A KINESTHETIC APPROACH TO THE CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS OF

DANCE FOR CAMERA

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ABSTRACT

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In dance for camera work, the interplay between dance and film mediums allows choreographic and cinematic choices to shape interpretive possibilities. The process, as a collaborative dialogue between designed movement of the body and camera-in-action, clarifies the distinctive nature of dance portrayed on film, specifically in creating dance works made for film. Questions guiding the research include: What elements of the film medium change the way the body is viewed and how is that important in shaping the film's choreographic narrative? Within the interplay between the body in designed motion and the camera-in-action, what sense-making text is created through the intent of the choreographer/filmmaker developed through the manipulation of these two considerations in the film editing process? A dancefilm is presented in conjunction with the paper as a culmination of the project to show how the choreographic process is shaped by the body's representation onto film.

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The genre of dance for camera, also known as dancefilm or cinedance, fuses a rich history of film and a rich history of dance. Starting with an inherent look into film as art, dance for camera has blossomed into a wide spectrum of dance on film with a myriad of products from documentation and enhancing live performance to experimental film and fully immersive virtual dance, making the terrain of dance on film vast.

Since the 1960s, multi-media and performance art has stimulated the dance field to further explore the similarities and differences between visual art and movement aesthetics. Avante-garde/experimental film followed a similar trajectory as artists pushed the boundaries of where film could take audiences in the context of meaningful art-making. The trajectory between the fields of dance, visual art, and film converged in the early twentieth century film work of Maya Deren. Deren's primary work being produced in the 1940s and 1950s, she is often associated with dancefilm because an interest in modern dance influenced much of her film work. According to dance scholar, Theresa Geller, "Deren is credited with making the first narrative in the history of American avant-garde, which up to that point had been dominated by abstract representations and formal experiments with animation" (p. 140). After the initial explorations of Deren, organizations today such as Dance Films Associations, Dance for Camera West, Media and Dance (MAD) network, and a myriad of dance for camera festivals are just a few of the institutions artists have initiated to perpetuate the

exploration into dance and film as a synergistic reality on screen. To illustrate the idea of synergism, the visual arts have an appropriate example in the glasswork of Dale Chihuly (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Glass Baskets by Dale Chihuly.

Dale Chihuly's "baskets" are glass bowls of varying sizes, nested within one another. Even though intended as one sculpture, each glass bowl can be examined and considered separately, but only in the context of the entire composition of bowls. When looking at dance for camera or dancefilm work. The moving images flickering on the screen can be similarly pulled apart into three separate elements for the purpose of examining the nature of dance for camera work as a whole. The relationships among these three elements provide a means of entry into the choreographic process specific to dance for camera work, by using the mediums of film and dance in a collaborative way.

These elements are designed movement of the body, the camera-in-action, and sense making.

In dance for camera, the first element or designed movement of the body refers to kinetic and proxemic patterns of the body or choreographed dance. Camera-in-action refers to the visual mise en scène, which includes composition and design, territorial space, movement of the camera and mechanical distortions of movement in the editing process (Giannetti, 2001). In short, camera-in-action considers how the visual elements are organized within the frame, what is excluded and what the frame itself does to the visual image. The third element of sense making refers to the meaning created through visual communication between the compositional image of the frame and the movement of the dancer or camera. Questions addressed in the sense-making process might include: How do the filming and editing processes shape the choreography? How does the film medium change the way dance is presented and perceived on film?

These questions lead to an inquiry on how choice-making happens in the dance for camera creative process. It also suggests that those choices have a direct effect on how the viewer makes sense of the images on screen. How do choreographic and cinematic choices shape interpretive possibilities in dance for camera? Analyzing the collaborative dialogue between designed movement of the body and camera-in-action clarifies the distinctive nature of dance portrayed on film. Questions guiding the research include: What elements of the camera-in-action change the way the body in movement is viewed and how is that important in shaping the film's choreographic narrative? Within the interplay between the body in designed motion and the camera-in-action, what sense-making text is created through the intent of the choreographer/filmmaker developed through the manipulation of these two considerations in the film editing process? How is the choreographic process shaped by the body's representation or revelation onto film? This suggests that the approach to creating a work is just as important as the end product itself.

Filmmakers have applied various philosophies as well as practical strategies to shape their decision-making in the artistic process. For example, in an interview about the making of the film *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), Lars von Trier states, "a provocation's purpose is to get people to think. If you subject people to a provocation, you allow them the possibility of their own interpretation" (von Trier, 2000). Von Trier attempts to consider territorial movement of the subjects and the compositional frame of the camera as a dependent relationship to invite the viewer to a provocative inquiry. In contrast, Maya Deren theorized that "…manipulations of the image destroyed the film's authority of reality and therefore subtracted from the fertile possibilities and strength of the medium itself" (Wilmouth, 2005, p. 7). Again, Dziga Vertov believed that the camera is a divisive tool more perfect than human vision and is meant to explore "the chaos of visual phenomenon" (Wilmouth, 2005, p. 8), "…not as a means to something else but as a revelation in and of itself" (Pearlman, 2005, 8/5, p. 7). To illustrate the difference that approach has on product, I look to photography to highlight similar concerns about artistic process that can be applied to dance for camera theory.

In the article, *Still Moving: The Revelation or Representation of Dance in Still Photography*, Matthew Reason (2003/2004) questions philosophies of revelation versus representation that manifest in the artistic process of photographers seeking to produce dance in still photography. Reason discusses the difference between revealing the physical shape of dance in photographic technique and representing the inherent nature of the form within the dance movement being photographed. According to Reason, photography holds a certain authority in culture with revelatory authority to present some aspect of truth in the world, to show a slice of life that is not normally seen in a frozen moment of time. Through artful methods, photography also has the ability to evoke a response in the viewer through representational properties. Rather than depending on the viewer's trust in the objectivity of the camera, photography can, through interventionist methods, represent the nature of the subject's form in a way that

evokes something more in the mind of the viewer. Reason critiques photographs by American photographer Lois Greenfield and British photographer Chris Nash both of whom have received acclaim for their ability to interpret dance movement in still photography. Greenfield and Nash's compositions are similar to one another, yet Reason discusses how the artists, through individual approaches, took the shape of dance and created different interpretations of the movement form. Greenfield's work is trademarked by her dependence on revelatory aesthetics that rely on the viewer trusting that the moments in movement that lens captures is a real and truthful moment of fractured time. In contrast, Nash draws on various techniques such as lighting effects, retouching, digital manipulation, to represent the moment of dance much the way an audience might experience a moment of movement. While their intentions to represent the aesthetics of dance in still photography are similar, Greenfield and Nash work in very different ways, one depending on the photograph's authenticity and the other undermining it to display movement "more as we might experience it ourselves" (Reason, p. 58). Speaking of Arnold Genthe's famous 1915 photograph of Anna Pavlova, Reason concludes:

> …[Genthe's] photograph is not a powerful image simply because it is, authentically, of a dancer in motion. [It] communicates movement beyond the moment it depicts – beyond, in a sense, what it reveals photographically to what it evokes in the mind of the viewer. (p. 43)

Reason's (2003/2004) ideas that still photography can represent aesthetic qualities of dance by "…[communicating] movement beyond the moment [the photograph] depicts" (p. 43), and his ideas about the compositional structures of photography parallel similar aspects of dance on film.

Johannes H. Birringer (1999) discusses the effects that digital technologies have had on dance as an art form. These technologies range from the recoding of the real into the virtual via computer to dance specifically made for camera and from multi-media

live performance to motion capture. Birringer analyzes the shifts that these digital technologies have had on the meaning of dance. He not only discusses the shifts in contemporary performance that happen when the physical body meets the mediated body, but he also suggests the introduction of new filmic practices into the modes of choreographic processes intended for stage performance. A duet created between two choreographers on opposite ends of the globe being mediated through the internet must address the physical limitations that technology imposes on the performance space as well as what interpretations come of witnessing the mediated body with a real body in a multi-media space. To summarize, Birringer states that the use of technology innately influences choreography rather than just being a device of documentation. This implies that the mere introduction of a technology, albeit digital or physical, in conjunction with another chosen technology, as in technique, there forms a relationship with dialogue that in effect must be addressed.

Karen Pearlman (2005) addresses this relationship between the discovery of new filmic processes and traditional choreographic processes by speaking about how rhythm in both film editing and the traditional choreographic process guide the viewer's perception:

> One of the things I found is that just as choreographers may work with the movement of dancers to bring out the events, the visuals or the emotions of a dance, the film editor shapes different kinds of movement to create a film's rhythms and has distinct craft tools and considerations for dealing with each film's event rhythms, visual rhythms and emotional rhythms. (p. 5)

This suggests that there is a dialogue between the camera-in-action and designed movement in the body, which begs the question: How does the film medium shape choreographic decision-making? In the instance of dance for camera, the images captured by the use of the camera and the craft of the editing, work in combination with designed movement to create a meaningful effect within the context of the film

narrative. Karen Pearlman introduces the idea that the film editor also creates her/his own choreography in that our physical bodies play an important role in shaping the rhythmic movement of the film. This idea, extended to the filming aspect of the dance for camera equation, means that the camera-in-action has kinesthetic input into the dancefilm's choreographic process. Pearlman points out that it is useful to "[tune] one's own physical rhythms to the rhythms being perceived in the filmed material, and is at work in every single rhythmic decision" (Pearlman, 2005, 8/5, p. 10). These distinctive approaches suggest that the way the work is approached is important to the outcome of the film. Birringer affirms this idea by asking how our kinesthetic experiences are altered while in the choreographic process with mediated temporality and space (Birringer, p. 370), thus a shift in awareness must occur and be accounted for in our choreographic process.

Turning to examine my kinesthetic experiences in dance, I have realized a shift from traditional training to conceptualizing my artistic processes in new ways. This shift is seemingly due to the abridged understanding I have brought to each new problem in creating work. Because of geographic location, technological deficiencies, and lack of traditional dance community, this shift has forced me to engage alternative perspectives to either broaden my understanding or question conventional methods of art making. For example, the allure of creating dance for camera films initially bloomed from a need for choreographic portability, repeatability, and independence from rehearsal space or working with additional dancers.

Dancefilm also serves to evoke further imagistic practices that I already use in the studio. Similar to the experience of watching movies or daydreaming, the images engage my imagination and broaden my perspective. A background in photography has also influenced how I see the choreographic problem in the studio through composition and perspective. Because of this and other forms of visual training, I am used to looking through a viewfinder as a means of focusing the details and seeing

aspects of a dance that are important to aesthetic craft. Likewise, my experience with photography has greatly influenced the way I organize and make sense of movement in film.

Presentation of Findings

In an effort to clarify the visual aspects of sense making in dance, I created a dance for camera project by taking existing stage choreography from my repertoire, a piece entitled *She Drew a Picture of a Whale,* and re-conceptualized it for film. The project began with the creation of a storyboard that would depict the initial concept and trajectory of the film. I personally edited the film as a way of engaging kinesthetically in the choreographic process. A formal journal was kept to document creative choices and record perceptions of meaning in the stage production of *She Drew a Picture of a Whale* to note what viewers saw and felt during the live performance for comparison with feedback from the draft film screenings of the dancefilm version of the work. . To understand my perspective on the project I must first situate myself as a filmmaker with a specific way of working. I developed a kinesthetic approach to the filmic and choreographic process by incorporating my aesthetic movement training with the visual nature of film in both the stage version and the film production of *She Drew a Picture of a Whale*.

The central focus of this approach was to create shifts in choreographic perspective through visual stimulation (watching the film footage) and kinesthetic awareness (attuning to internal responses felt from performance and from watching the film footage in edited form). This gave a clearer picture of what the visual does to movement in relation to choreographic ideas – what works and what doesn't – and highlights the images and transitions that create meaning. It is the act of shifting that creates interplay between kinesthetic and visual information imperative in making choreographic decisions in dancefilm.

Using the large movement phrases as the film's movement language, a storyboard was drafted assigning the frame as voyeur to the world-created, giving careful imaginative efforts to camera angles, movement, and composition as it was relevant to perpetuating the concept of the stage dance. However, the dance movement was never rehearsed for the camera prior to the filming day. On a pragmatic level, this was due mainly to the fact that I could not afford to pay for videographer services in any other way but in real time. Consequently, it became necessary to embody the rehearsal of those choices in the moment of performance rather than maintaining the dancefilm in imagined space. This became a way of actualization in the choreographic process. Much the same way the choreographer sees the dance unfolding in the studio, actualizing the rehearsal of movement for film in real time allowed a shift in the kinesthetic and visual experience of the dancefilm. The movement was brought out of the conceptual, performed for the camera, reviewed immediately and revised, if necessary. This became an integral part in connecting the conceptual to the embodied, resulting in choreographic decisions made in the moment.

Making kinesthetic connections became apparent in other ways during the filming process. In the middle of the filming process, we had a performance of the stage production. It is noteworthy to mention that because I had modified my performance choices to account for the medium of film just the day before, I had difficulty in referring back to my stage performances choices. For the "suitcase slamming" segment, I had watched the footage in the film production and noted that my head moved violently up and down within the frame. Because of the frame's close proximity, it gave the feel of an unreal emotional moment. In contrast, while spacing and lighting the stage version the very next day, I was advised to create in my body a more authentic moment of anger and violence while slamming the suitcase in order to fill the space beyond the stage. I had retained the previous day's kinesthetic experience of the dance moment however irrelevant to the stage version of the dance. In addition to how designed movement is

performed, the choreographic narrative is shaped by the camera-in-action through perceptual input. We can separate this input for analysis by examining some elements of camera-in-action specific to this project.

Important in shaping the film's choreographic narrative, four elements of the camera-in-action change the way the body in movement is viewed and interpreted: the frame, angles and proximity, camera movement, and editing rhythms. Within the camera frame, what is viewed is just as important as what is not viewed. Whether it is portions of the body that are implied and left to the viewer's imagination to assume through the action depicted, as in close-ups, or how the body is manipulated to communicate emotional information such as highlighting details or disembodying the dancer, the edge of the frame becomes a partner to the movement. Angles and proximity also play an important role in writing the choreographic narrative. For example, one shot was designed with a semi-Bird's Eye View angle to emphasize the dancer's action of reaching upward. However, the downward angle felt condescending and actually shortened the dancer's action of reaching up as well as disrupting the world-created in the dancefilm by letting in too much of real world through the windows behind. Camera movement became an important part in the making of *She Drew a Picture of a Whale*. The majority of the film was shot with little or no camera movement with the intent to assign the role of voyeur to the camera. Even though the angle and proximity of the camera change throughout the film, actual camera movement was kept to a minimum. This caused an accounting for the camera's role by assigning importance to the only pan in the film. Finally, considering and accounting for editing rhythms was central in shaping the film's narrative. It became significant that the visual information from cutting was designed in such a way as to make visual connections between images. This includes organization and type of editing cut which communicates links between ideas or images that create meaning, cultivate a response in the viewer, and shape the pace and dynamic drive of the overall film. This means that

the camera-in-action begs to be addressed for it is integral in bringing the viewer to the dance.

In the film editing process, I worked with cutting on the action, creating rhythm from static images, and the manipulation of time & space to tell the story. It was the interplay between the body in designed motion and the camera-in-action that created a myriad of interpretive possibilities through the manipulation of these two considerations. How a film is edited suggests viewer perception, whether the concept has a narrow or broad scope for interpretation. Therefore, the kind of editing cut, the organization of images, the movement of the body through the frame from one cut to another, and the proximity of the body to the dancer all create event, physical, and emotional rhythms that will be perceived by the viewer (Pearlman 2005/2006). The process of editing creates kinesthetic and visual information for the editor to then work into a filmic rhythm. Experiencing this kinesthetic and visual information became crucial in the decision-making process when crafting the dancefilm. Often times, choices were made based on experiencing the rise and fall of the energy perceived on the screen and attuning to internal impulses to guide footage duration, order, and dynamic. Karen Pearlman speaks of this phenomenon of feeling the editing within one's own body by stating, "all of us bring our own body rhythms to the edit suite and feel the rhythm of the film through the filter of our own" (8/5, p. 10). Attuning to my own internal rhythm working in tandem with the movement rhythms within the film images gave me the ability to pick and choose from a palette of editing choices.

Some editing choices, conceived in the storyboard phase, worked while the same device used elsewhere in the film did not. For example, making a film cut from one clip to another in the middle of an action can make an interpretive connection between events or characters. In *She Drew a Picture of a Whale*, this device worked when one dancer threw a dress out of the frame and the other dancer pulled the dress into the frame and began to fold it. On the contrary, this device did not work in an earlier

version of the film, when introducing the second dancer. It is interesting to note that the stage version of the dance had no problem associating the two dancers because they appeared on stage simultaneously for the duration of the dance. It was more difficult to address this relationship in the film largely due to the fact that the dancers weren't depicted in the frame at the same time. Therefore, it became necessary to equally contextualize each dancer to make the relationship clear.   How the dancers were depicted in relevance to the film concept became the drive behind the choreographic choices. As the editing was refined, the narrative then began to represent aspects of the body dancing in a way that asked more of the viewer than to simply watch.

The body's representation onto film shapes the choreographic process by assigning sense making authority. In short, if it's shown, it's assumed to be important. Film has the ability to manipulate what is depicted and present it with an altered interpretation through designed movement of the body, camera movement, and filmic rhythms. In speaking of still photography, Matthew Reason states that "the still photograph transforms its subject, and for the viewer the aesthetic interest of the image is between that transformation and our perception of the subject in the world" (p. 50). Editing in this medium has the ability to shift one's perspective when making choreographic decisions.

Choreography of body + choreography of camera + choreography of editing = multiple perspectives.

The project involved the development of a process consisting of using my imagination to conceptualize, engaging performance and editing techniques as means of embodiment, and attuning to meaningful connections and attending to those transitions. By examining the choreographic experience in this project, the following patterns emerged:

- All aspects of the process needed to happen in order to perpetuate the development of the dancefilm.

- The process is nonlinear, meaning one can jump from one aspect to another in no particular order.

- All aspects need to be accountable to body, frame, and editing or filmic rhythms.

The result of this way of working has been a film product with a similar concept as its sister stage version; however, the actual shape and rhythm of the film is vastly different. Even though the stage production and the dancefilm centralize around body image as a concept, these are two very different dances. In a feedback session after an adjudicated concert featuring the stage production, one juror indicated that the dance suggested a filmic quality that allowed him to think of the dance from multiple perspectives in a provocative way. The filmic quality mentioned indicates that this particular stage piece lent itself to re-conceptualization as a dancefilm; however, it can be a more difficult task with another dance work. Movement simply captured by the film camera is only a semblance of the dance.   The dance is then altered for interpretation by the technology. It then becomes important to consider how a dance is represented on film.

Johannes Birringer notes a similar shift in dance perspective regarding dance and technology:

> Making dances for the camera has become not only a cinematographic alternative to theatre-dance, but has motivated choreographers to reconceive the aesthetics of dance for the theatre, the impact of which is evident in the cinematic quality of many contemporary dance works. Video has thus effected a transition in two directions, opening up a new screen space for movement images,…as well as bringing new modes of digital image processing and nonlinear editing to the practice of composition and scenography onstage. (p. 362)

In some ways, the dancefilm can narrow the range of interpretations the viewer could have in the dance. Interpretive possibilities can be focused and the viewer forcefully led through a series of connected images. But, in other ways, it broadens the perspective of dance in a mediated space. What was once a fleeting moment can be interpreted in a myriad of ways and sent out into the world for experience by those who would not otherwise have access. It is evident in Birringer's observations that the film medium influences stage dance and visa versa, making dance no longer purely ephemeral. I do not believe that the dance has to be mystically here one minute and mythically gone the next. Technology allows the viewer to, not capture, but instead remember a remnant of the experience, feeling, rhythm, or weight of the dance. Therefore, the way you film the dance becomes increasingly important to how the dance is seen and felt in the future.

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