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A brief history of the dancer/camera relationship

(Accepted manuscript)

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the relationship between the dancer and the camera. It identifies a divide that commonly exists between the performing dancer and the camera operator/director in screendance-making and suggests that this divide is narrower in production works where links to the dance community exist on both sides of the lens and where production environments do not involve large teams behind the camera. This divide is examined in a historical context and changes in the dancer/camera relationship are charted with examples from the advent of film, such as Thomas Edison's Black Maria Studio productions through the choreography of Busby Berkeley in the 1930s, Maya Deren's screen dance experiments in the 1950s, Merce Cunningham in the 1970s and concluding in the present day with works by practitioners such as Katrina McPherson and Margaret Williams. Drawing on the testaments of historical observers, contemporary theorists and first-hand accounts by dancers such as Alice Barker, Gene Kelly and Cathy Nicoli, the research undertaken here suggests that the dancer/camera/director divide still persists, even in the more closely aligned groups working in smaller production environments today. However, the article identifies a number of film-makers who, with the advent of new technologies, have developed an alternative approach to filming dance that challenges those structural and hierarchical divisions.

KEYWORDS

SCREENDANCE, DANCER/CAMERA RELATIONSHIP, DANCE FILM, DANCE FILM HISTORY.

With the advancement of chemical technology's ability to fix a reaction to light, the first motion pictures were screened in 1895 on March 22 at 44 Rue de Rennes in Paris to an invited audience. The film the citizens came to see was Auguste and Louis Lumière's *Arrival of a Train at the Station* (1885). Marked by this event the cinema screen brought an alternative site for performance, hitherto the dominion of the stage, and a shift took place, from a performer's perspective, from a performer/audience relationship to a performer/camera relationship. This article examines the development of this relationship through the perspective of screendance. It draws on examples other than dance to discuss performer/camera relationships but my study is essentially devoted to the evolution of the dancer/camera relationship from the earliest screendance to the present day.

I use the term 'Screendance' here to define work arising from the intersection of dance and film/video, although a number of other nomenclatures have been in general use, for example; Dance on Camera, Video Dance, Dance for Camera, Dancefilm, Cinedance, Dance on Film, and Moving Picture Dance. While these are all terms that are used to describe collaborative acts between dance and film-making, each term has a slightly different emphasis. The designation 'screendance' has recently gained currency in academic circles through the publication of *The International Journal of Screendance* and

I adopt it to define a broad range of work from the avant-garde to mainstream commercial cinema.

The compatibility of dance and film, each sharing the concerns of the design of movement in time and space was obvious to early film-makers and dance quickly became one of the prime candidates for filming. Screendance director David Hinton observes how:

On a very fundamental level, making a film and making a dance are a very similar kind of activity; they're both about giving structure to action. If you think of film as just a formal language, and you forget about the acting and the talking you can look at any film as a dance film. All films take images of action and try to put these images together in a rhythmic and expressive way. In this sense film and dance work along the same lines. (Hinton 2006)

Hinton's statement might be particularly applicable to early films where there was no talking, or diegetic sound. Shot with static cameras, physical action in these films was the primary communicator of meaning and viewers experienced narrative through the choreography of the body. Early films, commonly shot in a single-take, gave structure to action by creating a beginning, middle and an end, and composed a viewing frame that ascribed spatial relationships to the body. This early relationship between dance and the camera can be witnessed in the flickering images of *Annabelle's Serpentine Dance*, filmed in Thomas Edison's Black Maria Studio, directed by William Dickson and William Heise (who was also producer and camera operator) and distributed by the

Edison Manufacturing Company in 1894. More than one version of the film was made, but the first 45 second long version consists of a skirt dance performed by Annabelle Moore in the style of the then popular dancer Loïe Fuller.¹ The film is shot in a single take by a static camera placed in front of the dancer, replicating a theatre audience experience in terms of physical position and of a real time continuous dancing event, unbroken by editing. In the last moment of the film, as Moore travels sideways across the stage, she appears to look at the camera operator, perhaps acknowledging the camera's presence and thus, in the viewing experience, ourselves. Whether Moore was simply making eye contact in the direction of the camera, as she might with a live audience, or whether she was aware of the future audiences via the camera lens, who even now continue to watch the *Serpentine Dance*, is not possible to know, but the moment demonstrates her awareness of the camera's presence.

The *Serpentine Dance* highlights the then new performance site of the screen, where the performer/audience relationship radically changed from that of an exchange within the same time and space, as in a live theatre, to one that lay separated by time and space. Performer and audience were connected by a transitional realm unseen and uncontrolled by either in which that which moved for the camera could be re-organised and then re-presented over and over again at multiple sites. The performer could only imagine their connection to an audience, somewhere in the future beyond the eye of the camera.

¹Skirt dances were a popular form of stage entertainment in Europe and America in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Originating in London, the dances involved the swirling and spinning of skirts made from many meters of fabric. Coloured theatre lights, an idea developed by skirt dancer Loïe Fuller, often lighted the dances. The development of the dance form is credited to Kate Vaughan.

Films like *Annabelle's Serpentine Dance* emerged into a visual entertainment world where audiences were eager for magic and illusion.² Whereas today's film audiences are familiar with on-going technological advances, and indeed may expect them to supersede the last viewing experience, sequel by sequel, the advent of cinema at the turn of the century must have seemed a big leap forward from the magic lantern shows that preceded it.³ Tom Gunning, reflecting on a screening at the Grand Café in Paris, of the Lumière brothers' *Arrival of a Train at the Station* in 1895, suggests that although it would seem unlikely that the spectators

reared back in their seats, or screamed, or got up and ran from the auditorium' he posits that 'there is no question that a reaction of astonishment, or even a type of terror accompanied many early projections. [It is a] well-attested fact that [they] caused shock and astonishment, an excitement pushed to the point of terror.

(Gunning 1994: 114)

² The Industrial Revolution of nineteenth century Britain brought with it an expansion of city population. Theatre entertainment was popular and a number of new theatres were built, while others like Covent Garden and Drury Lane were extended. Venues catered for a wide range of classes hosting everything from lectures to minstrel shows. Ingenious means were used to devise shows that responded to the Victorian fascination with the incredible and the supernatural. These included acts like the Indian rope trick and the escapology of Harry Houdini (1874 -1926) whilst developments in hydraulics and electric light enabled spectacular on-stage displays simulating moving trains and burning paddle steamers.

³ Magic Lantern shows may be seen as one of the precursors to motion pictures. A light source, concentrated by being reflecting off a concave mirror, was directed through a glass slide with an image printed or painted on it, resulting in a projection of the image onto a screen. Innovations in the latter part of the twentieth century introduced two glass plates placed together with one moving against the other to create an animated image on screen.

The shift from the live stage performance in the theatre auditorium environment to that of its mediated re-presentation on a cinema screen demanded a fundamental realignment for audiences and performers alike. The Dramatist and novelist Luigi Pirandello, writing in 1916, expressed disquiet concerning the impact of the camera on the performer making the transition from stage to screen via devices that allowed others to manipulate and ‘replay’ that which had been hitherto theirs by sole ownership.

The screen actor [...] feels as if exiled. Exiled not only from the stage but from his own person. With dim disquiet he senses the inexplicable emptiness that results from his body becoming a withdrawn symptom, from its dissipating and being robbed of its reality, its life, its voice, and the sounds it makes by moving around, reduced to a mute image that flickers on a screen for an instant, then disappears into thin air. (Pirandello 2009: 242)

Pirandello implies, in dramatic terms, that performers perceived the camera to be a threat to the integrity of stage performers. Pirandello nevertheless makes a point that may be considered no different now than it was then, that of a separation between performer and audience being a result of the process of film-making. Since the 1980s, a number of screendance makers have invested in the development of a practice that narrows the divide that Pirandello talks about and this will be discussed later in this article.

Dickson and Heise were among a number of early film-makers who embraced dance as a subject matter for their work. Initially the new medium was principally used to document existing dances. Films survive of performances by the ballerinas Anna Pavlova and Vera

Karalli who embodied Fokine's *Dying Swan* in 1907 and 1914 respectively, and a number of works survive that depict the dance crazes of the 1920s when dances like the Charleston and The Black Bottom were popular in Europe and the USA. These films were generally shot from a 'front on' perspective and were shot wide enough to include all of the dancing body, head to toe. As such, those films that survive provide good documentation of the dance forms. Other early film-makers using dance as subject also drew on the associated choreographic principles of rhythm, repetition and movement in the construction of their films. George Méliès (1861-1938) made highly choreographic films, reflecting Hinton's observation that 'films take images of action and try to put these images together in a rhythmic and expressive way' (Hinton, 2006) and Méliès regularly used dancers to perform in his 'Fantasy Films'. Both can be clearly seen in his 1903 film *Le Cake Walk Infernal* in which the entire narrative is danced. Filmed from a single viewpoint, the dancing is in the style of music hall entertainment, complete with a high stepping chorus line and comical dancing demon figures.

Two decades after the first known public exhibition of projected films with diegetic sound, which took place at the Paris Exposition in 1900, the movie industry moved into the era of the 'talkies' (Altman 2004: 158). The first noteworthy commercial feature length film presenting synchronised sound was Warner's 1928 release *The Jazz Singer*. Up until this point, movement was the main commonality between cinema and live theatre with 'speech' for film largely limited to written text intertitled onto the screen after the actor's lips had finished moving, and, less frequently, the presence of text within

the diegesis, as in Murnau's *Faust* 1926.⁴ The advent of the talkies was perhaps less of an advantage to the speechless nature of dancing than it was for acting. Music that may have been played live to accompany dancing could now become embedded as a soundtrack but for actors a greater part of their performing presence, their voices, would now reach their audience.

Murmurings of disquiet about the separation between performer and audience persisted however, and Walter Benjamin, commenting on this emerging era of cinema in his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', makes the same point as Pirandello concerning the performer's relationship with an audience. He asserts that in spite of diegetic sound, this relationship is altered in its transference from the stage to the screen. Although taking a more measured line than Pirandello, he highlights what he also perceives to be a negative aspect of mediating the performer. 'The screen actor' he writes, 'by not presenting his performance to the audience in person, is deprived of the possibility open to the stage actor of adapting that performance to the audience as the show goes on' (Benjamin 2009: 244). Benjamin suggests that an actor, when performing for the camera, is constantly aware of an alienation from their audience. He reasons that this awareness

⁴ Early films such as Murnau's *Faust* (1926) went to great lengths to find creative ways of adding text to their films, such as including, in the composition of the frame, signs and labels that appeared incidental but were deliberately placed to support and enhance meaning and narrative.

never leaves the screen actor, not for a moment. The screen actor is conscious, all the while he is before the camera, that in the final analysis he is dealing with the audience: the audience of consumers who constitute the market. That market, which he is entering not merely with his labour, but with his very presence, his whole physical being, is quite as intangible, so far as he is concerned at the time of the performance dedicated to it, as in any article produced in a factory. (2009: 244)

Clearly, the relationship between the camera and the performer got off to an exciting, but at times uneasy, start. Both Pirandello and Benjamin's observations, couched in negative terms, reference the distance between performer and audience and the uncertainty, for the performer, of just who that audience is. Then as now, the future audience can only exist as an abstract concept, however, if the destination of the film is a specific and perhaps limited one, and the performer knows the details of that destination, then that audience may become, at least to some degree, tangible. Beyond that, the audience of the future is intangible. More immediate as audience is the camera operator, and any others present during the actual dancing/filming. This relationship itself is, and will have always been, widely variable, depending on the nature of the event. The performer's relationship with the single camera operator and director will be different from a relationship with an extensive film crew on set. Though the former relationship may hold the possibilities of a more personal and collaborative exchange, issues concerning the impact of camera presence remains, as I will expand on shortly, even in a more intimate production environment.

The Hollywood film industry was quick to incorporate dance into its generic repertoire, and by the 1930s it was at the core of many full-length feature films. Styles broadly reflected those associated with stage musicals in which action moved seamlessly between dancing, singing, and acting to create a world where all three had equal value. The single-take of the *Serpentine Dance* was by now replaced by sophisticated camera use and editing. An example of this is the work of director and choreographer Busby Berkeley, whose Hollywood film-making career spanned 43 years (1933-1976). Berkeley constructed shots that could never be seen from a conventional audience perspective. Shots included his signature camera angle of the ‘top shot’, a bird’s eye view looking down onto the dancers from above, and shots from highly mobile cameras. This is demonstrated in the song sequence *I Only Have Eyes for You* in the 1937 Warner Bros musical comedy *Dames* directed by Ray Enright. Here the camera travels in amongst the dancers, then pulls out and up looking down from above them, and then returns down to a place partly behind the set from where the dancers are viewed as if from a hidden position, all in a single take.

In his films, Berkeley commonly mobilised dozens of female dancers who frequently make eye contact with the camera. This eye-to-eye interaction in his films has a similar feel to the way performers in a musical stage show might connect with audiences, delivering their performances downstage, facing and gesturing out to the audience, just as Moore appears to do in *The Serpentine Dance*. Although the content of many of Berkeley’s films has the hallmark of the stage musical (e.g. *Gold Diggers*, 1935) they

have scenes that cut from one unconventional perspective to another, and while still working in the musical genre, this aspect of his work represented a major shift in the way dance was seen on screen. The camera increasingly became a participant in the dance and, in a sense, was liberated from the mimicry of a static audience viewpoint framed by the proscenium arch.

In their well-drilled performances, Berkeley's un-credited professional dancers give nothing away concerning their feelings of being filmed. Their cheeky winks to the camera and their unwavering smiles present an outward appearance that suggests an untroubled confidence and an intimate awareness of their audience's presence. If Berkeley's dancers felt 'the sense of unease' that Pirandello suggests must be present when 'facing a film camera', their professionalism hid it well. Berkeley's contemporary, dancer and director Gene Kelly, indicated that the dancer/camera relationship remained, for him at least, one that still estranged the audience:

You're with the audience in the theatre. You look at them and you can embrace them and they can embrace you, so to speak, or you can hate each other. But you get no direct response from the screen. It is so remote from the empathy of live theatre. (Kelly quoted in Genne 2003: 75)

Kelly started his performance career on the Broadway stage and then made the transition to film. As both performer and later film director, he was familiar with the film-making environment from both sides of the camera, and yet from this statement one can perceive

a sense of dissatisfaction with the camera as a substitute for a live audience. Kelly, whose screen debut Berkeley co-directed (*For Me and My Gal*, 1942), was one of a number of dancers who appeared in the proliferation of film musicals over the 1940s and 1950s in the USA. Kelly was unusual in that he took a directorial role in some of his own films, notably *Singing in the Rain* (1952), which he co-directed with Stanley Donen, and was equally familiar with dancing on stage, dancing for camera, and directing. The same was true of Fred Astaire who both directed and performed in his films, but for the majority of performers, many of whom were skilled dancers who attained high status in popular entertainment, artistic contribution ended when the cameras ceased to roll. The separation between the performers on one side of the lens and the directors and their teams on the other mirrors the isolation that Kelly's statement implies.

Among these dancers was Alice Barker. Born in 1912, Barker danced in films with Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson, Gene Kelly, and Frank Sinatra. In an interview, at the age of 102, Barker expressed how much she had loved her work: 'I used to often say to myself I am being paid to do something that I enjoy doing, and I would do it for free'. (Barker, 2015). She also said how the film-makers misspelt her name 'all of the time. They'd leave out the middle R' (ibid). During the interview Barker watched herself on film for the first time. This may seem unusual, but at the time when Barker was dancing for the camera, dancers did not always see the films that they performed in. Barker's reminiscences suggest a sense of distance between herself as a dancer and the directors and their teams engaged in post-production, as well as between herself and the final audience in the cinema.

Alongside the developments in Hollywood, a number of avant-garde artists who embraced film-making experimented with dance. In 1928, Sergei Diaghilev projected a background of clouds, stars, and an unfolding flower created by time-lapse photography behind the performers in his production of Leonide Massine's ballet *Ode*. In 1945 artist, poet and film-maker Maya Deren directed *A Study in Choreography for the Camera*, a work that she described as: 'a dance so related to camera and cutting that it cannot be performed as a unit anywhere but in this particular film' (Deren [1965] 1991: 41).

Although this work is her only film made with a dancer, a strongly choreographic quality is evident in her other films. For example *Meshes of The Afternoon* (1943) and *At Land* (1944) both use movement of the body, often as close-ups of parts of the body and through moving shadows, as the primary language to convey emotion and narrative.

Deren has been considered the founder of the avant-garde film movement (Greenfield 2003: 21) and *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* represents a significant milestone in the history of screendance. Like Berkeley, Deren strove to emancipate the camera from the theatrical tradition of an audience perspective (Deren [1945] 2005: 221) but she also aspired to create a mutual understanding between the film-maker and the choreographer/dancer. In *A Study in Choreography for the Camera*, Deren considered that relationship to be a *pas de deux*, noting that 'these choreographies for camera are not dances recorded by the camera, they are dances choreographed for and performed by the camera and by human beings together.' (251). Deren reiterates that *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* was as a film that she and dancer Talley Beatty made 'together' (221). Some of Beatty's choreography is filmed in different locations and then manipulated in post-production to make it appear, through a linking movement, as if he is

transported from one place to another by means of, for example, a single jump. At another point, Beatty turns continually, spotting a point left of camera on each three hundred and sixty degree rotation. Deren, hand cranking the camera, reduced the frame rate as he spun round resulting in Beatty appearing, on screen, to speed up. Deren and Beatty in this sense co-choreographed the dance, exploiting the possibilities of the filmic process and creating dance that goes beyond the physical limitations of the dancer's body.

Though Deren's camerawork might be considered as experimental as Berkeley's, her close dancer/camera relationship could be regarded as the opposite to his working process. Deren and Berkeley both used the camera as a participant in the choreographic event that was being filmed, and both filmed with a single camera, however, as I have indicated, Deren, in her comparatively small-scale work, considered her performer as a partner in the creative process. Berkeley employed so many dancers in his works that this relationship would have been impossible. His dancers were skilful performers, as can be seen from the competent accomplishment of the elaborate tasks performed in his choreography, but ultimately the dancers were each a mechanical function of Berkeley's kaleidoscopic patterns. Elizabeth Zimmer observes that Berkeley saw and portrayed his dancers in a conventional manner for the period, 'at ironing boards or vanity tables, in beds and bathtubs' (2003: 69). She goes on to suggest that Berkeley felt that there was 'safety, apparently, in numbers; whereas a single woman might be perceived as a threat or need to be acknowledged as a person, dozens of women could be shaped into brilliant abstract patterns' (ibid).

By the 1930s a number of industrial film-makers emerged in Britain whose work similarly employed the principles of movement created by machines, people and by the camera itself. Straddling the genres of documentary, corporate, and experimental film-making, the General Post Office, Railway companies, and Shell were noteworthy in this area. An example of this is *Night Mail* (1936). Made by the GPO film unit, *Night Mail* takes the journey of the London to Glasgow Royal Mail train as its narrative. The film is highly rhythmical, especially in its last section when W. H. Auden's poetry is read to the combined rhythms of the speeding train and Benjamin Britten's music as the train climbs a last long gradient of the track before arriving at Glasgow. The film cuts from one movement action to another, from the swinging movement of coal being shovelled into the train's firebox to the pumping pistons and connecting rods of the train wheels, from a dog running beside the train in one direction to the landscape rushing by in another. Like Fernand Leger's *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), *Night Mail* and other films like it take advantage of the organised movement associated with industry.⁵ In 1982 Rob Rogers directed *Ballet Robotique* for the BBC. The film features mechanical robots building cars at a General Motors plant set to Tchaikovsky's *Waltz of the Flowers*, a section of the *Nutcracker Suite* (1892). The graceful, articulate movement of the robotic limbs are choreographed through the edit to synchronise with the music and the relationship to ballet is further emphasised by the use of double and multiple screens that correlate to

⁵ Director Geoffrey Jones is noteworthy in this respect. From the 1950s to the 1970s Jones made films for Shell, BP, and British Transport. His films are all cut to music and use the organising principle of rhythm and movement trajectory in their construction.

duets and the individual dancers of the corps de ballet moving in unison. In addition, the four sections of the film are entitled Études, Pas de Deux, Divertissement and Finale.

In Europe, Hollywood productions like *The Band Wagon* (1953) and *Singing in the Rain* (1952) drew on a stage musical tradition, from which they were often adapted. These presented acting and dancing as equal storytelling currency. For example, when Fred Astaire walks through the park with Cyd Charisse in *The Band Wagon* (Vincente Minnelli, 1953) he suddenly does a double step and begins to dance, merging the pedestrian and dance movement seamlessly together, inviting the viewer to accept the transfer from the ‘normal’ movement world associated with the place and event, to the magical one of dancing. *The Red Shoes*, co-directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, was more in keeping with the later Hollywood films of the 1970s and 1980s when there was a shift away from these musical traditions. In these films characters danced as a means of developing the plot, because it was something that they did as part of their daily lives. *The Red Shoes* is the story of a ballerina (Moira Shearer) who is a professional dancer and the dancing scenes depict her on stage or in rehearsal. Similarly, an even earlier European film, *La Mort du Cygne* (Jean Benoît-Lévy, 1937) is set in the world of ballet dancers where student Rose Souris aspires to stardom as a professional dancer. *La Mort du Cygne* was remade in the USA, in 1947, as *The Unfinished Dance* directed by Henry Koster. As with *The Red Shoes*, *La Mort du Cygne* has dance as central to the plot rather than dance as a component of the overall performance style.

In the 1970s and on into the 1980s, Hollywood continued to make dance orientated films but dancing and acting were no longer interchangeable languages in terms of plot progression as had been the case in early musicals and dance films now tended to follow the structures of *The Red Shoes* and *La Mort du Cygne*. In *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977), for example, John Travolta dances when he goes to the discotheque, a place dedicated to dancing, and in *Flashdance* (Adrian Lyne, 1983), Alex Owens (Jennifer Beals) dances tirelessly because it is her ambition to become good enough to be a professional dancer.⁶

Where Berkeley's films willingly take the viewer into a spectacle that abstracts the dancing body into a unit within a kaleidoscopic pattern, films such as *Dirty Dancing* and the others mentioned above seek to represent the possibility of 'real' dancing events cohering into a believable story. Where Berkeley's sets often mirror stage environments, the later narrative films locate the action within representations of 'real' places. This is not to say that camera work in these films is restricted to an eye level view as a representative viewpoint of everyday consciousness. There are a significant number of low-level shots that focus on feet and legs in many of them, emphasising the impressive footwork associated with the dances. The opening sequence of *Saturday Night Fever* frames John Travolta's feet walking purposefully along a pavement. The camera is employed at both this and at eye level, and further uses sideways upward shots, perhaps emphasising Travolta's belief in himself as being the best, well above others. For the

⁶ Other films that reflect this shift include *Cabaret* 1972 (Bob Fosse, 1972), *Fame* (Alan Parker, 1980), *Footloose* (Herbert Ross, 1984), and *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolini, 1987).

most part however, camera use is conventional compared to Berkeley's style, and because this is a narrative film, none of the performers look at the camera.

Among these dance-oriented films was *Hair* (1979), directed by Miloš Forman. *Hair* was slightly atypical presenting a step back to the more musical formula of the pre-1970s musical in keeping perhaps with the 1968 Broadway production on which it was based. As with *Fame* and *Saturday Night Fever*, the film has a number of scenes that feature groups of dancers in them. Performer France Hunter was one of the dancers. In an interview I conducted with Hunter she recalls her awareness of the camera:

In a way it's almost like you're being observed, you know, very closely. That was always my feeling, and I felt like there was more at stake because of the permanence of the record and I needed to be my best self in every moment. (Hunter, 2104).

Hunter's concerns, whilst far less acute than those expressed by Pirandello in 1916 or Benjamin in 1936, nonetheless demonstrate the impact of camera presence on her performance. Hunter goes on to note:

Usually working with a choreographer you have a very clear idea of their perspective and concept and, certainly in proscenium, you can tell what the audience is seeing. But with film it's way more. On the one hand it's very exciting because the possibilities are endless. (2014).

Hunter, who worked with choreographer Twyla Tharp and director Forman for a year in the making of the film, considered the possibilities of the dance/camera relationship as exciting, even though there was ‘never any real communication [from] behind the camera [...] or even the director of the film, with the dancers’ (2014).

She described the people on the other side of the lens as ‘this massive crew of people’ (2014). The film crew numbered 99 people (IMBd), and while there were 51 dancers, most dance sections of the film featured only small numbers of them at any one time.

Hunter goes on to say:

All of the communication went between the director and cinematographer and the choreographer. And the choreographer would relay the communication to us, you know, in a modified way I’m sure. So yeah, [...] there was a huge wall of separation. (2014)

During the 1960s and 1970s, a number of manufacturers in the electronics industries, notably Philips and Sony, developed magnetic videotape technology enabling filmmaking to become increasingly accessible because of its comparatively low cost compared with film stock. It was also extremely simple to use. The dance community was among those who took advantage of this new medium to document work, but also to use it for its creative possibilities as a choreographic device. An increasing number of screendance works, though not all shot on video, began to be made outside of the mainstream movie industry. Artists associated with postmodern dance, either as film-

makers, choreographers, or dancers, or a combination of the three, were producing comparatively low budget films. These were more in keeping with the avant-garde style of Deren's films than films produced in Hollywood, for example, *Westbeth* (1975) and *Locale* (1977) by Merce Cunningham and Charles Atlas, *Dune Dance* (Carolyn Brown, 1978), *16 Millimetre Earrings* (Meredith Monk, 1979) and *Husk* (Eiko & Koma, 1988). These films emerged out of the dance community itself rather than the film industry casting dancers in their films. They differ from the mainstream industry productions in that their content, like Deren's *A Study in Choreography for the Camera*, is primarily dance rather than having sections of dance in them as part of a surrounding narrative. These film-makers and many others like them had direct links with the dance community. Charles Atlas was assistant stage manager for Cunningham's company before becoming film-maker in residence, and Carolyn Brown was a dancer for his company. Monk was a performer and choreographer, and Eiko and Koma performed and filmed their own work.

Merce Cunningham and Charles Atlas were prominent at this time in renegotiating the relationship between the camera and the dancer. In *Locale* (1977) Cunningham and Atlas departed from techniques used in their previous film works, where a stationary camera recorded movement within the frame, and experimented with the possibilities offered by the moving camera.

Locale was one of the first dance films made with a steadycam, and explored the impact of having the camera moving with the dancers, 'emphasising the kinetic punch of the

movement' (Porter 2009: 37). It opens with a two minute fifty-five second unbroken shot during which the camera is constantly on the move travelling in amongst the dancers as they perform in a large studio space. The camera moves from one area of the space to another, shifting attention from one group of dancers to the next. The camera and dancers constantly alternate between being far apart to passing very close to one another, but each negotiates the space on equal terms through the pathways they travel. At times the camera progresses to the dancers, and at other times the dancers approach the camera, the movement of which was 'choreographed [...] as precisely as those of the dancers' (Vaughan 2002: 36).

The screen viewing experience in *Locale* illustrates an observation made by Walter Benjamin: 'Guided by the operator, the camera comments on the performance continuously' (2009: 24). In this respect, *Locale* may be compared with some of Berkley's camera choreography. For example, in the song sequence *I Only Have Eyes for You* (*Dames* 1953) the camera moves amongst the dancers as co-performer defining pathways past, through, and above them. In addition, both films use long takes, allowing the viewer's extended engagement with a real time relationship between dancer and camera. A fundamental difference however is that the camera trajectory in *Locale* is one that could be experienced by another dancer, because it is all shot at eye level. Berkley's camera trajectory travels high in the air and swoops down and through the elaborate sets of the dance scene, creating a movement pathway that cannot be replicated by a person without the support of mechanical apparatus. In addition, the two minute, fifty-five second opening take of *Locale* is considerably longer than any shot lengths in Berkeley's

films. The long takes in *Locale* allow for the viewer a relationship with the dancer that is not compromised by the fragmentation of the body, both in time and space that is the effect of shorter takes edited together. The uninterrupted nature of filming a long take to some degree parallels a 'live' performance, both from the viewer's perspective and as experienced by the performer who participates in an uninterrupted performance. However, it places particular demands and responsibilities on both dancer and camera operator alike. A single mistake means stopping and starting again. As Porter notes, a recording of dance as a long take shows the viewer that the dance has been executed with 'no pauses, and no mistakes' (2009: 37). A mistake made at the end of a long take means re-filming the entire event.

These long takes in *Locale* have similarities with Hilary Harris's twelve-minute black and white screendance *Nine Variations on a Dance Theme* (1996). Unlike the artists mentioned above in the context of their connection to the dance community, Harris was a documentary film-maker whose work did not normally have dance content. However, *Nine Variations on a Dance Theme* provides an effective example of camera mobility that, like *Locale*, interacts with a dancer to create screen choreography that can only exist through their combination of movement pathways. Also, like *Locale*, it is shot at heights that could be replicated by a person in the room, and is also comprised of significantly long takes. Performing in a large sunny room, dancer Bettie de Jong unfurls a smooth continuous phrase in which she spirals up from the floor, through kneeling to standing, executes a series of extensions before returning to the start position. Harris's film shows the sequence nine times, each iteration using a different filming technique with the

camera continually moving. Screendance maker Amy Greenfield describes the second variation:

Harris again circles the camera, closer and at a lower angle, in a way that makes it impossible to tell which is turning, the camera, or de Jong. The result is that we experience the sensation of turning. At times it seems that de Jong and the room circle with and against each other. (2003: 24)

Each of Harris's variations creates a different screen perspective on de Jong's dance, and creates a new choreography. In the eighth variation, Harris's camera travels through a series of intimate close-ups, filmed so close that it becomes impossible to tell what is vertical as there are few visual references to the recognisable horizontal and vertical architecture of the room. To achieve this, camera and dancer, both moving, had to be very close to each other, as in a *Pas de Deux*.

Screendance productions vary between those, like *Nine Variations*, with a single camera operator/director working with an individual dancer, and events involving large teams of people. Even if a camera operator or director has a sympathetic interchange with a dancer, in the situation where there is a large crew of technicians there exists a division between the dancers and crew through their individual group commonalities. Specific trainings, technical specialisms, experiences, on-set roles, general interests, systems of communications between operators and positions in the hierarchies of the production all contribute to the creation of mini-communities in this respect. This strict division of roles, with the camera lens at its centre, is a practical way of working and unrestrained

communication between everyone across the divide would inevitably create problems in the complex management of a film shoot. On the smaller scale shoots associated with avant-garde films, these divisions can have lesser impact than is indicated by Hunter's experience, with individuals being more likely to develop a personal rapport simply because there are fewer people in the filming environment with whom to communicate. However, contemporary screendance maker Katrina McPherson notes her awareness of the divide, even on her comparatively small film shoots:

Having been a dancer myself and having kind of come through watching and working on other people's dance films as a young person, I always felt very, very worried about what I felt was quite a schism existing between the dancers over there doing their thing, and the crew over here doing their thing. Because you would have the dancers, in their little costumes, standing out there in the lights and then you would have the crew in their sort of work clothes and their black jackets [...]and people would be shouting across this divide. (2014)

As McPherson's states, her sensitivity to the dancers on set derives from her having been a dancer herself. She implies that being able to form a personal relationship with dancers on set helps to create a 'softer' relationship than might be possible on a large scale film shoot:

I always feel that when I'm filming I can, just by my presence, affect what they are doing, and we have a relationship. In many ways that also kind of softens the

tension between feeling, the dancer feeling, exposed or in any way violated by the camera. (McPherson ibid)

Screenance maker Margaret Williams echoes McPherson's statement when she discusses her own work. She too acknowledges the importance of the relationship across the technical/performer divide:

We have to be extremely careful [...] with everyone I work with on any film. I'm very respectful if they're performing in front of the camera. You want to share, you know, you don't want them to feel you are going to do this and you're going to do this [...] It's very much a collaboration. (Williams 2014: online)

It would seem reasonable to suggest that with smaller scale productions it is easier to bridge the divide between those in front of, and those behind the camera and create a more personal approach to filming, this being more difficult to foster on a large scale set. The more people there are on set, the more complex the process involved in getting the camera rolling becomes, and the less flexible a filming event will be. As McPherson indicates, small scale screenance productions often take place within a community of artists with dance sensibilities, rather than the film industry drawing on the dance community from the outside. McPherson and Williams's statements acknowledge the divide but indicate a sensitive approach towards bridging it.

Smaller scale and often low-budget film projects that foster the more personal dancer/camera relationship as described by McPherson and Williams are increasingly common. In the 1990s, The Arts Council of England and the BBC commissioned the screendance series *Dance for Camera*, curated by Bob Lockyer (1994 – 1996 and 1998), and Channel 4 commissioned new works for the series *Tights Camera Action!* (MJW Productions. 1993 – 1994). These programmes produced a number of short films that were made collaboratively between choreographers and television directors and represent a body of work that might be seen as the threshold of British contemporary screendance work. Short screendance works are now constantly emerging, and their presence is evidenced by a growing trend in related courses at universities, and by the large number of film festivals worldwide that embrace screendance or are entirely dedicated to it.⁷

Much then has changed in the years between the production of *Annabelle the dancer* and contemporary screendance production. Moving image making is now highly accessible through low cost, lightweight digital cameras.⁸ The intervening space between the dance filming event and its screening is effectively shrunk by the ability to instantly play back that which has been filmed. The performer is quickly able to become a part of their own audience by sharing the viewing experience and, as a result, reconnecting with them,

⁷ Examples of these festivals include Loikka Dance Film Festival (Finland), Cinédanse Montreal (Canada), Dance Camera West (USA), International Dance and Electronic Media Festival (Mexico), Movies by Movers (USA), Reel Dance (Australia), Sao Carlos Vodeodance Festival (Brazil), Dance Screen (Austria), Festival Videodanzaba (Argentina), Jumping Frames (Hong Kong), DMJ International Video Dance Festival (Japan), Kino Tanca (Poland) and Dance Camera Istanbul (Turkey).

⁸ The full length feature film *Tangerine*, (Sean Baker, 2015) was shot on an iPhone 5s. The film was screened at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival and was voted 14th best film in 2015 by the Sight and Sound annual critics' poll.

circumnavigating the traditional distance between the two, and cancelling out the lack of response from the screen that Kelly spoke of (Kelly quoted in Genne 2003: 75).

Nonetheless, in spite of the 'every-dayness' of the mobile phone and other lightweight cameras, the presence of the lens would be hard, if not impossible, to ignore for anyone who is its subject just as would have been the case for Annabelle Moore in 1894. The dancer/camera relationship may now be different from when she danced for Edison, but camera presence still signifies a future re-presentation in just the same way. Indeed, the world that the lens can now access with such immediacy is far larger, and far less controlled than that of early cinema. Screendance maker and academic Douglas Rosenberg proposes that,

When a camera is brought into an event already unfolding we know that the nature of that event is inexorably changed. When an event begins with a camera already present, the event that might have taken place outside the purview of the camera has no chance of occurring. (2006: online)

Karla Shacklock, choreographer and performer, echoes Pirandello and Benjamin in her reflections on having her performance work filmed:

I feel like the camera isn't as sensitive as a live person so they can't receive. So, if it's emotional, I need to somehow make it more emotional for that to transmute [...] for that to get into the camera. And I don't feel like that with a live being,

because it feels they are sort of an open vessel that will receive it very immediately. (2013: online)

Cathy Nicoli, Associate Professor of Dance from Roger Williams University, has spoken about a screendance project in a Rhode Island warehouse in 2014 where she performed alongside one hundred and thirty seven oranges. Responding to the question ‘who did you feel you were performing for?’ she answered, ‘hmmm...who was I performing for? The camera, the oranges and myself in that order of importance (2015: online). Nicoli’s answer prioritises the camera, and makes no mention of the final audience, and Shacklock talks about the imperative of getting the emotional content of her work ‘into’ the camera. The camera was, and still is, the dominant partner in the dancer/camera relationship. In the lineage that connects the dancer to the final re-presentation of him or herself on screen, the camera is nearer the manipulation process that follows on from the filming event than is the performer. It stands between the dancer and postproduction. If dancers do not have access to post-production, their role, as with Berkeley’s dancers, ends with their performance for the camera.

The emergence in the 1980s of the avant-garde work of postmodern dancer/film-makers such as Merce Cunningham, Yvonne Rainer, Eiko and Koma, and Meredith Monk represented a shift in this status, and in the late 1990s, and on into the next decade, dancer/film-makers Wim Vandekeybus and Thierry de Mey made a number of feature

length screendance works.⁹ Dancer/film-maker/ directors are now common and their work bridges the divide between the film-maker and dance maker communities through a merging of the two.¹⁰

Writer and academic Sarah Kember has argued that the film-maker is in a position of control over images, a privilege that is not normally afforded to those who appear in the camera viewfinder. ‘The photographic gaze is discriminatory – it privileges the viewing subject over the viewed object’ (Kember1998: 55). In conventional film production it is hard to see how Kember’s observation could be any different now than in 1894. Although the dancer/camera relationship may be closer in production works where links to the dance community exist on both sides of the lens, and where production environments do not involve large teams on the film-maker side of the camera, an inequality nonetheless persists between the two. Early disquiet with camera presence may seem outmoded in a contemporary context but Pirandello’s words ,‘the little projector will play his shadow before the audience; and he himself must be content to act in front of the camera’(quoted in Benjamin 2009: 242), still resonates for the dancer today.

⁹ According to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and The British Film Institute, a film lasting over forty minutes is classified as a feature film. Feature length screendance works by Wim Vandekeybus include *La Mentira* (1992, 49:44 min.), *In Spite of wishing and Wanting* (2002, 50: 45 min.) and *Blush* (2005, 52: 45 min.) Feature length screendance works by Thierry de Mey include *Rosas Danst Rosas* (1997, 57 min.) and *Fase* (2002, 52: 52 min.).

¹⁰ A British Council, Arts Council of England, and South East Dance co-produced triple DVD series *Forward Motion* (2008) feature ‘leading British screendances’ from the late 1980s to 2007. Of the twenty-two screendance works, eleven are made by director/choreographers.

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