our freelance dancers, pain was recounted in terms of audition rejections, lack of work, unfavourable contract conditions, or other material and financial 'injuries', or in necessity of having to undertake second jobs which erode professional identity or status. This pain cuts to the core as the person, since a dancer's self-worth cannot so easily be extracted from the evaluation or opportunity of work. Not getting a job, for example, was often experienced as a deeply personal rejection:

I am choosing a profession that is...constantly putting myself (...) in a place to be judged. Um...and...it's not like...I am an accountant and I messed up on a decimal place here or there and I can go back and fix it. I am...my product is myself and for you to constantly hear 'no you are not what we want' um...that's hard to rise above and I think that's the hardest thing for me. I am my product and ... it's not like...a

defective toy that can be sent back to the factory, it is you and when somebody says...you know 80% of the time 'no' to your product, you are like 'but this is my heart and my soul'. 'I am bleeding for you'! They are like 'no, no thanks'! (Wren, USA).

Most dance auditions are conducted on a large and impersonal scale, often with many hundreds of dancers auditioning and going into studios in groups. With auditions attracting high numbers of prospective workers, most of our participants suggested they were rarely treated as individuals or with 'respect', often being herded into (and out of) the room; hence the popular industry term of being in the 'cattle market' or at 'cattle call':

You think to yourself, 'why do I come to a cattle market to try and get a job?' (...) and you have no answer but for some reason you keep doing it. It's not normal! (...) I know there are interviews and things [in conventional jobs] but they would never be as brutal as to go 'get out of the room, you are rubbish' which we get! (Elle, UK).

The pain is felt most keenly as a personal rejection but also a blow to self-esteem and the ambition to make a living as a dancer:

You kind of say 'am I good enough to do this'? I don't know. So it's a lot of self-doubt, a lot of self-doubt. I think it's hard when you've found something that you are good at and makes you feel good, and you enjoy, to think of anything else (Darcy, UK).

The physical work of staying in dance is matched in the psychological work necessary to adapt oneself to the demands of an especially individualized, blunt and judgmental profession. Dance workers must cope alone with the rigours and intensities of being constantly evaluated as capable or incapable, talented or untalented, and as physically 'right'

or ‘wrong’, having the appropriate ‘look’ or ‘shape’ and so on. There is a self-resilience demanded of dance workers that seems especially marked, even compared with other kinds of cultural work, since not only must they find a way to endure and manage the physical pain associated with commitments to intensive training, bodily-maintenance and performance, they must also cope psychologically with an industry where the structural tendency is not to regard dancers as persons, artists or exceptional ‘talent’ (except in the rarest instances) but to treat them as detail labour, ‘cattle’ or (as Kracauer imagined) expendable ‘units’.

Working in the now

One of the other ways in which dance work might be regarded as intense is related to the finite nature of the career. Dancers have short professional lives – often lasting only 10-15 years. There is a lack of jobs for older dancers, who come to be perceived as less youthfully attractive and easily replaceable by one of the high numbers of new entrants ever willing to enter the profession, particularly in the UK⁴. This further intensifies the work, not only creating an almost frantic need to gain employment, but a desire to ‘keep moving on’ in order to experience as many opportunities as possible in the limited time available. There is an abiding sense that you have to do as much as you can, while you can:

I think there is a lot of pressure and the time, ‘cos the clock is always ticking. Whether it’s your body that’s going to last out or like especially with ...I think the mentality over here [UK] is that there’s always the next job to get to, and like there’s, you know, you’ve got to tick them off as you go. I’m going to do one year at this show, and then one year at this show and keep moving (Freya, UK).

⁴ The specificities of the labour market are such that in the UK dancers are deemed ‘old’ in their early 30s. In the USA and Germany however dancers can continue into their early 40s although this is not common.

Further intensifying the sense of living ‘in the now’ is the absence of any kind of clear linear career progression. A dancer might be a dance captain⁵ or soloist in one show and then be an ensemble (chorus) member in the next. While dancers may incrementally gain experience in bigger or more prestigious shows, there is always the realistic prospect of being out of work and having to return to less glamorous or less well-paid production. Dancers’ careers tend to be more opportunistically organised, and much more ‘zig-zag’ than linear.

Consoling Passions

Just as there is no real career progression for a dancer, there are no pay increases based on length of service or experience. The top weekly pay for a theatre dancer in a large London production is £630 per week (this is prior to agent commission of around 12%, tax and NI) or £369 per week for the Royal Opera House (at Equity⁶ rates). Dancers in our sample however were paid as little as £180 per week for smaller, London based productions. Similarly, a large UK film production has a minimum Equity rate of £492 per day but often dancers reported being paid as little as £80. There are frequent pay cuts, almost no regulation and working conditions are often poor. Dancers are often at the bottom of the performing food chain with musicians, singers and other performers receiving greater benefits, including pay (SOLT, 2016, Storr, 2011)⁷. This eventually takes its toll as dancers – like others – might aspire to have stable relationships, families and financial security. While these material deficits can erode dancers’ capacities to maintain the emotional intensity of the work, more often it is the

⁵ A dance captain performs, but also oversees and manages the choreography in a show, acting as a lead and supervisor for other dancers.

⁶ Equity is the UK trade union for dancers, actors and other professional performers.

⁷ Society of London Theatres (SOLT) negotiates rates between the major producers and unions associated with theatre work including dancer, musicians, creative and technicians.

intense love and consolatory passion they feel for their work that provides the kind of immaterial compensation now regarded as widely characteristic of all kinds of cultural work:

The best thing for me is being able to do something that is kind of the love of my life really, you know, my absolute passion, and do it as a job and get paid for it. When you kind of think of so many people that kind of have jobs where they kind of drag themselves out of bed and they are doing it purely to live and pay their bills, but they don't get any fulfilment out of it – that's the best part, just doing something you absolutely love (Neo, UK).

Numerous writers have drawn attention to the innate 'passions' and affective rewards realised in the undertaking of creative work (e.g. Gregg, 2012; McRobbie, 2002). In dance, this takes on a particular cast given that the levels of physical and mental effort required to earn even the smallest incomes appear disproportionate when compared with other art forms. While musicians, actors and stage entertainers might make high emotional investments for similarly low financial returns, dance is not only amongst the lowest paid of performing arts professions, it is one that has the most condensed and time-limited career, so somewhat intensifying the need for cultivating the required compensatory passion.

BITZ or 'the moment when it all comes together'

Finally, in amidst mundane intensity, might come the opportunity of an extraordinary emotional peak or pay-off; the moment of BITZ or 'when it all comes together'. This is mostly realised on stage, in public performance, but can also occur in audition, or practice, in class or rehearsal – it can therefore be felt in multiple sites and under different conditions.

Our participants spoke of these moments, as being variously performed, relational, or transcendent:

When it really works it's really ...it's kind of like a drug you know? Kind of an addiction. You are able to have someone else perceive something. And you are never in control of what they [the audience] perceive but ...if you can make them feel, if you can make them engage, it's huge (Carl, UK).

The best thing is how alive I feel when I'm doing it, even if it's a rehearsal or a class but ...it's almost like ...when good work is ...when you are experiencing yourself through the work it's a form of ecstasy, it's a form of being outside your body and that's the high that keeps you wanting more. (Tilly, USA).

Such moments are not uniformly experienced, but felt and described in different ways. The zone is a moment of unity - physically, emotionally and temporally - and yet at the same time can be experienced as numbness, a void, or a moment without thought or feeling:

Oh my god. It's breath-taking. You get out there and it's an absolute buzz. It's almost like you're not in control of your body anymore (Suzie, UK)

To us these moments are not necessarily exemplary or unique, but sporadic, heightened instances of the more routine levels of intensity now being demanded of dance worker – a difference of degree rather than kind from the immersive work that marks out the everyday commitment to a dance career. The zone is an amplification of an already pervasive demand – but also a moment of peculiar intensity, and ambivalent potential. The zone is an acute

expression of a more abiding requirement to embody and perform at a high-level of intensity and concentration, that involves willing sacrifice, and a routine conduct of discipline and striving; a mode of working that has itself become more intensively reproduced in discourse and practice as dance (like other forms of cultural work) has become more individualised, performative and virtuosic (Virno, 2004). But because dance is so *exceptionally* demanding and intense, both physically and mentally, the performance of BITZ is also, simultaneously, a potential route of ‘escape’; as dance offers the possibility of an extraordinary and abnormal intensity beyond that ordinarily experienced; for as the dancers above describe, the zone is also a genuine moment of forgetting; a temporary lack of the consciousness of pain; an abandonment of an otherwise ubiquitous ‘control’; and a form of *ecstasy* – a removal and a state of exceptionality that has the potential to transcend the ordinary intensity now so routinely demanded – and to allow entry to other states of being.

Conclusion

Being in the zone or in the ‘moment’ is something widely (if rarely) experienced by professional dancers. For Aalten’s (2007) dancers it was something that might only be experienced ‘three times a year’, and for our participants just as infrequently. Some might struggle to ever achieve it more than once or twice in a career. Yet moments of transcendence, self-actualisation and euphoria are a much-cherished and mythologised part of the job, perceived as unattainable in other employment arenas and addictive once experienced. These moments are not simply personal, however, but deeply *social* – and come as the culmination of a complex web of life experiences and circumstances. Years of training, peer-group socialisation, competitiveness, self-commitment to extremity and excess, the notion of a being in finite possession of a contained and condensed career, as well as the desire to connect to others through one’s physical art, are all factors that help allow for the

attainment of these extraordinary states of creative grace. Such moments *are* exceptional therefore, but *also* derive from that more quotidian and mundane intensity that pervades all dance work; a demand for sacrifice, intensiveness and excess that is inculcated at a young age, and seen as the only channel to accessing the very best kinds of performed work, and the standards of excellence that performers and practitioners idealise. Ordinary intensity – a commitment to dedication, and immersive modes of working life – is the marker of dance work, and the context that shapes the possibility of attaining the BITZ-like intensity that has the potential to be regarded as transcendent and exceptional.

How this casts light on some of the questions we raised earlier – about BITZ’s relationship to managerial control, or worker autonomy, remain open. Our dancers can appear subjected to oppressive, limiting and (often deeply gendered) physical and psychological demands to submit themselves to pedagogic authority and discipline of technique – in ways that are intense and often seem pathological. Yet we cannot discount the agency of dancers – and the ways their own desires and human powers are wrapped up in their own striving and apparent surrender to this managed intensity. The attainment of BITZ suggests both a triumph of authority and the potential for its evasion and escape – and whether we see such special moments as compensatory illusions that can only further bind dance-workers to their unhealthy subjection, or as revelatory moments of *ekstasis* that affirm the potentialities of human freedom, we should give credence and due respect to the embodied experience and desires that animate such moments – and seek to interrogate them further.

But just as a small coda, let us finish by returning to where we began – by reflecting on dance as both symbol and idealised form of the state of work. If Kracauer saw a whole world of industrial work in the confines of The Tiller Girls’ dance, then can we use our analysis of dance today to tell us something about the world of post-industrial, cultural and creative work? This is too ambitious a question to answer fully here, perhaps. But to think about

intensity in dance work is to invite speculation on intensity in cultural work in general - and so what could we initially surmise? We might say that the strongly instrumental orientation of dance education has become mirrored in *all* education, through the systemic devaluation of disinterested study in favour of advancing 'employability' and work-focussed learning. Relatedly, the lack of separation between training and the workplace so deeply ingrained in dance education has now been extended into the education system more widely. The culture of work intensity, low pay, excess and self-responsibilization that dancers have long taken for granted is now a commonplace, and not just in cultural work. The dancer's need to demonstrate passion and use it as consolation for the lack of other kinds of (material) rewards has become extended across the creative economy more generally. Record levels of work-induced stress and ill-health (and now a diminution of the social care and support that might mitigate it) suggest that 'pain-in-work' must now be stoically endured across many occupations. The necessity of 'working in the now', which dancers have long become used to, seems to have widely migrated to other creative professions, given the growth of discontinuous and untenured employment and the diminished guarantee of any kind of 'job for life'. Finally, just as dance contains the prospect of a 'moment when it all comes together', then other kinds of employment make similar promises or claims – since work is itself (partly) an exercise in deferred gratification, where people are convinced that only by subjecting themselves to the demands of the present, will the future be fully realised and its material and psychic rewards obtained. As in dance, if not in the same specific form, perhaps many kinds of workers (and not just cultural ones) are now striving to obtain some special state of exception or grace, when it will all become worthwhile, when they will transcend the confines of the present and finally get in the zone. In these ways – and as Kracauer once claimed – perhaps we can look at the organization of dance as something of a sign, or a taste of work to come.

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