

Stemming from Cineworks's recent Dance Film Extravaganza, the following is a series of questions and notes regarding the formal and social intersections of film and dance. Contemporary dance-film in Canada is the focus.

Potentials

Dance-film is most powerful when it creates a presentation that utilizes both dance and film, if not the fullest then to the most relevant extent, for the task at hand. This most likely involves innovative combinations or cross-pollinations of the two mediums, allowing for a common understanding to emerge. In other words, how can movement be transmitted through the experience of film; or, how can the perspective of dance influence our understanding of film technique and effect? These are exciting questions since the potential inherent in a translation between mediums means new ways of challenging our perceptions of those mediums, and new ways of commenting on and expressing aspects of our world. The junctures where disciplines destabilize preconceived notions and carve pathways towards more fully realized artistic genres are fascinating because this involves the creation of works that exist in new spaces of inquiry, and presentations that do not erect barriers between our ideas of what film, dance and film-dances can be.

Translations

Dance-film seems to be a matter of translating content and methodology between mediums, ascertaining what is lost or gained in this process and adjusting to find a new, common language.

In some dance-films, one medium will come to the other knowing little about it, bringing undesirable, ill-informed assumptions to the table. This approach will underutilize the potentials of the collaboration or, to avoid being collaborative at all, become hierarchical. The question follows: how can the artistic process position techniques from different mediums to either allow for dominance of one over others or cohabitation between them? Should we use film to fix or hide undesirable movement or, conversely, should we use the strength of dance to capitalize on poor quality footage?

Allowing techniques to develop for effective collaboration between dance and film, and then strategically using these techniques, will result in fruitful collaborations. Dance filmmakers must be cognizant of the social relations involved in their enterprise; the communication of a set of collaborative and formal practices is needed. Rather than a top-down or strict set of formalized guidelines, this process should be linked to a wider dissemination of individual artistic findings, especially those happening at the ground level of artistic inquiry. At its best this evolution

would involve the exploration of lateral, non-hierarchical power structures, while at its worst, banal or objectifying projects would result.

Time

It can be said that film is and always will be a matter of speed and pacing. As such, it is sometimes assumed that this aspect of cinema dictates an approach to its construction akin to a foxtrot, a tango, a breakbeat—a preordained metre and rhythmic structure. Filmic structure by way of a dominant, musically recognizable rhythm is a powerful tool, but it can also be a crutch—it is only one option among many. Film can stand on its own without a musical track, becoming grandiose in a long, drawn-out tempo; Tarkovsky is a case in point.

Dance, too, can and should be thought of outside of metre, outside of choreography, outside of classical movement vocabularies. Sensory-based dances are valid filmic subject matter and can lend much to the screen, but they will not necessarily work with a click-track as such.

These considerations about cutting and time lead to questions about the senses, sensory translation and the options that have become dominant. Why is there a musical over-layer instead of bodily and environmental sounds? Why is there rhythm imposed on the body? Is it only that a particular style of dance lends itself to the screen or, a more sinister notion, that a particular dynamic of dance has emerged as the major player in the film medium?

Live performance keeps us on the edge of our seats because it is unpredictable: the dance unfolds and then it's over, never to be repeated the same way again. This live unfolding of events is something that dance has and film does not and it's something that intelligent dance-films must confront. Why, if this fleeting uniqueness is an integral part of dance, put a performance on film? [One could easily ask the same of music and recorded media.] It is truly tempting to defeat the time-aspect of dance and capture an ephemeral art through recording. However, to truly see the possibilities and limitations of dance-film, we must first ask ourselves why we would want to do such a thing. Secondly, we must investigate how particular dance-films address this question. In other words, how are time and rhythm addressed through editing to fully utilize the sensory and the ephemeral?

The Sensory Body

There are numerous instances where the consideration of dance on camera leads to questions of kinetics, distance, and the relationship between camera and body. Technically, it seems that these questions are best answered when not only the body, but also the camera, are choreographed, where the distance between the screen's surface and the dance is minimal.

In the film medium, where the body itself is foregrounded, body politics are key. Powerful dance-film images should aim to create texture and closeness—to focus

and portray what a dancer is sensing, to transcribe a presence and subjective point of view, not remove, code or flatten the senses. In addition to any cinematography and choreography based in shape and spatial relationships, these concerns must be taken into account.

We question the prevalence of gloss, cleanliness, and organized, mechanized movement as dance. Why is there so little sweat? Where is the visible effort, and why the presupposition of grace and detachment? Where is the sense of darkness, of disturbance? The lack of these seems to be tied to the supposed elevation of the dance-film genre. There is a natural overlap between dance and film in the use of shape and space. The predominance of space and shape creates objective and clean presentations. Structured improvisation, hand-held camera work, process-based projects, the use of real-time action, value systems that allow for a diversity of bodies, all are viable options for investigation that would result in a broader range of expression.

Rumours and Assumptions

Indeed, it seems that the definitions of dance-film are protectorates, set up in order to ensure a continuity of funding, earmarking positions of power for those involved in the game. If these boundaries do in fact exist, should they be destabilized? Does it function to have an aristocracy in this movement? Are “they” providing more opportunity for “everyone else” by way of programs, dissemination and teaching? Whatever one thinks, it is clear that the power structures of the film and dance industries have been largely replicated in the field of Canadian dance-film, for better or for worse.

Perhaps the rumour of declining funding for the genre has a silver lining—it could open up space for works to develop on the ground floor. There are innumerable emerging filmmakers and dance artists who could bring a sense of risk, disparate identity and experimentation into the field. It seems there is a common assumption that we need manifold more money to create a dance-film than a staged performance of equal length. Why are discussions of dance-film centred on the prohibitively expensive 35 mm format? Why are we dependent upon Bravo!FACT and the CBC for funding? Why are we defining this medium through the dictates of funding and broadcast agencies?

Dissemination

Why is it that dance-film has not had the level of impact on dance that the CD and music video have had on the music industry? Is it particularly a matter of scale? Is it because the audience for dance-film is ad-hoc, small and disparate, without dedicated channels of distribution? With these questions in mind, should dance-film be used exclusively as a tool for documentation and dissemination? Or is this a panacea? Is it enough to record a performance for repeat viewing or should we be more concerned with the creation of new languages? How have film and music navigated their collaborative ventures and what has dance to learn from them?

It is interesting to look at the genealogy of funding in these areas: Bravo!FACT, a primary funding body for many above-ground dance-films produced in Canada, is a sister organization to VideoFACT and PromoFACT, programs centered on the independent music industry, and all are descended from FACTOR, the main granting body to assist recorded music. It would seem that the initiative to fund dance-film in Canada was a strategic decision aimed at helping it succeed in the international marketplace, a method of leveraging cultural power.

But how in fact do we measure the impact of something like dance-film on the field of dance, film or, better yet, the public? Can we assess how much dance-film is being made only because the funding is available, because it serves as a chance for dissemination? We in no way mean to posit a limitation of creative avenues, or to say that only artists who are purely and resolutely interested in dance on camera can explore this medium, but there seems to be much testing of the water and not enough immersion. It seems like dissemination is merely an ulterior motive of dance filmmaking and not the exploration of the art per se.

Conclusion

The paramount issue here is the need for further discussion about the possibilities at hand: the diversity of music on dance's rhythmical—or non-rhythmical—structures, an appreciation of the sensory body, an awareness of the subjectivity of dance, a social-political awareness [as with any other art form], and collaborative practices that could result in more fully realized artistic visions. We hope this dialogue will be ongoing, serving to shed more light on the field, to aggregate conversation, conflict and context.

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“Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*).

the memelab

Currently based out of Vancouver, BC, the memelab is an artistic collaboration between Mirae Rosner, Jesse Scott, and the peoplings and groupings that they encounter along their way. Together, they traverse the micro-politics between movement, media, noise, performance, and theory. the memelab is an ongoing process: becoming-animal, becoming-nomad, becoming-sorcerer.

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