The politics of discourse in hybrid art forms

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This paper was originally presented at the Symposio Pensar la Videodanza III, Instituto Universitario Nacional del Arte, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 22nd - 25th November 2011 and is concerned with the attempts of hybrid art practices to establish an identity as distinct artforms whilst also crossing boundaries in the process of innovation and exploration. The paper draws on the discourse and politics around Expanded Cinema from the 60s and 70s and argues that there are parallels with the contemporary field of Screendance.

Every artform begs, borrows and steals from other artforms on the way to becoming a distinct, identifiable art practice. Art works take some time, perhaps several decades, looking 'like' another art practice before recognizing their own potential and establishing their own parameters. Film, for example, inherited a 19th century dream of recreating life through the newly invented photography. In 1946, film theorist André Bazin questioned this alignment of cinema with photography and 19th century realism and criticised the inventors of film who imagined "the cinema as a total and complete representation of reality; they saw in a trice the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief." [1] Bazin argued instead that film had not yet discovered its own potential.[2] The situation of Screendance in the 21st Century is perhaps somewhat comparable to that of film one hundred years ago, in that much of Screendance is perceived as another kind of dance.[3] This is not to suggest that Screendance is a new artform, quite the opposite. As Erin Brannigan argues in her book *Dance Film*, dance artists were at the forefront of developments in film at the turn of the 20th century.[4] But for some reason Screendance has remained a marginal practice that has never quite found its place or its own identity in amongst the catalogue of twentieth and twenty first century artforms.

Contemporary screendance artists and theorists have taken on two distinct positions to address the situation: some work to identify and name the constituent parts that make up screendance and try to delineate the practice. Others argue that screendance is a field of diverse practices that cannot be defined. For the latter group, the term screendance is positively promiscuous, embracing all kinds of concerns, practices and media.

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[1] André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema*," in* André Bazin, *What is Cinema, Vol* 1*,* Trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967. 22.

[2] Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema*." 21.*

[3] See previous article on this topic: Claudia Kappenberg, "*Does Screendance need to look like dance*", International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media, Volume 5, Number 2&3, (2009). 89 - 105.

[4] Erin Branningan, *Dancefilm, Choreographing the Moving Image* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 34-38.

Both positions carry risks and benefits with regards to the development of Screendance as an autonomous artform and as a cultural force. This essay is concerned with the politics of this debate and looks at comparable discussions around the experimental film practices of the 60s and 70s to explore the different sides of the argument. In order to unravel the complexities of the debate, the essay will review some of the experimental film projects from this period and consider their approaches to identify common concerns between expanded film practices and Screendance.

In a review of 60s experimental film practices in the journal *October* in 2011, Jonathan Walley writes that film appeared to suffer a form of identity crisis.[5] He suggests that the crisis was provoked by a number of factors such as: a wider breakdown of boundaries between artforms in the 1960s; a general advance of intermedia arts and a wider concern with a dematerialisation of the art object. In addition Walley identifies an interest on the part of filmmakers themselves in exploring the whole apparatus of cinema with its materials, performative aspects and visual and spatial components. Filmmakers experimented with anything that allowed them to "liberate" filmmaking from the constraints of cinema. However, this experimentation provoked concerns on the part of other filmmakers and theorists who were keen to conserve what was "essentially" film. They wanted to preserve filmmaking as a separate practice to maintain the status of film as an artform. Jonathan Walley writes:

> A belief in and commitment to the specificity of film had been key to the assertion of cinema's autonomy within the pantheon of the arts, and, as important, to experimental cinema's articulation of its identity as an artistic tradition. To cast off the film medium was to risk losing a connection to a tradition, with which contemporary filmmakers identified as artists and earlier generations had laboured to build and nurture.[6]

Walley's comment describes the two positions that dominated the filmmaking community: while some were keen to open up the notion of what film could be, others were worried about losing the position and status that film practices had gained so far. In addition, the experimentation by filmmakers in the 60s and 70s coincided with an interest on the part of visual arts institutions, galleries and museums in intermedia arts and experimental film. This interest meant that existing boundaries were also being eroded by art institutions which had previously resisted the idea that film could be art.

Filmmakers took an active part in the debates through the work they made and what they wrote. One such contribution came from British filmmaker Annabel Nicholson, who argued that a young artform such as filmmaking would lose what little autonomy it had gained and that it needed to secure its own ontology first before opening up to other artforms. Michael Mazière also commented on the uncertainty in film practices and wrote as late as 1984: "Unfortunately experimental film often remains largely dependent on

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[5] Dr. Jonathan Walley, "*Identity Crisis: Experimental Film and Artistic Expansion*", MIT: *October 137* (Summer 2011):23-50.
[6] Walley, *Identity Crisis*, 24.

more established fine art practices, unsure of its context."[7] Jonathan Walley surmises: "If cinema could be anything, what was to prevent it from becoming nothing?"[8] Filmmakers and theoreticians were reconceiving film as "sculptural", "performative" and "conceptual" as well as "post-medium", but artists like Nicholson and Mazière were concerned that this signified the end of film as film.[9]

The debates presented so far imply the following historical narrative: once upon a time filmmaking was a clearly defined practice, done by filmmakers, but in the 60s filmmakers began to experiment with other media and modes of exhibition which were borrowed from other art practices and which endangered the identity of film as film. This kind of narrative is however based on a fictional notion of stability and continuity that is often projected onto the past and exercised at a moment of change. As Jonathan Dollimore argues in *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* this sort of narrative of an original stability that is disrupted by a crisis constitutes a re-enactment of a biblical fall from grace. Referencing Augustine's account of the modern subject in *Confessions*, Dollimore argues that the so-called crisis of the modern subject is not a negative consequence of a contemporary society but part of its essence, and that its mutability is what fuels our culture.[10] This narrative, or mythology, about the modern subject also applies to other cultural narratives: we imagine and project an idea of stability onto the past and experience change as a crisis. The account of a crisis of film as described above follows this model and promotes the idea that in the early days film was simply film and that in the "crisis" of the wild 60s the "innocence" of film was lost.

However, film practices never had a fixed identity, and in the first decades of the 20th Century filmmaking was driven by dancers such as Loie Fuller and visual artists, photographers and painters such as Fernand Leger, Hans Richter, Dali, Duchamp and Man Ray as much as by filmmakers. Therefore, historians like Walley argue that the so-called "expansion" of cinema of the 60s and 70s was rather a reanimation of the history of cinema which had never been a separate, autonomous practice.[11] Curator Chrissie Isles also suggested that the notion of "expanded" is redundant for an artform that was never anything else but heterogeneous and interdisciplinary.[12] From this point of view the "crisis" of the 60s was not a crisis at all but the continuation of explorations and debates. Furthermore, there have been a number of such "critical moments" in the history of film,

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[7] Quoted in Walley, *Identity Crisis,* 26.

[8] Walley, *Identity Crisis,* 26.

[9] Walley, *Identity Crisis,* 25.

[10] In *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* Jonathan Dollimore writes: "[…] It is in Augustine's *Confessions* (c. 397 – 491) that we find one of the most influential precedents for the way in which 'modern' subjectivity is founded in that same sense of crisis which imparts the restless expansionist energy which is the making of civilisation itself". Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998) 92.

[11] Walley, *Identity Crisis,* 26.

[12] Chrissey Isles, quoted in Walley, *Identity Crisis,* 27.

the latest being a new wave of interest in moving-image practices on the part of visual art institutions in the first decade of the 21st Century.

The term "Expanded Cinema" (with capital E and capital C) was originally established to describe work made in the 60s and 70s. In order to be historically accurate we need to acknowledge that this notion of a specific period of expanded cinema is problematic and that film has always been an expanded and expanding practice. Jonathan Walley therefore asks how the history of a practice can be written if it does not have a separate identity and if it is, and always was, crossing the boundaries of other forms of practice.[13]

This is an interesting question also for the field of Screendance. Screendance has never been anything other than a hybrid practice which combines moving images with moving bodies, choreography and cinematography. A history of Screendance therefore incorporates the complex histories of film practices as well as those of choreographic practices which in turn are linked to the fields of music and poetry as well as digital media, to name but a few of the different roots and strands.

How can we therefore write a history of Screendance? How can we assert a specificity and independence for this kind of work if it is so closely tied to other art forms? Walley suggests that in the case of Expanded Cinema, a meaningful discourse has to consider a combination of shared and medium-specific issues.[14] At the same time such discourse needs to acknowledge an ongoing process of expansion and contraction.[15] In other words, it is a constant and simultaneous process of asserting differences and of admitting common ground with other disciplines and histories. The same applies to Screendance: Screendance practices will always share attributes with filmmaking, with dance and choreographic practices and with literary artforms such as poetry, but the combination of the different artforms for the purpose of Screendance also leads to a unique practice with distinct features.

Walley argues that filmmakers have found a way to operate within this complexity through their own promiscuity. On the one hand, they make work which highlights the materiality of cinema with its celluloid, projector and manipulation of light while, on the other hand, they do away with one or more constituent parts and produce work that looks more like sculpture or performance. Walley references a number of so-called "laundry lists" compiled by writers and filmmakers like David James and Malcolm Le Grice with which they attempt to identify unique filmic elements. These lists vary enormously, "ranging from the resolutely material (emulsion grains, sprocket holes, the shutter), to the elusive ephemeral (light, time, ideas, and the experience of the spectator)."[16] The lists are extensive and give the appearance of completeness. At the same time the lists are very different from one another and reveal a rather impossible endeavour, thereby undermining any attempt at creating a homogenous concept of film.

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[13] Walley, *Identity Crisis,* 26.
[14] Walley, *Identity Crisis,* 29.
[15] Walley, *Identity Crisis,* 36.
[16] Walley, *Identity Crisis,* 31.

Could we ever write a definitive "laundry list" of Screendance? Unlikely, if we cannot even settle on a name for this artform.[17]

Other theoretical attempts at delineating film have focused on thinking of film not in terms of its parts but as a heterogeneous whole. Filmmaker Hollis Frampton, for example, belongs to this group and has promoted the idea of a "film machine" that cannot be reduced to its parts but is more than the "sum" of its components;

> We are used to thinking of camera and projector as machines, but they are not. They are "parts". The flexible filmstrip is as much a "part" of the film machine as the projectile is part of the firearm… Since all the "parts" fit together, the sum of all film, all projectors, and all cameras in the world constitute one machine.[18]

This again is interesting with regards to Screendance, in that we should perhaps be less concerned with individual projects and whether they are Screendance or not, but rather consider a wider body of works and even include that which occurs in the everyday through interactions with cameras and screens, digital media and the internet. If a person is caught on a CCTV camera in a public building, perhaps this is also part of the contemporary machinery of Screendance.

Situations like this have become a familiar part of our everyday experience, and they in turn affect how we relate to screen-based work. On the occasion of a Screendance Symposium in Brighton, UK in 2010, Tate Modern curator Catherine Wood gave a paper that reflected on this new context and intermingling between dance and screen in the everyday:

> The now ubiquitous presence of screen-based technologies opens up the capacity for a significant shift in how dance on screen can be thought about – and even dance beyond screen in everyday life. […] Passages of our daily movement are constantly being captured, recorded, replayed and embedded in a whole other meta level of choreography of moving images, which is part of the everyday fabric.[19]

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[17] To date several names continue to circulate such as cinedance, videodance, dance for camera, dancefilm and filmic performance, as discussed in Erin Branningan's publication entitled *Dancefilm, Choreographing the Moving Image*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. vii – ix.

[18] Hollis Frampton, "For a Metahistory of film. Commonplace Notes and Hypothesis", in *On the Camera Arts and Consequitive Matters: the Writing of Hollis Frampton*, ed. Bruce Jenkins (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009) 137.

[19] Catherine Wood, "Ballet Méchanique", paper given at the *Screendance Symposium*, University of Brighton, UK, 4th February 2011, unpublished. A summery report on the symposium and the papers is published by Claudia Kappenberg and Sarah Whatley, "A Report on the Screendance Symposium*"*, in *The International Journal of Screendance*, Parallel Press, Spring 2012, Vol 2, 140-152.

Wood argues that the recent phenomena have led to, for example, a technological breakdown of movement into its constituent parts and that we, the audience and involuntary actors, have been absorbed into the homogenising flatness of the screen space. Wood also proposes that the work of contemporary artists like Dara Birnbaum, Keren Cytter and Mark Lecky responds to this new visual language and that their practices have emerged out of this context. Wood concludes her paper by asking if:

> …Screendance replace[s] what was thought to be ordinary dance in the sixties, that is an incorporation of another level of mediated movement into our experience of the everyday here and now (…)? I suppose I was thinking about where does screendance end and non-screendance begin and how easy is it to draw that distinction?

By comparing contemporary Screendance to ordinary dance in the 60s, Wood makes a further contribution to the blurring of boundaries of what may or may not be described as Screendance. As a multi-disciplinary practice Screendance is probably particularly suited to an environment in which artforms proliferate across different media, platforms and contexts.

On the other hand, a presence of the body and detailed exploration of physicality is sometimes claimed to be an essential aspect of Screendance and used to differentiate the artform from other art and film practices. However, the boundaries are not so clear. For example, filmmakers of the 60s and 70s deconstructed the filmic apparatus in events that combined cinematic elements with performed actions and thereby foregrounding the body. Instead of being represented on screen a live body became a constitutive part of the filmic machine, sometimes also a disruptive force in the proceedings and its reception. Events included performances without celluloid in the projector, live bodies acting as the film and live bodies interacting with the projected image. Curiously these projects asserted both an expanded practice and a film specificity. The filmmaker Annabel Nicholson, for example, developed a practice which could be described in those terms, as both film specific and as performance or sculpture. Her work *Reel Time* (1973) is described as a

> projection performance, in which an enormous film loop passed through both a projector and a sewing machine (operated by Nicholson). The filmstrip was dotted with more and more perforations with each pass through the loop, producing an increasingly abstract image and eventually weakening the strip to the point that it broke, bringing the performance to an end.[20]

This event was a performance as much as a screening and the body of the filmmaker was part of the "film machine", while the live action, the sewing, eventually led to the breaking of the film loop and to the end of the event. In a work by Valie Export and Peter Weibel entitled *Tapp and Tast Kino, Touch Cinema* (1968), the on-screen body is

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[20] Walley, *Identity Crisis,* 38.

replaced more specifically by the real breasts of Valie Export, who stands in the street wearing a box with curtains around her bare chest. Her collaborator Weibel invites male passersby to touch her breasts by reaching through the curtains into the box, thereby reaching for the object of their sexual fantasies. Both these works explore the conventional relationship between the audience and the cinema, and use a live body to challenge the audience's expectations and the mechanics of the filmic apparatus. In both cases it is a female body whose action is disruptive and whose body resists the mediation through the filmic apparatus. Given the proliferations of screens in the everyday and the ever tighter interaction between screen space and real space these works should not just be considered as part of a 70s discourse but maintain their significance in the 21st century and for contemporary discourses on Screendance. These sorts of cinematic experiments have not yet been considered within the field, but could be revisited as part of an investigation into the mediated body and the relation between cinematic bodies and everyday bodies. *Reel Time* and *Touch Cinema* could even be classified as Screendance if one agrees to work with an expanded concept of Screendance which does not insist on specific boundaries.

The works assert both a specificity of film practices and demonstrate a connection to other artforms, thereby adding to film histories and theories whilst challenging the boundaries of the practice. According to Walley, the works demonstrate an ontology of film and experimental cinema without necessarily invoking a notion of crisis. Screendance can equally draw on – and engage with - extensive histories of cinematic and choreographic practices and other interdisciplinary explorations whilst also promoting its own specificities: Heterogeneity and specificity are not mutually exclusive.

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