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Aesthetic Engagement in Video Dance

A B S T R A C T

This essay discusses dance film and video dance. The first was born of the manifold possibilities of chemical technology, while the second exploits the rich resources of digital technology and its freedom from material constraints. Now wholly in digital form, both technologies offer new possibilities for the dance arts by developing and enhancing the possibilities and powers of dance experience. This essay describes those possibilities and their contribution to dance appreciation.

I. Dance Video and Video Dance

The arts of dance have a strangely compelling quality. Using the human body as its material and often its subject-matter, dance directs the body's vital forces through the manifold associations and powers the body inhabits and evokes. Sometimes the movement takes the form of a solo dance; sometimes it is shared. Sometimes it is shaped by narrative, sometimes by a theme. Often it delights in the possibilities of movement itself, always shaping the vital forces that carry the body through time and space. Indeed, dance exemplifies how, through movement, the human body creates its time and space.

Dance may be thought of as a "ur-art." Using no tool or instrument other than one's body, the dancer shapes and inhabits a world of movement. Dance is one of the first manifestations of the aesthetic impulse and the fulfillment of an aesthetic need. At the same time, the dance arts, like the other arts, respond to the possibilities of technology. This can be seen in the imaginative use of set design and props, but the technological possibilities of filmic techniques are irresistible. Dance film and video do not replace the human body but are means of enhancing and extending its possibilities, creating a new artistic modality just as photography and film have done. Painting and theater continue to flourish and to innovate in their own spheres, but new and distinctive arts have been born of the new technologies. The same is true of dance. In addition, film adds the possibility of preserving a dance performance, not only archiving it but making it repeatable to a new audience.

In what follows, I shall be concerned with dance film and video dance. The first was born of the manifold possibilities of chemical technology, while the second, surpassing film technology, exploits the rich resources of digital technology and its freedom from material constraints. Both technologies offer new possibilities for the dance arts, similar in many respects but different in some others.¹ And both develop and enhance the possibilities and powers of dance experience.

A clarification is in order. In speaking of video dance, it is important to distinguish it from dance video as either a synonym or its equivalent. The terminology is not important here but the difference in meaning is. We can think of dance video (or dance film) as dance recorded by a video camera from a fixed position. Historic footage usually takes this form and provides invaluable archival information on dancers and choreography. On the other hand, filmic techniques are an integral part of video dance: the choreographer must take into account the camera's movements together with the dancers'. With the advent of video technology, new possibilities were added to the visualization of dance performance. Together, film and video offer extraordinary possibilities for the development of this new modality of dance art, a modality that requires its own understanding and appreciation.

Dance video thus belongs to the family of recording technologies, in this case, visual recording, in which a camera is set up to record a dance performance for archival purposes, viewing the dance much like a member of the audience. Dance videos, like archival dance films, have produced valuable documentation of dances and performers. For historical purposes, archival dance films and videos are invaluable documents, but they merely record live art from a fixed position. They are not dance; for that the camera must become a participant.

I chose the title "Aesthetic Engagement in Video Dance" to highlight the possibilities of engagement in the dance arts. I want to explore how video dance uses its technological resources to enhance aesthetic engagement. This may seem a redundancy since, as I have observed at the outset, the powerful attraction of the human body belies the eighteenth century convention of aesthetic distance and disinterestedness in the arts centered on the body.. The film arts have already dispelled the anachronism of disinterestedness. Active engagement is one of film's powerful attractions and people flock to the movies to participate in adventure, drama, and enchantment. Just as filmic techniques can enhance the power of drama by freeing action from the physical limitations of the body and the constraints of the stage, filmic dance can do the same and more with the moving body.

II. Choreographing the camera

Let me turn next to some of the camera techniques that are available to the choreographer of video dance. What is essential to note here is that this is not simply a catalog of filmic techniques but a repertory of techniques for creating dance experiences. Whereas in stage dance the stage provides a spatial continuum, video technology vastly increases the range of possible experience by adding camera movement and editing. Video dance provides a different continuum, a continuum of multi-dimensional movement.

The camera techniques are familiar. Varying the distance from the dancers offers a powerful resource. Close-ups, including shots of only part of the body, bring the eye of the viewer in close proximity to the dancer and convey the personal intimacy of the movement and the immediacy of the effort, joined with the sensuality of close physical presence. These are enhanced when combined with rapid cutting and a frenetic pace. Changing the camera's distance from the performers enlivens the spatial context and emphasizes its three-dimensionality. Changing the camera's direction and the angle from which it is shooting (which may include aerial shots), makes the viewer an active participant. It also can alter our

perception of movement and space. For example, when shot from a low angle, the length, height, and trajectory of a dancer's leap are greatly extended.² And by speeding up or slowing down the camera, time becomes malleable and the grace of movement more pronounced, while mechanical movement becomes more mechanized. Most significantly, when the frame replaces the stage, the camera becomes the viewer's eye and permits choreography that is manifestly unstageable. In all these ways, the medium enhances both the choreographer's choices and the audience's perceptions.³

Then there are techniques and features of video and film recording technology other than camera movement that are familiar from film and enhance aesthetic engagement. The lighting can be freely modified, changing the density of the space, while altering the location or the context changes the perception of movement from the outside, as it were. Then there is the use of distinctive filmic techniques, such as super-imposing images and combining multiple takes that can extend the body's corporeality and singularity. Speeding up or slowing down the camera changes the basic parameters of space and movement. The dancing body can transcend its somatic boundaries, splitting the single dancer into two reciprocal images and even cloning the body into a corps. So, too, can the body's movement be extended in time, leaving behind a trail of images as it moves forward.⁴

Most important of all, montage replaces the everyday physical space of the dancers with filmic space, transcending the limitations of the body's location within the physical boundaries of the immediate dance space and freeing it from the constraints imposed by gravity. Space becomes a homogeneous, one-dimensional medium in which the body moves. "Collision" cutting, invented by Eisenstein, combines unmatched shots for shocking effects, such as sharp changes in screen direction. Pseudo-matching action cuts leap across a kinetic bridge from one movement to another in the same sequence to create the illusion of simultaneity. Invented by Pudovkin, these cuts also encourage engagement. When combined with music, color, and strong images, one leaves the frame behind, creating what Eisenstein termed "overtone" montage and, later, "ecstasy."⁵ All such techniques combine in what Daniel Conrad calls "filmic choreography"⁶ to promote aesthetic engagement.⁷ Time, space, movement, even gravity are malleable and surpassed in this new art of videodance.

Thus the camera's eye becomes the viewer's eye. Unlike stage performance where everyone sees something different depending on the arbitrariness of seating, in video dance everyone is, in effect, front row center and sees the same thing, increasing the communal nature of the experience. Through the camera, the viewer's eye and the body of which it is part are choreographed into the dance, joining a matrix of space-time-movement whose boundaries are constantly shifting. The camera techniques I have been describing have the effect of activating the viewer by stimulation and surprise, disrupting placidity by unaccustomed intimacies and unexpected juxtapositions. These resemble the invitational influence that features of environment have on us, features that psychologists like Kurt Lewin called "invitational qualities" and J.J. Gibson termed "affordances." These are environmental features that lead us to respond and act in certain ways. Camera techniques and montage have a similar perceptual effect on the viewer of video dance and, when used skillfully, bring the viewer into active participation. By choreographing the camera in the dance, the choreographer is actually

choreographing the viewer, who becomes a virtual participant. This produces a radically altered dance experience, an enhanced appreciative experience that needs to be understood, not on the model of theatrical or stage dance, but as its own art.

III. Aesthetic engagement in video dance

The arts have always been bound up with technology of some sort, from the use of iron oxide and charcoal on cave walls to digital tools. Technological changes in human culture have always inspired innovation in artistic modes and aesthetic perception. Present-day technology has created resources that not only enhance the traditional arts but transmute their creative potential into related but distinctively new arts. Painting has been transfigured into photography, with its own possibilities of visualization and evocation. Plays and novels have metamorphosed into film, the modern collective art *par excellence*. Sounds generated electronically have altered the traditional sonic components of music, replacing themes with textures and meter with pulsation or no metrical order at all. The catalog of innovation is endless and inspiring.

Technological changes underlie a similar transformative process in dance. Much of the powerful appeal of dance performance has always been its ability engage the viewer's body in the appreciative experience. The current fashion of finding neurological correlates for the organic intensity of sympathetic movement in the spectator (e.g. mirror neurons) does not explain the experience, but merely identifies its physiological correlate.⁸ But, one does not need a neurological explanation to authenticate such occurrences, which are part of dance experience for the audience as well as the dancer. And just as, through movement, the dancer creates the space and time that (s)he inhabits, (s)he invites the viewer into it as a shadow partner. Phenomenologists speak of "lived space" as the space of experience, experienced space. To this we could add "lived time" that, together with space and the moving body, provide the conditions of dance experience. Not just the eye but the viewer's body as a whole enters a matrix of space, time, and movement within the shifting boundaries of a dance performance in a kind of liminal or subliminal kinesthesia.

This brings me to the central argument of this paper, aesthetic engagement in video dance. Aesthetic engagement is the idea that appreciation in the arts, in nature, and, indeed in any aesthetic context, elicits an involvement that is participatory. Instead of objectifying the dancers by the separation and distance of a stage, there is continuity and connection as the viewer becomes a virtual dancer. Such collaboration is part of a full appreciative experience. Disinterested contemplation, the traditional standard of aesthetic appreciation, is inappropriate and misleading. It is misleading in that it does not give full credit to the active contribution of the embodied spectator to the content and quality of appreciative experience. And, it is inappropriate because it uses a cognitive model for understanding appreciation, isolating the viewer by separating him or her from the object of attention and turning it into a thing presumably suitable for appreciation.⁹ Dewey rightly characterized such dualistic thinking as misleading and erroneous, calling it the intellectualist fallacy, the mistake of regarding all experience as cognitive.¹⁰ Such thinking is false to experience by not recognizing different kinds of experience with different kinds of appropriateness and credibility.

Aesthetic appreciation has its own legitimacy and demands to be acknowledged on its own terms. Dance, along with film and music, is not easily objectified and made into a contemplative object in part because all three arts share the primal aesthetic awareness of movement. In exemplifying the creative potential of aesthetic experience, music, film, and dance offer the best models for engaged appreciation in other arts and circumstances.

The techniques available for choreographing dancers and camera in video dance can take full advantage of this propensity in dance for active engagement. In artistic hands, these techniques can be used deliberately to entice the viewer into virtual somatic participation. The techniques can, of course, be abused and the dance experience turned into a crude manipulation of audience sensibilities. That this is a danger in any art is obvious from their exploitation for commercial and political purposes. However, this does not discredit the techniques but only their misuse. The potential of video dance is extraordinary-- for dance education, for dance training, and for expanding the availability of the excitement and gratification that the dance art offers. Perhaps video dance can serve as a portal for entry into participatory appreciation in other arts, as well.¹¹ Aesthetic gratification is its own justification.¹²

¹ "I shoot in both media, and there are some important things I can do in one that I can't do in the other. Superimpositions, for example, look better on film. When I choose video, it's mostly for economic reasons. Film still has a greater command of tonal gradation and detail in the shadows and highlights, and many directors still prefer it. Some significant virtues of video are that you can hand-hold more easily, capture much more footage per hour, shoot in lower light, and quickly and easily convert your footage into the ideal format for editing. The 'footage per hour' factor can free you, but it makes some directors sloppy. When I apply for a grant to shoot on video, I often specify that I intend to shoot "with a film aesthetic," implying that I'm careful about precisely when and where I push the shutter release. That being said, I'm mostly using video these days." Personal communication from Daniel Conrad, 24 August 2016.

² I owe this observation to the choreographer Joan Kunsch. She notes, "Any time I can get the camera (for moving or for still shots) as low as possible, a dancer's airborne moments, whether leaping across the space or jumping in one place, appear in their full height and splendor of flight. If the camera is positioned at level or above, that minimizes the airborne quality." Personal communication, 19 October 2016.

³ Daniel Conrad, "Notes on Filming Dance: A Dance Film Study Guide," Daniel Conrad, © 2006 5 pp. http://www.rhodopsin.ca/publications_en.html (accessed 29 August 2016).

⁴ Many of these techniques are displayed in Norman McLaren's *Pas de Deux* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WopqmACy5XI> (accessed 4 January 2017).

⁵ Eisenstein, S., 1929, "The Filmic Fourth Dimension," in *Film Form*, transl. Jay Leyda, Harcourt Brace.

⁶ Conrad, p. 1.

⁷ A striking example of the contribution of film technique to choreography is in the video production of Balanchine's *Tzigane*. Balanchine was especially pleased with the videography of this ballet. He wanted the corps to appear quickly and unobtrusively on stage in the last part of

the dance and was delighted with the video production, which could bypass this problem in a stage performance by cutting the corps in instantly. *Choreography by Balanchine*, Nonesuch DVD 79838-2. Merrill Brockway, program notes, p. 5.

⁸ Cf. Giacomo Rizzolatti and Laila Craigher, "The Mirror-Neuron System," *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 2004. 27:169–92; Eric Kandel, *The Age of Insight*.(Random House, 2012). See also <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0197455606000438> and <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0197455611000426> .

⁹ See Arnold Berleant, "Beyond Disinterestedness," in *Re-thinking Aesthetics, Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (Farnham, UK & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 41-53.

¹⁰ "the assumption of the ubiquity of knowledge...as a measure of reality." "This assumption of the...ubiquity of knowledge is the great intellectualistic fallacy. It is the source of all disparagement of everyday qualitative experience, practical, esthetic, moral. It is the ultimate source of the doctrine that calls subjective and phenomenal all objects of experience that cannot be reduced to properties of objects of knowledge." John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1929), pp. 291, 219. See also *Experience and Nature*, (2nd ed. 1929) (New York: Dover, 1958), Ch. 1. I consider this one of Dewey's more original and important insights.

¹¹ See Angela Keppler, " 'Can the Audience Want?' On the Artistic Status of Contemporary TV-Series" . *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume 5 (2016), *Contemporary Perspectives on Film and Philosophy*. On quality TV for comparable active appreciation. "An inspection of pertinent sequences leads to the conclusion that the enjoyment we experience when watching these series stems from the very type of active-passive involvement that Adorno described as being essential only for objects of high culture."

⁹ I am indebted to the experimental filmmaker Daniel Conrad for his account of filmic techniques in "Notes on Filming Dance: : A Dance Film Study Guide" and for his advice in the preparation of this essay.