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How Screendance Embraces What Cannot Be Done on Stage

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In a Bathtub, Upside Down:

How Screendance Embraces What Cannot Be Done on Stage

by

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Abstract: Due to the recentness of the field of dance filmmaking, little research exists on the difference between dance films designed to be watched as films (referred to as screendance) and dance videography (videos of performances created to be viewed by a live audience). This paper contends that what separates screendance from dance videography is the unique appeal screendance has for the viewer. Through the use of instantaneous location changes or inaccessible locations, unusual camera perspectives (such as a birds' eye shot) that allow the viewer to feel as if they or the dancers are defying gravity, and technology-mediated changes to bodies and surroundings, dance films show the viewer the impossible happening on screen. This impossibility factor enables the viewer to experience the work as a captivating visual spectacle. Rather than looking down on this as 'low art,' I suggest that the visual appeal has positive psychological effects on its viewers, which allows screendance to be used to create entertainment (music videos) and sell products (advertisements). This research has implications for dancers, choreographers, and dance filmmakers, particularly those interested in making their work — or dance in general — more accessible to audiences that may not conventionally seek out dance performances.

Introduction

Dance scholars frequently liken screendance to a *pas de deux* between dancer and camera. This broad definition encapsulates anything from the most highly edited dance film to dance rehearsal footage recorded on a shaky iPhone, making it impossible to distinguish between performances made for the camera and those that just happen to be captured on video. Independent art curator Jenelle Porter suggests that it is the relationship between dancer and camera that determines what can be considered screendance; screendance is only those dance videos "whose premier audience is the camera lens."[1]

Over dance filmmaking's 120-year history, multiple makers of these films have speculated and theorized on the distinction between their work, referred to as screendance, cine-dance, or dance films, and the documentation of dance on camera, referred to as dance videography. Drawing from these historical dance films and the words of their makers, it becomes apparent that three factors define screendance: the use of unique camera angles and perspectives, the use of multiple or inaccessible locations, and the modification of bodies and surroundings done through editing. Dance videography, in contrast, is simply the video documentation of dance designed for the stage or a live audience, most commonly concert dance.[2]

What has yet to be discussed thus far is why the distinction between screendance and dance videography is of any importance to either discipline. Particularly for the makers of screendance, the difference matters because the way screendance is defined determines what may or may not be considered screendance, and consequently, who may or may not be its audience. Here, screendance refers to filmed dance works that adhere to the outlined parameters on camera perspectives, location, and editing. For my purposes,

this includes dance films made for dance film festivals or online distribution, as well as some music videos, TV commercials, and videos made on social media applications such as TikTok. Although Hollywood musicals were an integral part of dance filmmaking's history, they are not considered here because they rely on the conventions of narrative filmmaking in addition to the dance.

The distinction also matters because of the dance forms that are the subject of dance videography versus those forms used in dance films. Full-length ballets, and, to a lesser extent, evening-length pieces by renowned modern dance choreographers are often recorded during a live performance of the work because of the prohibitive costs and the large crew required to stage it.[3] This simultaneous staging of live and filmed work restricts the camera to a single, proscenium-framed perspective, usually recorded in one take. Works of this production scale are, therefore, typically limited to videography. Popular or experimental dance forms that may be less valued as art — and consequently not performed in auditoriums — are better suited to screendance.

In defining screendance as such, it becomes apparent that its viewers do not, for the most part, belong to the world of concert dance. They are people who engage with dance through popular culture, usually in video format rather than live. Many may have limited knowledge of dance as a performance art, only accidentally encountering it in the advertisements that play between the televised or online video streaming content they seek out. Others, such as TikTok users, may skew far younger than the typical concert dance audience. For these screendance audiences, the digital product is the performance - it does not exist without the edits and the framing of the camera.[4]

It would be safe to say that screendance has a much larger viewership than dance videography, and even possibly concert dance as a whole. But to dismiss screendance as 'low art' because of its association with popular culture and its largely internet-based audience is to misunderstand screendance's unique appeal. Camera perspective, location, and editing come together in screendance to create a dance work whose allure is that it shows the impossible. Dancers defy gravity, turn invisible, and traverse the remote corners of the earth, inspiring in the viewer a sense of awe and wonder. The use of technology allows viewers of screendance to see rather than to imagine the world created by the choreographer. Yet dance critics often respond to screendance with "technophobic sentiment[s]," a mistrust of dance as mediated by the camera and a condescension towards performance whose digital medium is inseparable from its message.[5] In an article for the New York Times, American film critic Wesley Morris disparages TikTok as entertainment only bored, unhappy 10th-graders need, calling it a "twee, one-dimensional starter kit" for filmmaking.[6] This disdain marks a larger trend of artistic prejudice that values 'high art' and scorns popular, widely-accessible media that rely on visual pleasure and spectacle.

Ironically, it is screendance that may have the answers to concert dance's limited and largely homogenous audiences. Stemming from traditions of ballet and opera attendance, concert dance audiences are largely white, older, and wealthy. Producers and choreographers that are looking to broaden and sustain a larger viewership for dance frequently find the diversity of audiences with the integration of technology and popular media. While some, such as Compagnie Käfig artistic director and choreographer Mourad Merzouki, choose to bring images, video, and projection into live dance

performance, other well-respected figures in the dance world such as Wayne McGregor and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui have turned to screendance, choreographing music video sequences for The Chemical Brothers and The Carters, respectively[7].

For all the concerns dance critics have about digitization overwhelming choreography, screendance is not static installation art – rather, it is a collaboration between film and dance, between digital and corporeal storytelling.[8] For many viewers of screendance, it is not enough to see choreographic objects doing the impossible; the appeal lies in seeing the human body defy the laws of time and space.[9] The form does this by "blend[ing] physical and virtual elements within the performance environment" allowing them to "cohabit and interact."[10] In other words, at the heart of screendance's awe-factor is its ability to de-hierarchize dancer and environment, giving equal importance to dancing body, surroundings, and the framing of the camera.

It is not taken for granted in the field of screendance that awe and impossibility are its defining features, nor is it widely agreed upon that the impossibility is created by camera angles, locations, and editing. I draw examples from dance films to make this case. Yet this is not an exercise in creating a definition for definition's sake; in probing the boundaries of what can be considered screendance, I delve into the technical tools used to create impossibility while making use of theory to understand why the films work as advertising and storytelling. Critical viewing of these screendance works also requires that the psychological effect of impossibility on viewers be investigated, as well as the discussion of screendance as 'low art,' ultimately answering the question of why impossibility as the defining feature of screendance matters to both creators and audience.

History

Dance filmmaking was born out of early filmmakers' fascination with the ability to capture movement.[11] While all kinds of movement, from trains to galloping horses, was recorded on film, the human form emerged as the most convenient to experiment with. The dancing body was the ideal size for a film studio, and, unlike horses, had the ability to perform specifically for the camera. The first video camera, the Kinetoscope, was created in 1889; it took just five years from the invention of the technology for the first publicly available dance film to be made.

Since the invention of the video camera, people of all kinds have embraced its connection to dance – photographers, visual artists, filmmakers, choreographers, and even, increasingly, those with no connection to professional performing or visual arts communities. To name each of them would be impossible, though that does not make them any less a part of screendance's history. Through the years, many dance films have contributed to and formed the body of work that is now recognized as screendance; similarly, numerous technological advancements have taken place throughout screendance history, incrementally altering and reshaping the scope of dance filmmaking. Here, however, I discuss only those select works and events that are fundamental to the definition of screendance.

The Serpentine Dance, which evolved from burlesque skirt dances, was the subject of the first dance film. Two versions of this film exist: one created in 1894 by Edison Studios featuring Broadway dancer Annabelle Moore, and the second made in 1896 by the Lumière brothers with American modern dancer Loïe Fuller.[12] While both

may be considered documentation of a live performance, and therefore fall under the category of dance videography, the latter made use of modification to the film reel that places it resolutely in the screendance camp. Although Loïe Fuller's swirling skirts were filmed in black-and-white, the Lumière brothers painted the film strip frame by frame, giving the viewer the impression of ever-changing color.[13]

While those interested in screendance brought the capabilities of film technology to the forefront, dance videographers sought to use film as an archival tool. Early dance videography frequently captured solo variations from romantic-era ballets; in particular, substantial footage exists of Danish choreographer and ballet master August Bournoville's work. Filmed in 1903 in Copenhagen, the Bournoville repertoire films were royal court photographer Peter Elfelt's endeavor to accurately preserve the choreography after Bournoville's death.[14] Although performed specifically for the camera, these films were not created to be distributed to an audience. No attention is paid to the viewing experience, and the films are not significantly different from watching a dancer in a rehearsal room. Other early dance videography, such as the only existing clip of Isadora Duncan's outdoor recitals, is a fleeting seven seconds in length.[15] The purpose of such a film, though perhaps in a less planned way than Elfelt's Bournoville films, was to capture something about the essence of the live performance, not to transform it.[16]

Dance as designed for the camera made its return to widespread viewership through show dancing. As Hollywood musicals gained popularity, so did the idea that dance could be filmed and edited like the movies of the time. The 1933 film *42nd Street*, with choreography by dance director Busby Berkeley, began a series of popular American films that included dancing as an integral part of the films. Berkeley had no

dance experience, enabling him to arrange patterns of bodies and movement solely for the optics.[17] American dancer, actor, choreographer, and filmmaker Gene Kelly was greatly influenced by Berkeley's camera-driven spectacles. Kelly began to use camera tools, tricks, and edits in his work on Hollywood musicals, creating what he called 'cine-dance,' "films of dance that fell outside the parameters of straight document."[18] Kelly's experimentation was largely with camera perspective, zoom, and deep focus, with continuity edits to maintain the seamlessness of his choreography.[19] Unlike Berkeley, however, Gene Kelly used camera movement and angles to "express an emotional struggle" rather than as a solely visual gimmick.[20]

Following the rise in popularity of Hollywood films was the development of the portable video camera and the subsequent introduction of filmmaking into college curricula in the 1940s. Film education as taught in fine arts universities created the possibility for independent filmmaking that was more closely associated with the avant-garde art movement than it was with popular cinema.[21] Ukrainian-American filmmaker Maya Deren was among these early independent filmmakers, and, although not a dancer or choreographer, drastically expanded the possibilities within screendance. Her 1945 film, *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, utilized film as a means to collapse and reimagine time and space. In its day, Deren's work was described more frequently as "tricks and magic" than as masterful cinematography.[22] Her technique of jump cuts instantaneously transported her dancer, Talley Beatty, from indoors to outdoors, while preserving Beatty's seemingly continuous leap.[23]

While the editing of dance films was commonplace even in the pre-Hollywood era, edits rarely involved special effects. Made for Swedish TV, the 1969 dance film *Red*

Wine in Green Glasses was among the first to use chromakey (also known as green screen) technology to change what the backdrop looked like to viewers of the film.[24] This edit moved beyond changing the colors or patterns seen in the film: it also changed how the entire film could be understood. Shot in a bird's eye view, the film features a pair of dancers performing twists and turns as they lay on the green floor; this floor is replaced with fluffy clouds and pastel-colored skies from 18th-century landscape paintings in the editing process. The resulting film, from the viewer's perspective, shows two lovers floating upwards through the clouds, embracing and hanging onto each other's limbs as they ascend.[25]

Screendance history did not end in 1970. As a form that constantly reinvents itself with newer technology, screendance underwent an expansion in 2013 with the creation of the short video-sharing platform Vine. Following Vine's success came musical.ly, now known as the popular dance challenge app TikTok. TikTok enabled teenagers to become the choreographers and directors of their own short dance films by providing them with the filters, features, editing tools and the capacity to share their films all within a free, smartphone-based application.[26] The content posted on the social media platform — instantaneous clothing and location changes are popular in TikTok challenges — also reaffirmed the link between screendance and the captivating nature of seeing the impossible.[27]

The Defiance of Gravity Using Camera Perspectives and Angles

The use of multiple takes filmed from different angles and at different distances from the dancer is not unique to screendance. Films of various kinds utilize cuts between

shots to make up a scene, often giving the viewer a sense of omnipresence. What is unique to screendance is how these shots come together to enhance the viewer's understanding of the world of the performance. Because screendance is detached from the 'realistic' representation of the dance, the groundedness of performers no longer becomes a priority.[28] In screendance, the floor does not have to be at the bottom of the frame, and dancers' bodies do not have to obey the laws of gravity.

In Films.Dance's *A Kiss*, canted angles are used to create the impression that the world is not flat, and long takes suggest that its orientation is ever shifting.[29] At the start of the film, a black-and-white, close-up, side-view shot shows two dancers standing on a nondescript city sidewalk, leaning in for a kiss. Before their bodies can touch, however, the camera tilts horizontally, turning the sidewalk that was level with the bottom of the frame into a slope that reaches from top right corner to lower left corner. The tilting motion prompts one of the dancers to fall, roll, and somersault backwards, as if his body responds to the tilting of the world. This occurs again later in the film in a straight-on shot of the same dancer, where the camera tilting downwards prompts the dancer's body to fall back against the buildings in the background as if gravity is working against him.

A Kiss isn't the defiance of gravity in the most literal sense. The dancers' bodies do not suspend weightlessly in midair, nor do they walk upside down on ceilings. The film subverts the laws of gravity by creating the appearance of a downward pull in places where it does not exist. Realistically, nothing pulls the dancers apart as they stand together on the sidewalk. No force exists that causes them to fall or roll backwards. Yet in tilting the camera horizontally and vertically, *A Kiss* creates a world in which alternative gravitational forces are present.

Professor of performance design Franziska Bork Petersen argues that bodies defying gravity, such as those in *A Kiss*, aren't performing the impossible; in describing the performing body as "always…a reality," she denies the existence of bodily impossibility in screendance altogether.[30] Bork Petersen suggests that stories or narratives may contain impossibility, but that bodies themselves cannot be the site of this impossibility because bodies only "enact [their] own presence."[31] But if the "body…does not defeat reality when it defies gravity in dance," then the human form must be separable from the film in which it participates.[32] While the streets and buildings can participate in the subversion of reality, Bork Petersen asserts that bodies are inextricably bound to its laws. For Bork Petersen's claim to be true, however, bodies must have a different relationship to the screen than their surroundings, an idea that is at odds with the premise of screendance.

When depicted in dance films, dancing bodies are no more 'real' than their environment: both are bound by the rectangular framing of the screen. As a result, the tilting of the world —which is determined by the tilting of the camera — has repercussions on the moving bodies of the dancers. This is substantially different from most narrative feature films in which the camera tilts, but the moving bodies continue to perform as if the ground they stand on remains level beneath them. The former suggests an impossible world in which orientation and gravity work differently than what we recognize, while the latter remains rooted in the idea that a perspective may be changed, but not the world itself.

The #nogravity hashtag on TikTok is a repository of short films, many of which make use of camera movement and angles to create impossible, tilting worlds like the one

in *A Kiss*.[33] While most are not dance films, a handful are. Among them is one created by TikTok user @rylitight, or Team USA artistic gymnast Riley Loos. Loos' 14-second film shows him balanced between parallel bars at a gymnasium.[34] He cycles his legs backwards in the air with deliberate strides, as if walking backwards on solid ground. As he does this, his arms remain extended, allowing his body to 'walk' itself into a handstand position atop the bars. The camera turns as Loos' body changes orientation, such that his feet are always at the bottom of the frame; this creates the illusion that Loos is walking backward, suspended midair as the world around him rotates like a hamster wheel.

While it is apparent that Riley Loos' TikTok uses camera angles and movement to alter how the film may be seen and understood, the film exists on the murky boundary of what is dance on film and not simply a video of a gymnast that uses camera angles to create impossibility. It is in this ambiguity that screendance thrives. The movement forms practiced in screendance may not be recognized as dance by dance educators and concert dance artists; in her paper titled "Does screendance need to look like dance?" University of Brighton scholar Claudia Kappenberg differentiates between 'dance for film' and 'dance as film' to make this case.[35] 'Dance as film' is not concerned with how dance is defined. It does not differentiate between the framing of a dancer performing set choreography, a human body in motion, and "anything kinetically driven": all are seen as screendance.[36]

Burberry's *Open Spaces* commercial takes a more direct approach to defying gravity – its dancers quite literally float through wide open fields and run horizontally along the sides of trees.[37] Posted to the brand's Instagram page and YouTube channel, the

2-and-a-half-minute advertisement begins with four people reaching into the trunk of their car to take out their coats. After all of them have their outerwear on, they walk away from the car, through a narrow path in a field full of tall yellowing grass. A strong wind ripples through the grass, picking up one of the men. He twists and spins midair, before catching ahold of another one of his companions and encouraging them to do the same. Soon all four are caught up in the breeze, skimming over the grass at great speed.

Behind-the-scenes footage released by the film's direction team reveals that the floating effect was created by harnessing the dancers to a crane on a moving vehicle, a mechanical method of creating the defiance of gravity.[38] The latter half of the film combines this use of harnesses with the 90-degree rotation of the camera to further shake up a viewer's sense of gravity and spatial orientation. The four movers zoom toward a wooded area and run along the sides of trees. The lengths of the tree trunks are parallel to the bottom of the frame, and the running bodies appear upright. The film ends when all four fly off the side of a cliff, and cluster together to form a human balloon above the ocean.

The advertisement celebrates Thomas Burberry's "signature fabric gabardine," and with it, "the freedom to move into new spaces beyond boundaries and expectations."[39] But the comments posted below the film on YouTube demonstrate its appeal as a work of screendance. Multiple viewer's noted that the film replicated the experience of flying in a dream, while others had seen part of the film in short advertisement form and had come looking for the entire film.[40] Many viewers also commented on their reaction to watching *Open Spaces*, described the film as evoking a unique sensation, awe-inspiring, and as one that gave them goosebumps.[41]

Location, Place, and Space

The discussion of location in screendance is a complex one, for every dance film has at least three sites: the screen itself, the location(s) in which it is filmed, and the place and context in which it is watched.[42] Each of these may be considered either 'space' or 'place,' with space being the physical landscape of the site and place being the combination of the space and the memories associated with it.[43] While dance videography may use black box theaters or studios of unknown location or dimensions as a 'neutral' filming site, screendance necessarily avoids this. Not every place may be personally known to a viewer, but they must broadly recognize places as streets, bedrooms, or stairwells.

The screen as a site is 2-dimensional, rendering it the least 'real.' Yet it is this flatness of the mise-en-scene that de-hierarchizes the body and its surroundings, lending both equal weight within the frame.[44] Giving both place and human form equal importance is the basis of screendance's impossibility factor: to see video clips of a handful of locations play one after another is not extraordinary, but to a see the same human body be transported from location to location in a matter of moments defies our understanding of distance and time.

In a televised ad for Bose's Quiet Comfort 35 headphones, a woman wearing the headphones dances through empty public sites in London.[45] As she moves, her surroundings morph from one location to another, from Piccadilly Circus to the inside of a subway car to an escalator at a Tube station within the span of a single song.[46] A return to the same locations at the end of the ad reveals why they were chosen in the first place

– each location is now bustling with people, but the woman continues to dance as if they weren't there at all.

Nothing about this commercial gives its viewer any indication of what makes it different from any other noise-canceling headphones. Melissa Blanco Borelli suggests that this is exactly how dance-based advertisements for gadgets work: the technical ability of the dancers is subliminally compared to the technological superiority of the device without elucidating the functional details of the product being sold.[47] This naturally begets the question, why have location changes at all? If the dance is what carries the message of the advertising, what purpose do multiple locations serve? Blanco Borelli is astute in observing that dance in commercials is most often used to sell technological devices, a fact that is key to making sense of why the directors of the Bose commercial utilized location changes.[48] While the movement implies a quality digital product, location changes construct the sort of wondrous impossibility of events associated with science fiction and futuristic technology. This positions the product as one that is cutting-edge and imminently desirable.

Even in dance films with a single shooting location, nothing about the place is accidental. Often, single sites are chosen because their inaccessibility lends something to the magic of the film. Julie Gautier's *AMA*, a six-and-a-half minute underwater solo, does just this.[49] Directed and danced by Gautier, the entire film takes place in Y-40 Deep Joy, a 138-foot-deep pool in Padua, Italy.[50] The film begins with Gautier lying on her side at the bottom of the pool with one hand resting on her stomach and her eyes closed. The choreography takes her from sitting, standing, and walking on the bottom of the pool to an upward, full-body spiraling movement. As the music builds, she performs flipping

movements in the water, finally returning her body to the tiled floor. Gautier opens her eyes and begins to let air out of her mouth, causing her body to rise slowly through the water. The film fades to black as her body appears suspended in the pool, never quite breaking the surface.

Despite the solo being performed in a single breath, *AMA* is not a performance that could easily have been staged for a live audience on site. The spare, emptiness of the location adds to the work's breathtaking quality, and the depth of the pool makes it improbable that any viewer could see all the choreography without swimming along with Gautier. Even if it were possible to have the audience seated in the water, the viewing experience would not be the same as it is on film. For the shoot, the pool was temperature-controlled to ensure that the water appeared entirely clear on camera, creating the impression that Gautier's body floats weightlessly in air.[51]

Dedicated to "the women of the world" as well as to her "tiniest daughter," many viewers have understood *AMA* as a piece about Gautier's emotional struggle following a miscarriage. Gautier, however, dissuades from this reading of the work, preferring it to be interpreted through the viewer's own experiences with loss or pain.[52] Regardless of interpretation, the film's title, *AMA*, suggests that location is at the very center of its meaning. Ama divers (also called 'pearl divers') are Japanese women that practice free diving for seaweed and shellfish, a traditional occupation thought to be thousands of years old.[53]

Occasionally, single-location screendance works are not about location at all: they use one site to create impossibility by overturning filmmaking conventions of continuity and linear time. In Minneapolis-based choreographer Alexandra Bodnarchuk's film

Heritage Sites, the shooting location is a large, light-filled warehouse in which stands a single bathtub.[54] The opening of the film cuts between multiple close-ups of different dancers in the bathtub, each one performing a personal morning ritual with the water in the tub. As they perform these movements, their black t-shirts cling to their bodies, and their hair hangs down in wet bunches. Group choreography later in film shows the dancers at varying stages of dryness; sometimes, their clothes and hair look completely dry, but a cut to a different angle a moment later shows the dancers in the same positions in the room, their hair now damp from the bath. This deliberate patchwork of shots suggests that the order of events in the film — and therefore the flow of time itself — works differently than what we know to be the constant, evenly-paced passing of time.

Although this creation of impossible time may not appear to be associated with location, an understanding of the way time is constructed in filmmaking suggests otherwise. Continuity editing, which relies on spatiotemporal relations, "enables viewers to perceive some sequences of shots as depicting a continuously unfolding event" despite "never experiencing such an abrupt perceptual sequence in real-world interactions."[55] In other words, cinematography conventionally attempts to replicate the naturalistic passing of time, using shots of locations to cue the viewer in.

Locations may be chosen for what they are (in the case of the Bose commercial) or for what they can do (as in *AMA* and *Heritage Sites*). Yet the underlying assumption in both cases is that the place of the viewer is not the filming location. The location, a three-dimensional Euclidean place, is transformed to a two-dimensional representation (the screen), which then interacts with the relational place, or the viewer's three-dimensional reality.[56] While a handful of screendance viewers may be watching projections of the

films in a darkened theater, the vast majority of them are experiencing screendance on their personal devices in familiar places: in bed, at work, on a bus. Their locatedness matters.[57] Viewers' sense of presence depends upon their relationship to the places from which they watch screendance; routine and daily schedules create the normalcy that surrounds their everyday places, enabling them to appreciate and be awed by impossibility when they see it in screendance.[58]

Modification of Body and Surroundings Through Editing

Altering the appearance of the body or its surroundings using editing has become a core tool in the making of screendance. Editing itself is one of the oldest filmmaking tools, as film reel could be cut and spliced to make motion pictures with little other technology. Digital editing that alters bodies and worlds is a recent but significant development in the creation of screendance because it reconstructs the role of the editor. When the editor makes fundamental changes to how the dance is seen onscreen by viewers, "creating the dance through new rhythms, effects, and artistic choices," their role is no longer easily distinguishable from that of the choreographer.[59] Since the film, edited in post-production, is the completed product, the creator of the movement material is only the initial choreographer; the final choreographer is the editor.[60]

Editing as choreography is central to screendance for two reasons. The first is that editing is the primary cause of concern among dance artists and critics that fear screendance's "danger for dance because of its capacity to alter or modify movement."[61] French-Canadian multidisciplinary artist Priscilla Guy compares the distrust of editing technologies in screendance to the fear that the advancement of photography would

destroy the art of painting in the early 1900s.[62] Guy reasons that editing does not "mask[]

any of the most fundamental and powerful dance properties, nor are they interfering in

the expression of…human presence."[63] Like Kappenberg's idea of dance as film, Priscilla

Guy concludes that screendance is a performance medium that is entirely discrete from

dance; it is not intended as a replacement for or detraction from live performance.[64]

Secondarily, editing as choreography matters because it broadens the possibilities of who

is considered a maker of screendance: on TikTok, the choreographer might be the same

as the editor, and a person who creates a remix with another artist's work could also be

considered a choreographer. In interactive screendance performances, a viewer could be a

choreographer, too.

Before the age of YouTube, Vimeo, and other internet-based video-sharing

platforms, dance filmmakers experimented with interactive CD-ROM based performance.

A notable example of this is *Waterfall*, a digital dance production that utilized

contemporary dance in connection with video game programming to create an hour-long

piece.[65] Created in 2002, *Waterfall* superimposed videos of a dancing body filmed in a

studio with clips of outdoor bodies of water, allowing the viewer to determine where the

dancer stood as she performed her choreography.[66] If placed in the water, her body would

ripple in sync with the waves.

Since *Waterfall*, editing technology has become both more complex and more

accessible. On one end of the spectrum — if it can be considered that — is those dance

films relying on sophisticated technology such as LiDAR scans, motion capture, custom-

made software, and computer animation.[67] On the other end are films made in TikTok,

where the entire means of production exists within a single free application on a device

most people already own. The former category, due to the expense and expertise required to produce such films, are usually streamable music videos, videos that are projected as backdrops in large pop music concerts, or advertisements.

Choreographed by Wayne McGregor, The Chemical Brothers' music video *Wide Open* is an example of the modification of bodies using advanced technological tools.[68] At the start of the film, a performer, Sonoya Mizuno, in a T-shirt and briefs dances alone in a parking garage. As the film progresses, her solid, opaque limbs begin to morph, turning into web-like limbs with holes through which the walls and surroundings are visible. These non-human parts eventually take over her body, turning her torso similarly mesh-like. She does not resist it, or even notice it as it happens. At three minutes into the film, Mizuno stumbles upon a full-length mirror, seeing her transformed body for the first time in the five-minute piece. As she watches her body in the mirror, the viewer sees two reflections in the glass, one of her modified body and another of her human body walking by, watching herself. This prompts Mizuno's head, the last of the human body parts, to change into the webbing.

Wide Open utilizes one of three common editing motifs found in screendance: multiples.[69] At its most basic level, the idea of duplicating bodies on film exists parallel to corps de ballets and chorus lines found in live dance performance. Although evolutionary psychologists do not agree on the origins of synchronous group dancing, there is an undeniable visual pleasure in watching multiple bodies perform the same movements at the exact same time.[70] An examination of ballet and show dancing history reveals that practitioners of these forms used uniformity as a cause to enforce exclusionary practices. On American and European stages, willowy white bodies have

long been preferred over more diverse casts. Modern dance, rebelling against these practices, favored individualism and the solo form. Screendance multiples exist at the intersection between these two approaches to dancing bodies – they explore the choreographic possibilities of having multiple dancing bodies while still working with the physical traits of the one dancer.[71]

At first glance, *Wide Open* has no multiples. There is a single dancer, and no digital copies dancing beside her. However, multiples can also be construed as "a type of puppetry in which new forms are created" by combining parts of different bodies, human and animated, freeing the resulting body from "the constraints of a single body anchored in real time."[72] Sonoya Mizuno's digitally altered body fits this description. Editing can also be used to create impossible, hybrid bodies without the complex graphics tools used in the making of *Wide Open*.

In a short video made through Instagram's reels feature, choreographer Talia Favia performs inversions and floor rolls in what appears to be a dance studio.[73] The video is mirrored left-to-right such that there are two Favias dancing beside each other, their bodies sometimes colliding to form just one. Depending on the speed of the movement, Favia's black leggings blur, creating clouds of little black particles rather than fully defined limbs. This produces the effect of a swarm of pixels forming rippling patterns in the space that coincide to form a human body at some moments before scattering apart again.

Brazilian author and dance festival founder Leonel Brum describes this particular effect as the "fragmentation of the body into numerous pixels," a technique he credits to videographer Paulo Mendel.[74] Rather than viewing this as a case of multiples, Brum

interprets it as an example of editing as choreography, where the "effects become their own choreography which does not exist without them."[75] Most importantly, he points to the blurring of the diegesis that editing of this kind causes: not all of the post-editing choreography exists in the dancer's body, and not all movement-based choreography can be seen in the final film.[76] In Brum's words, this "turn[s] the impossible dance into possibility."[77]

The idea that not all the movement-based choreography makes it into the final film can also be found in the editing theme of repetition or replay, a tool similar to but distinct from the use of multiples.[78] Although repeating movement is by no means impossible, the way it is commonly used in screendance is. Repetitive movement requires repetition and recollection, or, more simply, the movement in the forward direction, followed by the movement in the backward direction to return the body to its starting position, ready to repeat the cycle.[79] Replay in screendance edits out the recollection portion of the movement, omitting the resetting of the body to its initial position. When movements are naturally cyclical, like pirouettes or other turns where the end of the first repetition is the beginning of the next, replay editing can be used to add in the backward recollecting movement, creating the impression that the dancer turns in both directions.

An example of the close intertwining of multiples and replay is Films.Dance's work *Weakness of the Flesh*.[80] The film is carried by a single dancer, Emma Rosenzweig-Bock, whose body is replicated lying against the concrete ground in multiple shots. In some scenes, her multiplied body is scaled differently such that one copy is so large only her feet fit within the frame, and another is so little that it looks like an insect. In other scenes, all copies of Rosenzweig-Bock's body are scaled to the same size and laid across

the screen in a diagonal line. It is in these scenes that replay is used – she performs a forward lurching motion, reaching out with her left hand from a crouched position. The retracting of her body is edited out; the resulting scene shows repeated forward reaches, but the dancer's body stays impossibly in place.

Impossibility, Awe, and Screendance's Ties to 'Low Art'

While certain facets of screendance undoubtedly create the impossible on screen, little has been said on how this positively affects its viewers. It would be easy to equate the allure of impossibility with its entertainment value, explaining away screendance's appeal as no more than spectacle to be distracted by. Yet spectacle alone cannot explain why screendance spans popular dancing, gymnastics, and experimental choreography while serving the purpose of art, entertainment, and advertising, suggesting that seeing the impossible may be a much more complex phenomenon.

Watching the impossible take place in screendance creates feelings of inspiration, awe, and even transcendence.[81] Psychologists agree that these are profound human emotions that can lead to increased mental and physical well-being, feelings of interconnectedness, and more pro-social behaviors.[82] Others identify awe as more beneficial than amusement (or the experience of being entertained) in the alleviation of negative affect such as depression and hopelessness.[83] Some researchers even advocate for the creation of more affordable and accessible awe-inspiring experiences to improve the lives of individuals and society as a whole.[84] Why, then, does screendance, an awe-inspiring experience, continue to be treated like 'low art' that exists exclusively for entertainment?

To begin to answer this question, it is necessary to take apart the assumed link between 'low art' and entertainment. John Fischer, professor emeritus of philosophy at the University of Colorado, dissuades from equating 'low art' with 'bad art,' citing examples of "uninspired, minor, derivative" 'high art' and "successful and important" 'low art.'[85] He instead offers the following explanation: "this distinction is in the conceptual scheme we apply to the arts," particularly "the assumption that high art has great value and is more worth taking seriously and subsidizing than popular art."[86] Fischer also points to the lack of a clear definition for what popular art is, resulting in the inevitable contrasting of "popular with 'serious,' high, or fine art."[87]

The origin of the distinction between 'high' and 'low' art can be traced to 18th-century French philosopher Charles Batteux, who classified 'fine art' as "painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry" that were "imitations of beautiful nature."[88] With such a definition, it is easy to see why screendance does not fit the description of 'high art'; its emphasis is not necessarily on beauty, and nature or the naturalistic portrayal of the world is antithetical to screendance's core tenet of impossibility. Interestingly, Batteux did not consider dance a 'fine art' either. Poet and dance critic Jay Rogoff theorizes that dance gained this status during the Baroque period in Europe, when dance, "a communal, participatory endeavor…metamorphosed into an aristocratic art for which participation required training," ultimately evolving into "a highly specialized entertainment in which intensively schooled performers present their skill for the benefit of a wallflower audience."[89]

In the 21st century, medium-based distinctions between 'high' and 'low' art still exist: "most prominent painters serve minority tastes, whereas most prominent

filmmakers aim at satisfying popular taste."[90] The reason for this may lie in the economics. Historically as well as in the present day, visual artists with family funds and wealthy patrons have had the luxury of working on personally satisfying projects that may appeal to only a niche audience.[91] Many of these artists state that making art for its earning potential lowers the quality of the art.[92]

This assumption puts screendance in a precarious position. Many screendance works are commercials, whose express purpose is to sell a product or service. Other dance films, distributed on YouTube or TikTok, could enable their makers to earn from brand sponsorships or the advertisements that play before the screendance content. If these screendance works are automatically disqualified from the category of 'high art' because of their monetary potential, the only works that could theoretically be included are screendance films made by concert dance artists, thus ultimately maintaining the elitist bias against 'popular art.'

Economics might in part explain why concert dance artists are not enamored of screendance practitioners, particularly TikTokers.[93] But concert dance's status as 'high art' and screendance's as 'low art' is a division upheld by dancers, audiences, and critics alike. This has to do with the concept of 'original' art and the ephemeral nature of dance. Live dance performances are original works in the sense that each iteration of a show is unique and fleeting, even if it is the same choreography being performed night after night. The value of the work as 'high art,' therefore, is not only in the quality of dancing or its effect upon the viewers, but also in its exclusivity and perceived rarity.[94] A finite number of seats are sold for every live performance, unlike many screendance

performances that may be viewed (and, crucially, reviewed) at any time by anyone with an internet connection.

Another perspective on the distinction between 'high' and 'low' art as it applies to concert dance and screendance is that of meaning-making. 'High art' is "discussed and presented as though [it is a] holy relic…enveloped in an atmosphere of…religiosity."[95] 'Low art,' in contrast, "enters a million houses, and, in each of them, is seen in a different context."[96] The role of screens in this process is paramount: in the past, a live dance performance "could never be seen in two places at the same time,"[97] lending great importance to the darkened theater in which the performance is seen. Screendance, conveyed through a screen and viewed from a great number of places, has no one site to tie together the way it is interpreted. As a result, "its meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings."[98]

Conclusions for the Future of Screendance

Screendance as a performance medium is not the solution to all the problems of the concert dance world, nor is it a suggested replacement for live dance performance. Screendance is a performance format that is closely related to live concert dance, but is defined by its digital, screen-based experience and its depiction of the impossible. Impossibility is not the only way to define screendance. Of all the ways that it could be defined, impossibility is useful because it both narrows and broadens the scope of what can be considered screendance. This is not in itself a helpful device, but it is invaluable in identifying who the creators and spectators of screendance are.

Screendance is largely "popular dance – dance broadly recognized as performed by the 'populace' either in codified forms such as hip-hop, in fads like the Macarena, or in styles unique to individual members of the public."[99] Its web-based format "has been highly successful in providing a platform to certain otherwise marginalized individuals and movement forms for wider exposure."[100] Although far from perfect, social media and the internet have created a more equitable space where many common people are able to share their work, receive free feedback, and view the creations of others. This is especially important because "the constantly evolving exchange and recombining of information is seen as existing apart from traditional centers of power."[101] The creators and spectators of this kind of screendance content are the same people, with neither group belongs to the world of professional filmmaking or dance. In this scenario, impossibility is a measure of access: people without professional training can utilize screendance tools in a free or low-cost manner to create content that was once available to only specialized artists.

Music videos and other commercial screendance films are not the same as the user-generated content as described earlier, but impossibility still plays a role in their making and viewing. On-demand, streamable music videos evolved as music producers recognized that video content could be marketed as distinct from music CDs and concert tickets rather than used as promotional material.[102] For this to work, music videos needed to be a significantly different experience from attending a concert. Concerts already had singing, dancing, and colorful light-up LED backdrops; music videos needed, therefore, to have something that couldn't be done live on stage.

Screendance as a discipline has shown that there is space in it for concert dance artists and filmmakers, too. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many dancers whose performance seasons were cancelled or cut short turned to screendance both to pass their time and for employment. Some, such as American Ballet Theater's Erica Lall, joined TikTok.[103] Others, like LA-based choreographer Jacob Jonas, used their time in quarantine to collaborate with other artists on new screendance work. Jonas' company, Jacob Jonas The Company (JJTC), built an internationally collaborative film series, Films.Dance, to produce, direct, and sometimes choreograph for dancers, filmmakers, editors, and movement artists in multiple countries.[104] Although JJTC had previously been working toward the integration of technology into live dance performance, Films.Dance gave them a chance to create impossibility in the filming and editing process rather than through the choreography or the mechanical rigging of a dancer to a pulley.

In describing screendance as creating the impossible and awe-inspiring, it is easy to forget the flaws, problems, and imperfections it continues to carry forward. Although it opens the door for younger, queer, disabled, and nonwhite artists and audiences in a way that concert dance has been largely unsuccessful in doing, biases still exist in both the people that make screendance and the technology that is used to do so. Dances created by Black TikTokers continue to be attributed to white, conventionally attractive TikTokers instead.[105] Camera technology continues to improve the appearance of lighter skinned individuals while leaving behind their darker-skinned counterparts.[106] Screendance works continue to rely on Hollywood filmmaking practices that have roots in anti-Black racism.[107]

To blame all of screendance's failings on concert dance would be unjust. As with any hybrid discipline, all its sources — concert dance, cinema, and popular culture — are in part to blame. Screendance does, however, have the advantage of being its own artistic field with a complex and ongoing history that points to its success in evolving, growing, and diversifying to meet the needs of both its makers and its audience. As a young, constantly adapting discipline, there is still time "to bring to life the full generative potential…of screendance."[108]

Appendix: Film Terminology

Aperture or Iris – The size of the circular opening that lets light into the camera.

Canted angle or Dutch angle – A type of camera shot positioning that involves tilting the camera in the vertical plane, creating a similar effect to tilting one's head.

Continuity editing – A process of cutting between multiple related shots to locate the viewer in the flow of time as well as physical location. This series of shots usually begins with an establishing shot, a wide-angle, zoomed out shot of a location that helps to help orient the viewer.

Deep focus – A cinematographic technique that creates a large depth of field using a wide-angle lens and low aperture/iris, such that the foreground, middle-ground and background objects are all in focus.

Diegesis – The interior experience of the 'character' in film; this includes things seen, heard, and experienced by the character as the story or arc unfolds, but not information, visuals, or a perspective that only the viewer has access to.

LiDAR scan – A measurement method that relies on recording the time a laser beam takes to bounce off an object and return to the receiver to estimate distances.

Mise-en-scene – The placement of scenery, props, actors, and lighting within a two-dimensional frame.

Motion Capture – A process of digitally recording the movement of people and objects.

Shot distance – The distance of a performer from the camera. This may include anything from an extreme close up (for instance, part of a person's face) to extreme long shot (where the emphasis is on the surroundings and the human body may just barely visible).

Take – A single continuous video recording. The camera may move or be stationary during this time, but there are no cuts to other angles, shots, or scenes.

Notes

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[21] Porter, *Dance with Camera*, 15.

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