

University of Theatre and Film Arts Budapest

# On Choreographic Moving Images

Point Taken (Netherlands), DV8 and David Hinton  
(Great Britain), En-Knap and Iztok Kovač  
(Slovenia), Ultima Vez and Wim Vandekeybus  
(Belgium), Eric Pauwels (Belgium) and Thierry De  
Mey (Belgium) dance film workshops.

Analytical experiments

## DOCTORAL DISSERTATION THESES

of

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1.

As the research field of my dissertation I discuss (using my self-created terminology) the Choreographic Moving Image.

2.

We can take many different approaches to choreographic moving images.

As part of the film canon, they can be considered as genre films.

As another approach, it can be said that the film's storyline is also the storyline of the dance film ('*dance film*', '*cine-dance*', '*film dance*', '*video dance*', '*camera dance*', '*screen dance*', '*dance on screen*'... etc.). (Erin Brannigan)

It can be approached as an 'affinity' or 'characteristic'; this can also be observed as part of the commercial and artistic fields of motion pictures as seen from advertisements through video games to the experimental film, or the dance theatre using the medium of film as part of the performance.

We can adopt and appropriate phrases or create autonomous terms which expressly specify the choreography that was formed specifically for the characteristics of the moving image, or was modified for the characteristics of the moving image, or was created by the characteristics of the moving image. ('*Moving-Picture Dance*' – Noël Carroll, '*screendance*' – Douglas Rosenberg)

3.

Instead of explicit interpretations of possible or most appropriate definitions, I will discuss the choreography of moving images. To simplify I choose certain moving images that are self-identified as dance films ('*dance film*', '*cine-dance*', '*film dance*', '*video dance*', '*camera dance*', '*screen dance*', '*dance on screen*'... etc.). I will examine the modalities and levels of the moving image which the spectator implicitly observes as a type of choreography.

I will describe these phenomena in as much detail as possible.

4.

The main arc of thought of my thesis leads the reader from the rule-following, even defensive creative attitude, through the examination of the experimenter to a risk taking, interrogatory, border crossing attitude between the field of dance and film, to finally arrive at the act of autonomous (dance) filmmaking.

This arc is a model, of course.

The result of my decade long research was constructed by having thoroughly studied numerous dance films.

I organized the dissertation into four chapters in order to help the reader gain gradual familiarity with certain elements that constitute the Choreographic Moving Image, and to show my personal attitude as a creative artist and as a researcher towards this field of inquiry.

## 5.

Thus Chapter One describes the majority of Dutch dance films; its creators do not believe in the *raison d'être* of representing dancing or moving bodies without dialogues and storytelling.

In these artworks the *persona* dances only when he or she can perform dance in an everyday reality as a civilian.

The space of the moving image either works as a theatrical (back)stage, in which the performer declares that he or she plays a role, or the dance and non-dance (prosaic) scenes split up into separate layers of reality of cinematic fiction, where dance becomes dream, the 'other world' of 'higher spiritual dimensions' of tales and the world of fantasy.

The Dutch model does not emotionally move its viewers, but rather satisfies them. And that on the highest professional level.

I observe this phenomenon through the most significant Dutch dance film project, the Cinedans – Dance on Screen Festival (established in 2002), and through Point Taken, a project that supports dance film production (established in 2010).

I classify the moving images of my research into three basic groups:

- 1) dance films produced for a larger audience,
- 2) the new pantomime,
- 3) works of multimedia arts.

I also take note of a fourth group, a more peripheral creative direction that includes (more) experimental and (highly) irregular attempts.

In the First group specific short movies, sometimes creative documentaries are enrolled, in which, for various reasons, the actor or performer dances – *exceptionally*. The choreography is not an essential part of the language of the (moving) image. The choreography is not organic. The creators do not experiment with the form of choreography, but rather, cautiously 'bypass' it.

As part of the Second group I list short movies that have a conventional narrative presented nonverbally or with certain silent movie gags – with *pantomime*. In these films a choreographic layer is added – as dream, memory, fantasy, or a painting that comes alive, etc.

The Third group holds certain artworks that were created by the intersection of film and fine arts, and possibly, but not necessarily, dance. These are moving image installations that experiment with the relationship of body, space and time.

They experiment with the space of theatre not of film. And with time, that is anything but linear.

## 6.

Chapter Two analyses British television production that took systematic steps from the 1990s onward to help choreographers, dancers and filmmakers to jointly think of and experiment with producing art where the choreographed body could appear without dialogue.

Through the joint experiment the dancers got closer to the moving image, while the filmmakers could more fully embrace the characteristics of dance.

I examine the British dance film traditions with the help of *Dance on Screen. Genres and Media from Hollywood to Experimental Art*, a book written by Sherril Dodds.

I discuss in detail the creative concept of choreographer Victoria Marks and director Margaret Williams, and another director: David Hinton.

As I examine the work of David Hinton, I discuss the DV8 Physical Theatre dance company and the dance films by the members of the company – led by choreographer Lloyd Newson.

Marks and Williams conducted experiments in television workshops and created the ‘*choreo-portraiture*’. The phrase was created by Marks, she uses it when describing her own work. The performers of the ‘*choreo-portraiture*’ are civilians, not professional dancers.

Marks creates very simple but expressive movements that are shaped accurately to the physical and mental habitude of every person and the situation of the performance so that they can perform them easily, naturally – and if all goes well, authentically in front of the camera.

Marks introduces another term: ‘*action conversation*’. In her work, she describes it as physical encounters that could never happen in realistic circumstances. Behind the abstract concept, there is a virtual community containing ‘mothers’, ‘daughters’, ‘men’ and ‘veterans’, who become a united community by performing similar movements. The unique characteristics of each member can be observed when the similar movements are performed in different ways.

David Hinton selected his figures out of the most radically experimental performance artists of the 1990s. Supporting Hinton’s creative process they were able to improvise and create their own

movements in front of the camera – as seen in the film of choreographer Wendy Houston, entitled: *Touched*. They were equally capable of performing a final choreography made for the theatre stage to be captured on film; such are the ‘re–interpreted’ works of choreographer Lloyd Newson.

The movie *Touched* was shot on real location, in an English pub, while the DV8-adaptations were captured in a studio with built scenery. My argument is that the construction of the space in the films of Hinton, is between theatre and moving image – it is compressed and abstracted. With light and small objects, he created spaces that are able to awake associations in the viewer.

Seemingly the moving bodies were captured impartially. Yet, if we analyse the compositions deeper, we are able to discover many sensitive affiliations with the choreography in the camera movements and the rhythm of the editing.

## 7.

Chapter Three explores the influence of contemporary dance as the foundational element of Slovenian video-art of the 1990’s.

These two art movements worked together in a constantly active environment engaged in a dynamic dialogue. As a result, a series of risk taking and low-budget moving images were created.

In these moving images, the choreographed body appears exclusive and as a prerogative.

The Slovenian contemporary dance separated itself from the traditions of the theatrical stage and of ballet, while the Slovenian experimental video-art parted from the traditions of narrative fiction. This is how they participated in their joint work.

I focus on the Slovenian dance film traditions through the works of the En-Knap dance company led by choreographer Iztok Kovač.

Each of Kovac’s moving images takes place in his homeland, in a Post-Yugoslavian industry-bitten countryside, where nature took back the urban environment – enstilled between present and past.

The performers of Kovac’s moving images enforce movements that approach the ritualistic. The choreography and the moving images work with permanent symbolism and concepts, such as the ‘*interruption of the present*’ – a term that can be comparable with the phrase ‘*still act*’, which originates from anthropologist Nadia C. Seremetakis, or the different medial positions, such as the ‘*art of walking*’ or the ‘*participant optics*’.

The ‘*art of walking*’ means that we interpret the pedestrian movement of the performer (someone who is not a dancer) as choreography, where walking itself is understood as a form of art.

‘*Participant optics*’ is a similar technical interpretation of the moving image: it places in context the non-dancing movements of the camera lens.

Kovač's main creative stance is his self-awareness of being a marginalized identity. It evokes the phrase '*lateness*' by K. Homi Bhabha.

Through various movements the performers are keen to enter into the space of the past by breaking away from the present.

## **8.**

Chapter Four demonstrates and explores the degree to which all the noteworthy Belgian contemporary dance workshops experimented with the possibilities of moving images right from the start.

All of these works interpret the receptivity of the viewer as evidently capable of reading the choreographed body.

These experiments vary widely and the creators use the artistic instruments without distinction; the different modalities of experimentation depend on the habits, approaches and possibilities of the artists and on the concept of the particular project: from using a hand-held camera or shooting in a dance studio, to super-productions shot on extreme locations with huge technical sets, from the 16mm or Super8 footage of video technology to modern digital recordings – everything is utilized as a solution to express the artistic meanings.

Some approach dance film making as choreographers, some as anthropologists, and yet others as composers. I discuss the Belgian dance film traditions citing the works of three filmmakers: Eric Pauwels (1953– ), Wim Vandekeybus (1963– ) and Thierry De Mey (1956– ). Although they come from almost the same milieu, they take distinctively different roads.

Pauwels refers to his own work as '*half-films*'. These are mingled genre films, in which the camera records and describes from the point of view of the ethnographer, and at the same time, from the point of view of the creative artist, rewrites, edits, compresses and emphasizes certain aspects. These moving images were recorded in dance studios.

The lean concept of Pauwels is to use space roughly, in a naturalistic and practical way, and to focus on the moving body in it.

Vandekeybus experiments with the moving image as a choreographer and also as a director. Moving images appear in his theatre, while his theatrical choreography is featured on the footage he shoots. He does not create adaptations per se, his work entwines theatre and film. He freely mixes the spectacular, popular and commercial elements (using stunning imagery, fragmented 'music-video-like' narrative, and pop music) with completely raw, brave experimentation or precisely elaborated concepts (the choreography of 'necessary moves', stretching the physical limits of the body, utilising various film media and materials).

He forges a strong bond between text and language – using as inspiration literary works of Bowles, Cortázar, Euripides, Ovid, and Pavić; his performers speak and these dialogues are usually multilingual, where the speakers sometimes understand each other and sometimes do not.

The symbolism focuses on the eternal questions of humanity: life, death, old age, love, hate, struggle, jealousy, empathy.

In the works of Thierry De Mey we can see the choreography being extended from the dancers' body to the general image of the body of the musicians or 'civilians' (non-dancers) who appear in his films. He applies this to the other elements and layers of the moving image (such as space and light), and to every element of his film composition (location of optics, usage of the film plan, montage and sound). He also experiments with the juxtaposition of images (dual split picture, multi-channel moving images) to create a possible 'meta-choreography', one that reaches 'beyond' what's been captured on camera.

The key element of his moving images is the carefully researched and selected location that perfectly matches the character of the choreography.

In essence, he creates a direct sensual experience of the bodies that are placed in the chosen locality (a '*kinesthetic empathy*'). For this purpose he purposefully and inventively focuses on the position of the camera, and even more so, on the height of the camera. Instead of applying the 'eye level perspective', which is a line of sight that overlooks the moving body and thus intellectualizes and rationalizes the spectacle of dance, De Mey focuses on creating a 'torso perspective', a viewpoint that starts at the middle of the body.

## **9.**

I have been working with choreographic moving images as a theoretical specialist for approximately as long as I have been a filmmaker, and I have intentionally set apart my research of the past few years from my own filmmaking processes.

I thought it very important to remain objective towards my research material to ensure that the reader of my research could personally interpret information about it, and consequently be able to develop his or her own relationship with the genre.

Both I and my dissertation are a mere medium, a set of tools towards this development.

In my lectures and workshops, whether at home or abroad, I have always tried to show examples of artistic works that represent my thought processes, and I equally made sure to present radically different approaches as well, so as to indicate the diversity of concepts of the genre.

Soon after my doctoral exam, I received an invitation to give a lecture, and for the first time I used the insights gained from my research to talk about the concepts of ‘adaptation of choreography as moving images’, ‘cinematic improvisation’, ‘layers of moving image choreography’, ‘meta-choreography’ and ‘mental editing’ as they are represented in my own dance films.

While writing my doctoral dissertation (i.e. re-writing, editing, having had it critiqued, and having found its concise form), I believe, I have come to see something fundamental: not only is my dissertation a medium for the receiver, so are all of my dance films. Through my works readers and viewers can formulate their own relationship with this genre.

At the same time, my dissertation does not stay objective and neither do my films. My strong creative stance is undeniably visible in every aspect and instance of analysis and interpretation, and in my choices of certain details to emphasize and articulate. It is present in my thinking and description of the body, movements, narratives, images and of filming in general.

My dissertation text, like my films, is experimental. Each reflects my personal and subjective viewpoint as a creative artist of choreographic moving images.

Throughout my research process, by categorizing and organizing creative artists, workshops, creative works and various studies on the subject, I was able to implement and examine concepts and perspectives which had been implicitly present in my various works earlier; now, thanks to this in-depth study, they are explicit formulators of my current conceptual work.

Being able to take multiple perspectives allows me to locate and recognize myself and my work within the rather divergent context of international dance film production.