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Cinematography and choreography: "It takes two to tango"

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Cinematography and Choreography

"It takes two to tango"

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LINK Dance Company

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

Abstract

As a practicing dancer and choreographer with a developing interest in film, the lifelong struggle (where many have gone before) to capture and accurately depict choreography on screen, intrigues me.

Who should dance the camera or the choreography? These are questions that have been pondered by choreographers and theorists for centuries, with pioneers such as Busby Berkeley and Maya Deren each finding their own answers to success.

This thesis discusses the creation and production of dance film, and the importance of movement in front of and behind the camera lens. I believe experimentation and research are the most effective methods for deciphering this choreographic code, therefore I have developed three short dance films using principles encountered in literature and cinematographic research.

Prim, Cut and *Mate*
This body of work is about false facades, external judgment, social stereotypes and the view through rose coloured glasses. I am interested in audiences forming opinions rather than merely observing what is presented in a mindless state. I have endeavored to push the audience to question why they have made particular conclusions, and how these conclusions reflect on them.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

I. Incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education

II. Contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made to the text; or

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Laura Boynes

Acknowledgements

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Cinematography and Choreography

"It takes two to Tango"

"Either the camera will dance or I will".

Fred Astaire[1]

'The invention of film and technology has had a profound impact on dance: on access to it, on creation, understanding, and appreciation of it.'[2] As a practicing dancer and choreographer with a developing interest in film, the lifelong struggle (where many have gone before) to capture and accurately depict choreography on screen, intrigues me. Is it the choreography that should dance for the camera? Or is the camera that should dance for the choreography? Is the answer to the puzzle in the subtle collaboration of the two?

These are questions that have been pondered by choreographers and theorists for centuries, with pioneers such as Busby Berkeley and Maya Deren each finding their own answers to the challenges provoked. I believe experimentation and research are the most effective methods for deciphering this choreographic code. Therefore, I have also attempted to find insight from behind the camera lens. This research thus comprises of this written exploration of the relationship between cinematography and choreography, plus my two dance films, *Prim* and *Cut* and the process notes of *Mate*.

An Introduction to Dance Film

As dance did not (and still does not) have a notation system that is widely used, recording on film provided one the first practical means of dance documentation. Notation systems for documenting dance such as Laban notation and the Benesh system have existed for 60/70 years, but are complicated and so technology has proved to be a more efficient method of capturing dance. Dancers use cameras as research tools, to record and study movement and technique, to analyse choreography and to build performance skills. 'Film and video have spawned entirely new forms of dance, created when director and choreographer go beyond the constraints of the body and find new ways to capture human motion'.[3] Whether a documentation tool, a study aid, or a creative medium, the recorded moving image (as

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[1] Larry Billman, "Music Video as a Short Form Dance Film, Judy Mitoma Editor. Ch 2", Envisioning Dance on Film and Video, Routledge, New York 2002 pp 13
[2] Judy Mitoma-Editor, Introduction, Envisioning Dance on Film and Video, Routledge, 2002 pp xxxi
[3] Ibid

opposed to the live moving image) has forever changed the way we perceive and experience dance.

The techniques of dance and film/video are equally integral to the creation and outcome of a dance film. This simple definition separates dance films from archival records of stage or site-specific dance compositions. The makers of dance films generally include the placement and movement of the camera, the lighting, the balance of foreground/background, and the composition within the framing of each shot in the overall choreography. In other words there are other elements than simply the dancers for which to consider movement, as the camera has to be 'choreographed' as well.

'Dance in film is a subject that has taken on a semblance of controversy owing to the insistence of some writers that a conflict between dance and film exists. People dancing in the movies are demonstrating one kind of human activity the camera can capture as well as any other. Movies can also invent dances that cannot be done anywhere except on film. Most successful screen dances lie somewhere between total cinematic illusion and passive recording. A cleanly photographed dance can be pretentious and boring; a complex cinematic extravaganza can be utterly devoid of kinetic charm.'

Critic Arlene Croce "Afterimages"[4]

Still and moving images of dance can be profound, and timeless. But a dance filmmaker can incorporate the imagination and personality of a dancer, which can restore that dimension that may be lost when documenting dance. Making a film with the intent to enlighten the viewer as to the context of the choreography may add layers, often inaccessible to viewers of stage dance.

If what is highly important to the filmmakers is the kinaesthetic experience of the viewer and heightening this awareness, the choreography of the camera becomes very important while the range of choreography from the body maybe sacrificed. 'The challenge is to find a true synthesis between the two mediums, and effectively translate a three-dimensional kinetic art form into a two-dimensional one.'[5] Dance on film can expand one's understanding of dance as a metaphor. Instead of seeing only moving bodies, the viewer comes to appreciate the nature of the dance, the rhythms or emotions, and to recognise the musicality, patterns, and designs that are around us all the time. The viewer is led into a world directed by creative and abstract thinking.

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[4] Croce Quoted in, Larry Billman,"Music Video as a Short Form Dance Film, Judy Mitoma Editor,Ch 2", <u>Envisioning Dance Film and Video,</u> Routledge, 2002 pp 12

[5] Evann Siebens, "A Historical Perspective", <u>Choreography for Camera</u> Louise Spain Editor, Scarecrow Press, USA, 1998 pp 14

A Brief History

The introduction of new technologies at the turn of the century had a polarising effect on the dance profession. 'Many believed they threatened a fundamental value of dance-direct interpersonal encounters'.[6] Modern dance pioneer, Isadora Duncan for example, did not allow anyone to film her dancing (a person hiding behind a tree recorded the only known footage of her). During this time dancers were at the mercy of filmmakers who had recognised that dance would be an ideal subject for demonstrating the magic of their new invention. However their interest lay in the technology rather than the dance itself. The inventor Thomas Edison used dancers in his studio in New Jersey in the 1890s to test his equipment. Ever since, inventors have worked with dancers to demonstrate their newfound effects.

Early Experiments

Thomas Edison captured the exotic, the seductive, vitality of dancing girls including Miss Ruth St Denis. In late Victorian times, film allowed audiences to witness dance at a socially safe distance, from the seat of the movie theatre. The effect was the same as if the girls were there on the stage, all of their smiles and kicks and bows were seen: 'Edison filmed very simple dances, almost mechanical and repetitious, suitable for the loop format of the nickelodeon, where, to the public's amazement, the picture moved and could be viewed over and over again'.[7] In the early 1900s, court photographer Peter Elfeldt used single fixed camera to film dancers from the Royal Danish Ballet. The resulting images are satisfactory, and remain useful 100 years later.

During the same period that Thomas Edison and Elefeldt were recording live performances, George Melies in France was beginning to use film techniques to make inanimate objects dance and to animate still figures.[8] Melies was creating choreography that existed only on the screen.

These filmmakers were the predecessors of such creative directors as Busby Berkeley and Maya Deren who recorded movement of many sorts to realise their filmic visions. Maya Deren is one who moved beyond experimenting with machinery, plots, tricks and dance as decoration. Her shorts placed the body in landscapes in a magical way that few dance filmmakers have been able to do. After the technicians came the romantics with the dancer turned director, Stanley Donen, who worked with Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire, honouring the

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[6] Judy Mitoma-Editor,Introduction, <u>Envisioning Dance on Film and Video,</u> Routledge New York, 2002 pp xxxi
[7] Virginia Brooks,"From Melies to Streaming Video", <u>Envisioning Dance on Film and Video,</u> Routledge New York, 2002 pp 55
[8] Ibid

Hollywood formula for commercial success while exploring various ideas from Astaire's dancing on the ceiling to Kelly's dancing with his altar ego in a display window in *Cover Girl*.[9]

The Introduction of Sound

The introduction of sound film in the late 1920s enabled filmed dance to be synchronised with music, resulting in the movie musical's inception. At first, the innovation of sound recording restrained the mobility of the camera, reverting to the stationary perspective it had in the earliest days of film. Filmmakers aimed their cameras as if it were on a proscenium stage, with the audience at the vantage point of the best seats in the house. 'The popular line dancers of the day kicked, tapped, twirled, and cavorted within a camera frame that was distant and passive. Movies were trapped within a huge picture frame with dancers often moving out of that frame to disappear into the void'.[10] As sound film became more refined, so did camera editing and choreographic form, and filmmakers realised it was the camera that had to dance. 'The speed with which the technical complexity of filming evolved, and the subsequent economic pressures of labour and materials imposed on filmmakers, undercut the experimentation that might have resulted in an orderly development of the craft of filming dance'.[11]

As an established convention, narrative filming prevailed, however the art of choreography, with its very different requirements, was not considered or accessible at that time. Dance its-self rarely surfaced as subject matter for feature-length films; dance sequences may have served as an interlude, and were more or less directly related to the plot and choreographed for the camera. Such interludes seldom bore resemblance to works that were originally intended for the proscenium performance. Sometimes, like the work of Busby Berkeley, the camera-created extravaganzas that would be impossible to reproduce on the stage.

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[9] "Drawing Inspiration from the rich history of Dance Films", Dance Films Association INC, www.dancefilmassn.org/
[10] Larry Billman,"Music Video as Short Form Dance Film" Judy Mitoma Editor, Envisioning Dance on Film and Video, Routledge New York, 2002 pp12
[11] Ibid

Busby Berkeley

Busby Berkeley, born 1895, was a highly influential Hollywood movie director and musical choreographer. Famous for his elaborate musical productions, during the 1920s Berkeley was a dance director for nearly two dozen broadway musicals. Berkeley's works used extravagant showgirls and props as fantastic elements in kaleidoscopic on-screen performances. As a dance director, Berkeley was less concerned with the technical skill of his chorus girls than he was with his ability to form them into attractive and complex geometric patterns. 'Berkeley's legendary top shot technique "the kaleidoscope" first appeared seminally in the Cantor Films, and also in the 1932 Universal programmer *Night World*.[12] His musical numbers were among the largest and best-regimented on Broadway. The only way they'd get any larger was if Berkeley moved to films, and he did when 'talkies' arrived.

His numbers were known for starting out in the realm of the stage, but quickly exceeding the space by moving into a time and place that could only be cinematic, only to return to images of an applauding audience and the fall of a curtain. 'As choreographer, Berkeley was allowed a certain degree of independence in his direction of musical numbers, and they were often markedly distinct from (and sometimes in contrast to) the narrative sections of the films'.[13] The numbers he choreographed were mostly upbeat and focused on decoration as opposed to substance.

Just like many other movie directors, he started as a theatrical director, but unlike many at the time, he felt that a camera should be allowed mobility. He framed shots carefully from unusual angles to allow movie audiences to see things from perspectives that the theatrical stage never could provide. This is why he played an enormous role in establishing the movie musical as a category in its own right.

Berkeley's innovative and often sexually-charged dance numbers have been analyzed at length by cinema scholars. 'Berkeley always denied any deep significance to his work, arguing that his main professional goals were to constantly top himself and to never repeat his past accomplishments. As the outsized musicals in which Berkeley specialised became passé, he turned to straight directing, begging Warners to give him a chance at drama'.[14] Berkeley's drive for perfection led to a number of well-publicised run-ins with MGM stars such as Judy Garland as well as making numerous films with the opposition 20th Century Fox.

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[12] Busby Berkeley, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Busby_Berkeley
[13] Busby Berkeley, Ibid
[14] Busby Berkeley, Wikipedia, Ibid

Maya Deren / Eleanora Derenkowsky

'Maya Deren is recognisable as the woman with the enigmatic expression at the window, silently observing from within. Although her eyes indicate distrust, she is not desperate to escape her domestic space, but she is not entirely comfortable immured behind the glass'.

Wendy Haslem[15]

This image symbolizes some of Deren's most significant initiatives in experimental cinema, superimposition and juxtaposition. It is an image that describes the themes of her film work, rhythm, reflection, dreaming, ritual, vision and identity. 'Like Cindy Sherman's film stills, this image represents a poignant and hesitant moment, but unlike the photographs, Deren's still shot belongs within a dynamic, kinetic narrative'.[16]

Although famous for this image, Maya Deren was also a dancer, choreographer, writer, poet and photographer. In the cinema she was a writer, director, cinematographer, editor, performer and pioneer in experimental filmmaking in the United States. 'Like Jean-Luc Godard and Sergei Eisenstein, Maya Deren was a filmmaker, theorist and teacher'.[17] Rarely screened outside experimental or feminist film courses, unlike Eisenstein and Godard, her writing was obscure in classic film theory.

Deren's theories although advanced at the time, are still followed and admired by film makers today. In regards to the culmination and creation of making dance film she said,

'In most dance films the dancer, knowing little of the possibilities of camera and cutting, works in terms of theatrical composition; the filmmaker, knowing little about theatrical choreographic integrity, refuses to sit still concerns himself with photographic pictorial effects which usually have nothing to do with the intensions of the dancer, the usual unsatisfactory result is either fish nor fowl- it is neither good film nor good dance.'

Maya Deren[18]

Born, Eleanora Derenkowsky she studied journalism and political science, before completing her masters degree in English Literature and Symbolist Poetry in 1939. After college Deren began working as an assistant to the famous dancer and choreographer, Katherine Dunham, touring and performing with the Katherine Dunham Dance Company across the USA. 'It was in Los Angeles in 1941 that Deren met Alexander Hammid, a Czechoslovakian filmmaker working in Hollywood. In 1943, Deren returned to New York, married Hammid, transferred her

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[15] Wendy Haslem, "Maya Deren", Senses of Cinema, www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/oz/deren.html

[16] Ibid
[17] Ibid
[18] Quote Maya Deren, Evann Siebens, "A Historical Perspective", In L. Spain Editor, Choreography for Camera, Scarecrow Press, USA, 1998

primary focus from dance to film and changed her name to Maya. 'Her new name was particularly apt for a burgeoning filmmaker, Buddhists understanding Maya to mean 'illusion'.[19] It was here in collaboration with Hammid, Deren produced her first and most remarkable experimental film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943).

'*Meshes of the Afternoon* was produced in an environment of wartime volatility and this is reflected symbolically throughout its mise-en-scène'.[20] The film establishes an atmosphere thick with paranoia and distrust, with lovers turning into killers and with the presence of a mysterious but fascinating hooded figure. '*Meshes of the Afternoon* reflects this uncanny estrangement in the doubling, tripling and quadrupling of its central character (played by Deren)'[21] and gives the viewer a strong sense of restlessness and alienation.
'Thomas Schatz points to *Meshes* as the best known experimental film of the decade. He categorizes it as the first example of "the poetic psychodrama", films bearing the impression of art cinema which were seen as "scandalous and radically artistic." He writes that

"*The poetic psychodrama emphasized a dreamlike quality, tackled questions of sexual identity, featured taboo or shocking images, and used editing to liberate spatio-temporal logic from the conventions of Hollywood realism.*"[22]

Meshes of the Afternoon is shot as a silent film; there is no dialogue, communication between characters or atmospheric sound. A record player plays silently. Inspired by Eisenstein's notion of rhythmic montage, the editing and movements are accentuated by the rhythm of Teiji Ito's soundtrack. Rhythm is a defining element of all of Deren's films, it arises from her interest in repetition and variation, which is integral to her experiments in narrative. *Meshes* uses an innovative style of cutting on action, where Deren steps over such opposing terrains as the beach, soil, grass and concrete. 'The rhythmic drumbeat and the repetitive movement highlight her deliberate progress across these discontinuous spaces.'[23]

The film is constructed from numerous eye-line matches and mismatches. Deren uses extreme camera angles and reverse camera footage to create this nightmarish vision. She uses abstract viewpoints, transforming the frame into tunnel vision with the perspective funnelling through a cylinder's centre. 'These visions are intensified with the use of a horizontal wipe, with a semiopaque filter, mystifying the image and implying the beginning of the nightmare sequence.'[24]

Meshes of the Afternoon expresses Deren's deep understanding of movement, not only through the dancer's capability, but also the space/frame within which the dancer moves. An

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[19] Wendy Haslem, "Maya Deren", Senses of Cinema,
[20] Wendy Haslem, "Maya Deren", Senses of Cinema, www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/oz/deren.html

[21] Ibid
[22] Ibid
[23] Ibid
[24] Ibid

appreciation of how movement and space interrelate is crucial in dance film, for the perspective of the camera is an inversion of the proscenium stage.

Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly

The most consistently successful efforts by far at faithfully presenting choreography on film during the 20s and 30s were those of Fred Astaire. Born Frederick Austerlitz, Astaire had a film career that spanned over seventy-six years, in which time he made thirty-one musical films. He is particularly known for his work with Ginger Rogers with whom he made ten films and revolutionised the genre. 'George Balanchine and Rudolf Nureyev praised him as the greatest dancer of the twentieth century, and is generally acknowledged to have been the most influential dancer in the history of filmed and televised musicals'.[25]

Astaire is credited with two important innovations in early film musicals. 'Firstly his insistence that the camera stay stationary to film a dance routine in a single shot, if possible while holding the dancer in full view at all times'.[26] Keeping Astaire and his partners in full frame at all times and having the camera follow them, afforded Astaire seamless long takes that allowed the viewer to realise the physicality and immediacy of the dance. Astaire famously quoted,

"Either the camera will dance or I will"

Fred Astaire[27]

Astaire's style of dance sequences therefore contrasted with the Busby Berkeley musicals, as Astaire was more interested in elegant simplicity. Astaire's second innovation, was that all song and dance routines should be seamlessly integrated into the plotlines of the film. So rather than using dance as mere spectacle, Astaire used it to move the plot along.

Gene Kelly was another star of musical films who found new ways of choreographing that took advantage of the cinematic medium. 'As a major exponent of 20th century filmed dance, Gene Kelly was known for his energetic and athletic dancing style, his good looks and the likeable characters that he played on screen'.[28] Although he is probably best known today for his performance in *Singin' In The Rain,* he dominated the Hollywood musical film from the mid 1940s until its demise in the late 1950s.

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[25] Fred Astaire, Wikipedia, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fred_Astaire.html
[26] " "

[27] Fred Astaire in Larry Billman,"Music Video as Short Form Dance Film", Judy Mitoma Editor, <u>Envisioning Dance on Film and Video,</u> Routledge New York, 2002, p13

[28] Gene Kelly, Wikipedia, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gene_Kelly

Most choreographers of the Hollywood films had little input as to how their work would be photographed and edited, but Gene Kelly's star status allowed him major input into the dance contents of his films, where he was single minded about his goal. ' "When I came to Hollywood, it was as an actor-dancer, certainly not as a choreographer. But soon after my first picture I realised that no director in Hollywood was seriously interested in developing the cinematic possibilities of dance. No one cared about finding new techniques or improving the old ones, I decided that that would be my work." [29] From his arrival in film with "For Me and My Gal"(1942), Kelly studied the effect of filmed dance and realised that speed, distance and the dancer's environment were all elements altered by the camera.' "I did *Cover Girl (*1944), and that's when I began to see that you could make dances for cinema that weren't just photographed stage dancing. Photographing dance is trying to take a three-dimensional activity and put it in a two dimensional frame" '.[30]

Gene Kelly understood that framing affects the impact of any dance, and like Astaire insisted on never cutting away from the performer during the sequence, as he felt it ruined the continuity and unity of the choreography. 'Kelly's shots whether from front or side, include the dancer's full figure, surrounded by enough space to include the complete dance gesture and allow the dancer to shape the space within which he is working, in height, to each side, and in depth.'[31]Kelly followed in the steps of Astaire, who insisted that his directors take into account the relationship between the shape of the screen and the shape of the dancer, each film eventuating in the viewer receiving what Kelly felt was the optimal view of the dancer's gestures.

The term 'early pioneers' is indeed accurate, but also flexible, as the theories developed by these film makers, are still commonly used by young filmmakers today. Like Busby Berkeley, I feel that a camera should be allowed mobility presenting viewers with numerous perspectives. This separates dance film from live performance as it is possible to create situations which cannot be acted out in reality. Gene Kelly's theories on framing the action are also views that I comply with, as an awareness of the relationship created between the shape of the screen and the shape of the movement inevitably contribute to a stronger overall composition. Astaire and Berkeley's differences sum up one of the conundrums still facing the dance filmmaker today, which I am endeavoring to answer: Which will move the dancer or the camera?

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[29] Larry Billman, Judy Mitoma Editor, "Music Video as a Short Form Dance Film",Envisioning Dance on Film and Video, Routledge New York, 2002 pp 29

[30] Ibid
[31] Beth Genne, "Dancin' in the Rain", Judy Mitoma Editor, Envisioning Dance on Film and Video, Routledge New York, 2002 pp 74

Pioneers of Today

From its initial beginnings, dance film has evolved with new artists continually discovering innovative concepts and methods of experimentation to contribute to the forward motion of this hybrid form. Two such pioneers who have influenced my own interest in dance film have been international choreographers/filmmakers Clara Van Gool and Australia's Dianne Reid. Both of these artists hold their own distinct style and opinions on how dance film should be created similarly to the determination of a Busby Berkeley or a Fred Astaire.

Clara Van Gool – *Enter Achilles*

Expressing an idea through images rather than words is dance's forte, but sometimes the reality of a performance's setting remains an abstraction on stage. Cinema is an art form that allows our imagination to travel to new locations, a concept that Belgian filmmaker Clara Van Gool is familiar with. The now 35-year-old filmmaker was trained at the Dutch Film and Television Academy. During her study she focused on making short films and, in particular, films without words-so dance was a subject that attracted her. She began experimenting with her choreographer friends, discovering her preference for a strong sense of character and story development as opposed to more formal abstract work, which she found harder to film.

Van Gool has distinguished herself as a filmmaker by her craftsmanship. 'Using conventional camera work without special effects or filmic illusion, she creates a strong sense of narrative by focusing on what the camera sees. Strong musicality, deft editing and a range of camera angles give her films a sense of realism that live performance often lacks.'[32](pp 164) She keeps segments whole with little editing in her attempt not to interfere with the dance itself. Instead she focuses on the worlds surrounding the dance, colours, textures and sounds to heighten the dance's story and enhance the energy and dynamics of its movement.

'Clara Van Gool's collaboration with Lloyd Newson on the film adaptation of DV8 Physical Theatre's, *Enter Achilles* is one of the most acclaimed dance films of the 1990s and remains as her most outstanding work.'[33] Lloyd Newson creates and develops his choreography like a film director. He prepares a script, which sets up a scenario and characters, before beginning rehearsals. He then casts his own performers based specifically on the needs of the script. Perhaps most importantly, he writes these characters and scenarios with a clear intention. 'Newson is a psychologically driven choreographer whose work often relates directly to the

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[32] Kelly Hargraves, Judy Mitoma Editor, "Europeans Filming New Narrative Dance" Envisioning Dance on Film and Video, Routledge New York, 2002 pp 164

[33] Ibid

socio-cultural context in which he lives. He aims for clarity, intent and content, and emotional as well as physical vigor.'[34]

'DV8's work is about taking risks, breaking down barriers, whether in dance, theatre or personal politics.'

Lloyd Newson [35]

Originally designed for stage, the film version of *Enter Achilles* is set inside a London pub (where Newson first had the impulse to make it) with its classic wooden bar, beer taps and glasses. Performed by a group of men, the tensions are high as they flirt and threaten one another in what appears to be post work gathering for drinks. Lloyd Newson's innovative choreography ensues with the dancers jumping and tumbling along the barroom floor as they continue to hold their beer glasses. Van Gool seems to have a good sense of a choreographer's needs and has not interfered with the dance itself. Instead she enhances the stunning choreography and the personality of these men by following their intense actions with a combination of close and long shots in order to depict their intentions. Through the intimacy of film, she heightens the strong psychology of Newson's work with her own choreographic choices.

Dianne Reid

'As the movement of the dancer and dance are inscribed in film and video, that inscription becomes the artefact that endures over time. And by this process, as choreographers, dancers and filmmakers, future generations will have access to the marks we made.'[36]

Dianne Reid is an Australian independent dance and video artist and was previously artistic director of Dancehouse in Melbourne. As a former Postgraduate researcher and lecturer at the Deakin University, Reid remains at the forefront of dance film in Australia.

'My life between company dancer and solo performer exists in screen space. I began creating dance video work to assert my existence, imbuing my presence with palpable history, and with it credibility, a meaning. On screen, dance can reappear and be replayed. It becomes a tangible artefact accessible across geographical and temporal locations.'[37]

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[34] Kelly Hargraves, Judy Mitoma Editor, "Europeans Filming New Narrative Dance" <u>Envisioning Dance on Film and Video,</u> Routledge New York, 2002 pp 165
[35] Lloyd Newson, "Never Again" <u>Film Summary</u> 1989
[36] Dianne Reid, "The Shifting Eye: A Reflection on the Processes of Making a Dance Video" www.doubledialogues.com/archive/issue_three/reid.html
[37] Dianne Reid, "Scenes from another Life" (the paper), Dance House, Melbourne Australia

Her exploration into dance film/video began in the early nineties with a three-minute 16mm film. It was created as a projection for a live dance solo within a larger performance work entitled *Betrayal*. Thematically the solo dealt with anger and extreme emotion, and more so the few seconds that build to an outburst of anger, and the physical body's reaction to the surge of chemicals. The solo then became a duet between the dancer and the projected double.

When choreographing for a live performance context, Reid tends to create shorter, more dense works, often incorporating the use of live voice with recorded sound in addition to video or film projection.

'I find the juxtaposition of both media provides layers of meaning and texture that enhances the live experience and shifts the focus of the audience in ways that demand an unusual synthesis of active and passive viewing.'[38]

In choreographing for film Reid, explores mechanisms by which she can translate the kinaesthetic intimacy of dance and the body to screen. She is interested in the individual experience and the emotional and psychological landscape which functions in the physical landscape. She has redefined her movement vocabulary, 'instead of a leap, I gasp; a lift of a finger replaces an arabesque; to fall I close my eyes, virtuosity for me now is about detail, specificity, a quality, and about a psychokinetic connection.'[39]

Her more recent film *Neglect* is a prime example of this vocabulary. Set in the hidden alleyways and backstreets of suburban Melbourne, the narrative focuses on a group of women confined to the corridors of an apartment building. Although fluid and full choreography is present, it is in the moments of subtly where her movement speaks the most. Focusing on the hands, toes, the mouth in these moments forms an increasing tension, giving her choreography an edge that sits perfectly with the subject matter.

'With the camera, I can direct the eye specifically, take the viewer into the intimate space of the body, reveal the detail which humanises and personalises the performer.'[40]

Dianne Reid has a strong mentality in relation to choreographing the camera. She refers to herself as the 'new body of the camera, both the dancer and the viewer, and therefore closer to its underlying or emotive, psychological inscription'.[41] Her choreography becomes cinematic as she re-sequences and re-frames the movement.

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[38] Dianne Reid, "The Shifting Eye: A Reflection on the Processes of Making a Dance Video" www.doubledialogues.com/archive/issue_three/reid.html
[39] " "

[40] Dianne Reid, "The Shifting Eye: A Reflection on the Processes of Making a Dance Video" www.doubledialogues.com/archive/issue_three/reid.html

[41] Dianne Reid, "Scenes from another Life" (the paper), Dance House, Melbourne Australia pp 6

For a live performance, the final choreographic decisions and refinement are made in the studio working with the real body. With dance film the material shifts between movement of the real body in space and time to the movement of one filmed sequence to the next. The movement becomes segments of footage choreographic tools are editing room skills.

'With the editing process, I can make the connections between the performers, their 'stories,' and the movement material more particular and lateral.'[42]

Reid considers the choreographic process not complete until the last stages of postproduction, when the edited picture, with music/sound and effects are synchronised. I believe this to be true, as the rhythm created when manipulating the sound for the footage is of equal importance for the overall vision of the film. A fraction of a second can determine either a successful or unsuccessful shot, and this remains true for the tempo of the sound -scape. Many dance films have been less than successful when they consider the process complete with the placement of the dance material in front of the camera. Choreographing for the camera, although similar to live performance requires attention to detail, as the camera cannot see what humans see, and so film needs special considerations.

Choreography for the Camera

Making dance film is difficult, and one of the traps creators often fall into is that they shy away from using choreographed dance movement in their own work. 'Our agenda –as-video dance-makers- must be to out dance movement-rich, textured, complex, rhythmical, compelling dance movement-at the centre of the work, as it is this that communicates. The worst scenario, which must be avoided, is that the movement, or dance, content of the work seems like an afterthought; the last thing to be considered after the location, design, camera and editing style.'[43]

Whilst there are many ways to create movement material, many choose to use a camera within the rehearsal period. This gives an idea of how the choreography will look on screen, allowing them to adapt and manipulate the dancers from an alternative viewing point. This is imperitive as the dancer and choreography can appear quite different on screen. Knowing this early on also allows the choreographer to focus on perfecting or manipulating the movement material to suit the camera, therefore presenting it in the best light.

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[42] Ibid
[43] Katrina McPherson, "Introduction" Making Video Dance Routledge New York 2006, pp xxx

Re-Choreographing for Camera

Re-choreographing for the camera refers to the manipulation of choreography from a live performance to the screen. This may mean that the intention or narrative may need to be developed, or the length reduced, to recreate the feeling of the original choreography. For *Prim* the first film in the series, I used the method of re-choreographing as the material was initially performed live as part of a larger work. Set in a Laundromat, *Prim* focuses on a woman as she fantasises in her mundane world. The film shifts between her internal (fantasy) space and her bland reality. Having adapted the concept from a previous work, meant that although I could extract the female character from the original piece, there was time spent developing a new storyline and arranging movement for the camera. This was relatively easy as the main section of pure dance material was recorded in a couple of long takes. It was also achievable for the performer (Jess Lewis) as this sequence was filmed in a television studio, so there were no external distractions or obstacles.

'Choreography for the camera' is a rather misleading phrase. Indeed the movement may have been specifically created for the screen, but it also requires additional intention, whether that is expressive or formal, or a combination of both. Identifying the intention will complement the structure of the work and what is being communicated. If the sole purpose of the choreography is to fill the frame with movement, you will end up with carefully designed shots, but it will be hard to edit them together effectively.

My second film *Cut* uses these principles. Focused around a single character (Joshua Mu) *Cut* follows the internal battle of a lone businessman eating at a dinner table. Again the scene shifts between his internal freedom and the restraint and obsession of his daily life. Identifying the intention in not only the choreography but also the portrayal of the character was a crucial element in the rehearsal process. As the psychology of the character was so complex we placed additional attention on the subtlest of movements. For example the simple shifting of cutlery or the folding of a napkin was all executed with precision and intention.

A method that is used by some choreographers when transposing the intentions (not the steps) of a live composition to screen, with its particular time, space and energy, is the charting of the work's intentions. This imaginary chart is called a wave-form pattern and accents the dynamic of the dance. From this imaginary chart the director can then decide if the dynamic wave's peak was too sharp or too shallow or otherwise distorting the flow of movement trajectories beyond a range which expresses their choreographic intentions. They can then alter the actual sequence of steps, pauses or gestures accordingly to change the shape of the dynamic wave.

Identifying the intention is also needed in the individual journey of the performer. When working for a camera the expression of the dancer is crucial, and must also be considered by

the director. If the dancer is unsure of what they are meant to be thinking at any time in a sequence, it will show on the screen. As the un-choreographed pedestrian movement for *Prim* was largely improvised on the day, I would select an action for example (opening the washing machine) and then advise the dancer of the emotions she should be feeling, in order to achieve the desired facial expressions on the screen.

In my experience location also tends to effect the emotions or facial expressions of the performer, as they may be struggling with numerous factors such as the temperature or the surface they are dancing on. I found it most effective to encourage the dancers to utilise these emotions within their characters, this produced more realistic facial expressions, as they were not trying to cover any discomfort. For example the outdoor shoot for *Cut* was extremely cold and windy and the performer was wearing thin clothes. I told him to use his discomfort for the character and to direct it into his worried facial expression or his breathing. I feel this uncomfortable environment actually contributed to his embodiment of the character, as he could use real sensations to produce the required emotion.

'Often you don't know what it's really going to be like until you are on location. There can be a certain awkwardness in the movement because the performer is running along a path with roots all over it and they're bound to trip, and there's only so fast they can run. Everything changes all the time working on location and it can be incredibly frustrating, but also magical. I think change is inherent to film-making.'

Laura Taler choreographer/director[44]

As dance film is a screen-based art form, it is by default associated with television. Therefore the expectation is often that everything should be immediately obvious on one viewing and that there is narrative closure. Dance film offers much greater potential than that, it can create compelling visual and aural experiences, it can challenge perceptions and illuminate and stimulate concepts and emotions. Although closure is not necessary, I believe some form of storyline or concept is needed to create a successful dance film. Whether it is simply a theme that binds the choreography to the surroundings, a movement motif that carries throughout or a complex storyline with many characters.

Narrative Translations

With the manipulation of choreography for film also comes the need to continue the transference of narrative for the screen. Of course not all choreographers create their work with a narrative or storyline in mind but even in the absence of a direct plot, the question, (what is a particular abstract movement communicating with its energy in emotional or narrative terms?) is something that should be asked. For both the director/choreographer and

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[44] Laura Taler in, Katrina McPherson, 'Developing the Work' <u>Making Video Dance</u> Routledge, New York 2006 pp.47

the cinematographer knowing the 'story' in the movement is important as it also guides the direction of the camera. Like-wise the quality and energy of the choreography assists in determining how long to stay focused on things, how quickly to establish them, and where the development is leading.

This skill came naturally for me, when viewing '*Cut*' through the lens. As I was aware of the intentions of the character and also the broader narrative, cinematic choices were obvious and clear in my mind. In the character's moments of reflection or stillness, I could suggest that the director use a long or high angle shot, to emphasise his insignificance or isolation within the surroundings. Like wise the intimate framing for the dinner scene, references the internal and personal thoughts of the dancer. These concepts lead directly into the use of camera movement when filming dance, and the importance of planned and impromptu camera choreography.

Choreographing the Camera

The camera frames the world of a dance film, it is the eye through which the viewer sees, a key collaborator the work. Through the use of different shots and angles, the camera can take the viewer places they could not usually reach. The lens can enter the dancer's kinesphere, focusing on a detail of movement and allowing an intimacy that would be unattainable in a live performance context.

Another difference between stage and film space is that the film director decides where the audience directs its gaze. This is manifest in the basic differences of shot size, close ups, medium shots, and full shots. Many emerging filmmakers believe that dancers should be shot in full-frame, with plenty of head and foot room. For archival documentation, this is obviously the best practice since the point of the work is to capture the choreography in its entirety. However to shoot a creative dance film in a continuous long wide shot overlooks the power of the close-up and the subtleties of choreography; a turn of the head, a movement of the hands.

This freedom is what makes filming dance so exciting, though style is personal and depends on the aesthetics of the director. One dance film may feature a series of long, carefully choreographed moving shots, while the other will consist of short, rapidly edited still images, creating the choreography through the editing as much as through the movement. From the initial stages of filming *Prim* until the filming of *Cut* several months later, my knowledge and experience of framing the dancer developed dramatically. With my first tentative steps largely concerned with framing the dancer in full, by the shoot for *Cut,* I had begun to realise the benefit and mystery in simply focusing on sections of the body or choreography. This attention to detail created a tension and anticipation in the footage, leaving the entirety of the dancer until last.

However if the framing is too tight, the relationship between camera and body can become overly intimate, like a very exclusive duet. The viewer can then lose their own entry point, and they will no longer feel included in the dance. Whilst we realise that the viewer's capacity to feel something profound is dictated by what they see in a frame, we do not want total control over their experiences, as there has to be space for their individual opinions.

The Camera in Motion

As the common subject of the frame for dance film is human movement, video dance invites- even demands- the camera to be in motion. How the camera moves in relation to the dancer or performers, and the space they are in, has great impact on the viewer's experience of the movement, and I believe the most important element in dance film. The movement of the camera through space means that what the lens sees will change and, as a result, the framing of the shot will continually alter. 'As the choreographed camera-whether hand held or on track or a jib- moves through space, it alters the viewer's perception of the dance, rendering it three-dimensional and creating a fluid and lively viewing experience'.[45] Camera movement in the filming allows the viewer to feel like they are involved in the dance which is an important element.

From a practical standpoint, camera movement changes whether the instrument is on a dolly, on a crane or hand-held. In the outdoor shoot for *Cut,* there was something supremely satisfying about shooting hand-held, as it gave us the freedom to move with the action. For me, this is the method in dance film that comes closest to "dancing with the camera". As it was my own choreography and I knew the pathways, we were able to move the camera along with the dancer, producing (what I hope to be) a strong sense of kinesthetic movement. The camera does not always have to follow the movement, but can also be used in contrast, allowing the dancer to pass through the frame.

Choreography and Editing

The role of the choreographer does not finish when the movement and filming have been completed, but continues on through the process of editing the footage. The term editing refers to the detailing of not only the footage but the sound. During the editing process, choreographers will often find a rhythm develops as they move from one shot to another.

Some filmmakers call this 'singing the rhythm', created by movement trajectories, shaped by cuts that 'sound' in their head. 'This phenomenon draws on a synesthesia that a lot of editors have and the reason why editing is often compared with music.'[46]The movements sound in

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[45] Katrina McPherson, "Dance and the Camera, The Camera's Role" <u>Making Video Dance</u> Copyright Routledge New York pp 24

[46] Katrina McPherson, "Choreography of the Edit, The Sound-image relationship" <u>Making Video Dance</u> Routledge New York pp 182

the editor's heads/bodies with their timing, pacing and trajectory phrasing making a kind of 'song'. This can also be used in the cutting of the footage, not just the phrase they make with the edits. Listening to the breath, tensions and releases of the flow of energy, time, space and movement are all aspects that will determine the pace of the editing. This rhythm is also important when adding any kind of sound-scape or music, as the slightest shift from one side of a beat to the next will result in a successful or unsuccessful edit. These techniques are all discoveries I made in the process of choreographing, filming and editing my own films *Prim* and *Cut.*

Laura Boynes- *Prim, Cut* and *Mate*

The Process

This body of work is about false facades, external judgment, social stereotypes and the view through rose coloured glasses. I am interested in audiences forming opinions rather than merely observing what is presented in a mindless state. I have endeavored to push the audience to question why they have made particular conclusions, and how these conclusions reflect on them.

Characters are of pivotal importance in my films as not only do I have a passion for dance theatre, but also I am intrigued by body language and human interaction physically and psychologically. This is an obvious statement for a dance filmmaker but the subject matter is not usually focused on narrative, nor on the complexity of the character/dancer alone. Similarly to the films of Lloyd Newson, the scenario and characters were established before the first rehearsals. The dancers were cast specifically for the characters I had already developed within the narrative, and I was as clear as possible with my directions for their intentions. Storyboarding was used to devise a concept and for my filmmaker collaborator's understanding of the work and his involvement.

For films, the choreography and movement direction for the camera was made in collaboration with the dancers. Choreography was often created using tasks or questions, or by developing manipulations of pedestrian/everyday movement. In both films, direction was also given on the day of filming when I could see how the dancer looked in the frame. Pedestrian movement was often created whilst observing the composition of the body and the surroundings. Simplicity was of great importance to me in the choreographic process. I believe that like Reid that subtlety is crucial for dance film as the smallest gesture or facial expression can portray far more than a large movement. This is not to say that full and athletic movement should not be filmed, but for the purpose of my work it was not necessary. At times I found the justification of more than a hand gesture difficult as it seemed out of context and irrelevant.

'I think that the more traditional dancey films often don't work for me because it seems forced and false to place someone in a location and then get them to do dance movements, when what they need is the context of a stage, ie. sprung floors, warmth, light. It just looks wrong. When I work in an environment, I will discard anything that looks like "Oh a bit of dance!" because what I am trying to make is movement that seems right and totally apt for the environment.'

Rosemary Lee, choreographer/director[47]

The fact that dance film brings together two different art forms -dance and film- which themselves incorporate many different creative elements, gives it enormous potential as a cross-arts medium.

It also means that the production process will involve various artists and technicians coming together to work towards one goal. Filmed in collaboration with the Western Australian Screen Academy and in particular with director Simon Stokes, the *Prim* series was originally designed to be a three part suite. As a newcomer to any field, there were many lessons to learn in devising, choreographing and filming my own work for the first time. The reality and constraints of time was one of the initial factors to negotiate. Not only in the making of the choreography and film, but in simply setting a rehearsal and production schedule that suited all parties involved. In hindsight the art of time management appears to be one of the most crucial skills to ascertain in filmmaking, in the planning, making, editing, in and outside the film itself. Therefore although the concept, choreography, costuming etc. was already devised for the third film *Mate* it was due to 'time' and scheduling that it could not be completed.

Mate

Mate was to complete the set of three films, with the same concept but presented in a different manner to the first two. Focused around two males, (dancers Luke Hickmott and Steven Smith-Ince) the film was to be set in a suburban apartment block. Each character was confined to the isolation of their own house, an empty kitchen, one bowl on the drying rack, a quiet and empty world. A relationship would be established through movement and intimate camera work to implying a connection between the two characters. Although never filmed in the same setting, split screens, and reversed images would place them in the same space. The choreography was a mixture of static and suggestive movement, (largely performed with the hands) leaving the viewer wondering what the character was doing as sections of the picture were missing. The intention was to end with the image of the two men playing chess,

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[47] Rosemary Lee, Katrina McPherson-Editor "Themes" <u>Making Video Dance</u> Routledge New York 2006, pp.67

their hand gestures manipulations of their game tactics. At this point I imagine the viewer would ask themselves if they had judged the situation too quickly, and if their assumptions, for instance, were based on stereotypes or sexuality. As the creator this would be the desired outcome, but in reality reactions are harder to determine.

Capturing the moment

Learning the skills of camera choreography was something that developed due to trial and error. Each film was conducted differently, with my knowledge and experience growing and aiding each shoot or setting. Although ideas and locations were always specified often the decisions or filmic choices were improvised. This was largely due to factors changing out of my control or opportunities arising in the moment. Factors included weather change, costuming, lighting, sound, injury, fire alarms, business hours, rules and regulations.

I became aware from the early stages that the choices made when framing the dancer would play a pivotal role in whether the movement was depicted accurately. My findings (which is ultimately why I enjoy creating dance film) is that the director/cinematographer controls what they wish the viewer to see and therefore interpret. Framing an eyebrow moving is suggesting where the audience should be focusing their attention, where as in a live performance this attention could be directed at any number of things. Like Gool, I am interested in the intimacy of film and the ability to capture an audience's complete attention. I believe film maintains a realism that live performance often lacks, which is a result of this intimacy.

Camera movement or lack of movement is the key element in choreographing the camera. While moving the camera with a dancer can be effective, so can leaving the lens stationary whilst the movement occurs or alternatively allowing the figure to pass through the frame/shot. This movement as previously mentioned will also instruct the viewer as to the mood they should be experiencing depending on the camera's choreography and pace. Again like Clara Van Gool, conventional camera techniques and narrative are preferred to filmic illusion, as a clean raw image at this exploratory stage is of more interest to me. I feel that if a film can support itself without illusion or special effects then it is a more accurate depiction of the quality of content. This is not to say that stylistic choices cannot be made based purely around effects, but illusion/manipulation without intention, in my opinion, is unnecessary.

The outdoor film shoot for 'Cut' was the most challenging when deciding whether to complement or oppose the choreography with the camera movement. This was due to the scale and physicality of some of the movement and the lack of restriction as we were in open space. Often I found shots became too dense as the surroundings of the city were already so vibrant. This reaction emphasised the importance I place in simplicity in my work, and I was forced to adapt some of my choreography in the final stages in order to accommodate a calmer image.

The Edit

Editing is the most crucial aspect of dance filmmaking. It is at this point that the line between reality and illusion can be blurred as time and space can be manipulated. I have discovered editing to be about precision and accuracy of timing, the rhythm that can be created in the cutting of images and the power of continuing the direction and flow of movement from one shot to the next. I have found enjoyment in continuing the movement not only from one human movement to another but from objects, machines, man- made movement to human.

Editing also involves the manipulation of music/sound in relation to the image, another process I find enjoyable. For *Cut* a sound artist was used as a specific mood was required to complement the footage and copyright for pre-made music is becoming increasingly hard to secure. Collaborating with a family member meant my desires could be reached easily and truthfully, over the course of numerous phone calls and music sent via the internet. The synchronisation of image and sound is a challenging aspect of editing as the slightest difference in timing can result in the shot looking awkward and clumsy. Some moments of satisfaction in editing *Cut* were the synchronisation of actions for instance, the co-ordination of two pieces of cutlery making contact with a similar chiming sound in the music. Once discovered this connection was repeated deliberately and carried on throughout the film.

The Finished Product

In the completion and reflection of *Cut,* I feel as a viewer I have achieved the inclusion of new concepts and at very least addressed the techniques used by pioneers before me. Obviously it takes many years to master these skills but I have observed a noticeable shift in my lateral and creative mind throughout the duration of this project. I have subconsciously found myself applying and adapting the knowledge learnt on paper to the practical elements of filmmaking. I have become a conscious decision maker and create relationships between the camera and the dancer for a reason, rather than by chance. Editing is now an art-form that excites me, where my creativity can flourish as I play with the illusion of time and space. These techniques have become part of my observation as I watch other dance films with a stronger kinesthetic and holistic sense of the rhythm and breath in the camera movement.

Conclusion

'It is my earnest hope that film-dance will be rapidly developed and that, in the interest of such a development, an era of collaboration between dancers and filmmakers will open up- one in which both would pool their creative energies and talents towards an integrated art expression.'

Rosemary Lee [48]

Is it the choreography that should dance for the camera? Or the camera that should dance for the choreography? Or is the answer to the puzzle in the subtle collaboration of the two? In conclusion to my research and exploration into making dance film, my findings have achieved nothing more than to amplify my initial beliefs about capturing movement.

To make a successful and kinesthetically pleasing dance film the motion of both the camera and the choreography must be considered. This does not mean the camera has to be in motion, but that the cinematic decisions should be made with the dancer or choreography in mind. Opposition of the action is just as powerful as complementing the flow of the movement, but again it is about the awareness of these concepts that are important.

Throughout this process the division in my mind separating the choreographer from the filmmaker has softened. Initially I assumed the role of the choreographer. It was only during the process that I became aware I was also taking on the directorial role. As my knowledge of filming movement has grown due to my research and observations of other dance films, so did my creative decisions, trust and intuition of my own directorship. Whilst collaboration was necessary for my first exploratory attempts into dance film, the purpose served by this relationship was to guide and mentor me in the technical aspects of filmmaking. It is my long term goal to acquire all skills required in making dance film, so therefore I can continue to foster my choreographic visions, transferring movement from stage space to screen.

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[48] Rosemary Lee, Katrina McPherson-Editor, "Final Stages" Making Video Dance, Routledge New York 2006, pp199

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