

Dance film from Maya Deren to Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker

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Abstract: This study sets out to review the most influential creators in the history of dance film, both historical and recent figures. In approaching dance film I was inspired by my own experience in this field, a short dance film, and by my passion about contemporary dance. I see the communication between cinema and dance as capitalising both on corporeal expressive capacity and the technical means of editing, lighting and oratorical accumulation in the sense of a discourse, whose substance need not be epic or narrative. The studied creators demonstrate the primacy of poetry, as it is transposed into movement, in the making of a dance film.

Key words: Maya Deren, dance theatre, Pina Bausch, contemporary dance, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker

Introduction

Dance film appeared in the 5th decade of the previous century, once the non-narrative experiments of American filmmaker, choreographer, dancer, film theoretician, poetess and photographer Maya Deren came to the fore. „A different vision of the art of dance is outlined towards the middle of the 20th century, when the discourse on body and movement changes [...]. Simple, day-to-day gestures begin to be seen as dance manifestations, as performers are not required to have bodies trained through traditional techniques.” (Mavhima 2021, 25). Maya Deren directed four dance films: “A Study in Choreography for Camera”, “Ritual in Transfigured Time”, “Meditation on Violence” and “The Very Eye of Night”; the former two will partially be the object of this study.

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In the 21st century certain music videos were included in the category of visual products, in which “cinema techniques” are used “in order to create choreographies” (Mavhima 2021, 25). One such video, filmed by the band *Chemical Brothers*, will be discussed below. A chapter will be dedicated to the genre of dance theatre, to which three of the dance films presented in this study belong: *Die Klage der Kaiserin* (The Plaint of the Empress), written, choreographed and directed by Pina Bausch, *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* and *Strange Fish*, composed as dance theatre pieces by Lloyd Newson and his company, *DV8 Physical Theatre*.

A similar case, this time of a choreography filmed subsequently and thus transformed into a dance film, is that of the piece “Fase, four movements to the music of Steve Reich”, composed by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. As opposed to dance theatre, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker prioritises contemporary dance in her practice.

1. Maya Deren or the fantastic context

In *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945), a first sequence filmed in a forest visualises choreographer Talley Beatty in different shots, the first three being right-to-left panning shots, giving the impression that the dancer appears thrice in the same shot. A “visible” cut brings Talley Beatty in close-up. He begins a descending movement, which is continued through a match on movement in a full shot, in which the dancer executes the first impressive movement, a balancing act of the vertical body on a diagonal, supported on the tips of his toes, with the centre of gravity in his pelvis. The quality of the movement benefits from this shot being filmed in back light. The choreographer’s descending arching of the left leg beginning with a lateral stance makes the transition towards the next location, an apartment. The rhythm of the dance increases with the new filming spot, the courtyard of a museum. The dancer executes increasingly fast pirouettes here, being filmed in close-up. The effect is a combination of slow-motion and fast-forwarded movement.

As opposed to this study, *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946) offers a clearer structure. The dance film begins with a verisimilar sequence, as the dancer Rita Christiani is the first to be placed in a fantastic context. Through

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a gesture of calling for performer Maya Deren's attention, she oscillates between the two situations. The performers' action is that of wrapping up thread onto a ball. A third character appears in this shot, observing them. Filmed in slow motion, Maya Deren ends the action by raising her arms in a choreographed gesture.

The third character marks the passage towards another, much more generous, space, in which a party takes place. Once the transition towards this sequence is made, Maya Deren starts to direct freeze frames, the first of which reveals a characteristic gesture of conviviality, arms stretched out towards a fellow human. In this sequence Rita Christiani wears a nun costume and a flower bouquet on her right arm. Once among the party goes, Rita Christiani causes a sequence of gestures – closing in, holding of shoulders/hands, moving off -, which, after having been pedestrian, becomes choreographed.

An exterior third sequence is filmed in a park populated by statues, this being the place where the dance movements have the greatest weight. A duet between Rita Christiani and choreographer Frank Westbrook is being choreographed. The location is capitalised on through freeze frames, which sometimes reveal the dancers' statuesque bodies and other times interrupt the movement in a fashion reminiscent of Eadweard Muybridge studies in biomechanics. At the end Maya Deren substitutes herself to Rita Christiani, who is being followed by the character performed by Frank Westbrook.

2. *Let Forever Be*

“In the study *Choreography; At the Crossroads of Cinema and Dance* choreographer Alla Koygan supports the idea that the act of creating a choreography for cinema is different from that of a choreography for dance [...]” She “Identifies three categories of dance films [...]. The filmmakers who use cinema techniques in order to create choreographies can be found in the second category. [...] Products such as [...] the music videos of the band *Chemical Brothers* are included.” (Mavhima 2021, 150-151)

In *Let Forever Be* (2003), from a long shot of a crossroads, our attention is being drawn towards a tramp who plays the drums. Through zooming out and panning towards the right we discover a young woman

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sleeping in the building across the street. An important detail is the alarm clock situated on the bed stand; six female dancers stop the alarm on six alarm clocks. Another one joins them, as they are positioned in perspective. A camera movement reveals a spotlight oriented towards the camera, which, next to the costumes, induces a 1980s style. The dancers withdraw before one-person beds arranged vertically; through a fan-like effect, these compress into the image of the sleeping young woman. She wakes up, stopping the alarm clock.

The young woman sits up and stretches, in which moment her image is again multiplied into five dancers, who stretch in their turn within a stage design formed out of panels; they come out from between the panels dancing.

In the next sequence the young woman is in a shopping mall. On a moving staircase she is again multiplied into six dancers placed within a stage design, which, filmed from above, imitates the aspect of the moving staircase. When the dancers stand up off the stage design, we observe it for what it is – a three-dimensional construction resembling a pyramid. The sequence is filmed on a set; six drummers are placed in perspective, wearing fake bears and fur hats. The image transforms into the representation of a single drummer, to whom a digital effect of multiplication of up to six silhouettes is applied. Once the effect ends, we find the initial drummer on the street, while the young woman runs before him. As she stops, the pyramidal stage design is staged again, the shopping mall appears and it becomes clear that she is at her job, selling cosmetic products.

3. Dance theatre

In her non-narrative film *Die Klage der Kaiserin* (The Complaint of the Empress), Pina Bausch directs sequences in which mainly dancers from her dance theatre company Tanztheater Wuppertal perform some coherent and some merely episodic roles. There are transitory roles, actresses and/or actors appearing once or a reduced number of times and there are roles woven through the whole duration of the film. A sense cannot be found in an equal distribution of the roles, but in the richness of ideas staged, such as the contrast between luxury and human misery, the human condition in general, the condition of immigration.

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Linearity is assured by ordering the pieces of music on the soundtrack without editing interventions. Thus, we can interpret that what would constitute a sequence in a narrative film (unity of place and time) is supported by the unity of the respective musical piece in this film (there are multiple filming locations in such a sequence). Additionally, the tone of the shots is obviously influenced by the musical genre. If the funeral march chosen for the first “sequence” illustrates, among other aspects, an actress handling a leaf blower and pointing a pistol at them, a woman dressed in a burlesque costume, stumbling on rocky terrain, two identically dressed old men walking with difficulty in Indian file on the same terrain, a woman repeatedly taking out her arm from the left sleeve of her evening dress, then putting it back in as she wanders through a forest formed out of numbered trees, men holding children in their arms or by the hand among the same numbered trees, a man dressed in an office suit digging in the rocky terrain, and the hymn “Consumatum est” illustrates the human condition especially in a shot, in which a man carries an oversized wardrobe on his back with great effort, the *son cubano* melody “Aurora en Pekin” illustrates, among other aspects, a love scene, a nude man covered in mud dancing inside a flower shop; he will appear subsequently, playing one of the coherent roles. “Aurora en Pekin” will be used later for a cyclic comic sequence (that begins and ends with the same choreography).

Choreography *per se* appears surprisingly late in the film, being illustrated by the folk music piece “Kaichin - Le signal nocturne du coucher” (“It is as if Bausch must find the choreographic in the familiar before she can move fully into what we recognise as contemporary dance.” (Brannigan 2011, 114)); two dancers execute choreographic phrases in different shots, the stage design including pouring streams of water resembling rain. The technique will be used in the piece *Vollmond* (Full moon), composed by Pina Bausch in 2006.

The dance films *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* and *Strange Fish* belonging to the company *DV8 Physical Theatre* were made in the same period as *Die Klage der Kaiserin* (The Plaint of the Empress). The action of the dance theatre piece *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* (1989) takes place on a set resembling an industrial setting, which could be a stone bunker. No main characters can be distinguished in it, the ensemble cast being formed out of four performers. Only the ending institutes a main character in the sense of the narrative of the piece.

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The first choreographic gesture that does not connote homoeroticism belongs to one of the “secondary” characters: he flexes his knees, orienting his palms outwardly. “While constant shifts in filmic perspective maintain a malleable sense of space, the isolated figures are organized spatially within the mise en scene and through editing to create a continuity of movement across figures.” (Brannigan 2011, 134-135). In a subsequent scene, he initiates a dance phrase, consisting in climbing up / trying to reach a bar fixed at a superior height. (The dancers use their bodies as support.) In full shot duet with another “secondary” character, he falls repeatedly just as a consequence of the latter’s intense regard. As if trying to test him, the former throws himself in his arms from high up. The action is also captured in a long shot, which impresses through the amplitude of the gesture.

Strange Fish (1992) proposes the version of a female Jesus, who supervises the characters’ action. Among these two antagonists can be found, unusually the main female character herself, joined by a clownish spirit, otherwise the only named character: Nigel. The two form an alliance; in a first scene, the main female character tempts Jesus, a moment resumed at the end of the production. The perspective is, thus, a human one.

The main female character is represented by performer Wendy Houston. Her alliance with Nigel is initially manifested in a comedy convention. Her need for closeness determines her to fluctuate between Nigel and her future partner. The secondary plot is supported, like in a novel, by secondary characters, a stable couple, who present an ideal to the main female character. The latter manifests her interest for her future partner through comic scenes, supported by movements such as a handstand or locking a love interest of his in a room. The formation of the couple of the secondary characters is illustrated gradually, as the performer dances with two tea candles on his shoulders. In the same scene there are used “disguise and the choreography of camera and bodies to confuse distinctions between” Wendy Houston and the female secondary character “in a mute satire of seduction. The women [...], similarly dressed and wearing blonde wigs, enter” in the room, in which the male secondary character is found. “Operating as a team, the women begin to vie for his attention, moving rapidly to disorient him. A point-of-view shot represents his static field of vision and the women circle him, the two blonde wigs bobbing across the frame, faces obscured, and the masses of hair

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mutating into a disembodied white puppet. The precisely choreographed trio that follows continues the theme with the two women constantly replacing each other midmovement in proximity to the man.” (Brannigan 2011, 133-134). Having chosen his partner, the male secondary character interprets a duet, supporting her with his body, while she is fixed diagonally on a background wall. Wendy Houstoun watches them, being filmed in two shots, a medium and a full shot, in the latter of which she leaves the location – a corridor. In fact, the locations – specific to a set – are used recurrently.

In one of the most complex filmed sequences, the clownish spirit, Nigel, cuts in between the two members of the couple. Upon being rejected, he draws near to the female main character, who reacts violently, forcing him to stop. However, mirroring Nigel’s action, Wendy Houstoun in her turn cuts in between the secondary characters, looking for affection. Left on her own, the female main character is faced with the only option of her future partner. In the location corresponding to Wendy Houstoun’s room, in the presence of the two, the female Jesus intones an invocation, then throwing two small stones between them. The most poetic moment in this dance-theatre production is the rain of stones following the invocation, happening between them and in the background of the close-up of the female main character. The union between Wendy Houstoun and her partner is observed by the female Jesus.

Those who are, in fact, portrayed as friends of the female main character, the secondary characters, speak about her in asides, avoid her. She shoves each one of them, falling to the ground, however, as if as a consequence of a morally wrong gesture. They exit hurriedly. The clownish spirit slides into the corridor, dancing a duet with Wendy Houstoun, then disappearing through a change of shot and match on movement.

The boards in the female main character’s room start to vibrate. Three boards spring up powerfully from the floor, as if propelled by a superhuman force. Under the floor there is water. An arm reaches out of the water, then the entire body, less the head of a male character, who tries to rise. Wendy Houstoun does her best to help him, not succeeding, however; the male character sinks back. The female main character frantically pulls out a large number of boards, looking for the character.

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What seems to have been her partner, swallowed by the underground waters, causes a confrontation between Wendy Houstoun and the clownish spirit. They fall into the water enchained in battle; the female Jesus intones a new invocation. Stressing the metaphorical nature of the dance-theatre piece, the female main character's partner enters the room, water dripping off him, suffering atrociously. In a duet, the female Jesus consoles and bears him away from the source of the submergence. Wendy Houstoun comes out of the water as if after having fought the depths; she calls Nigel.

The crucified female Jesus intones a prayer, whose melos is oriental in nature. The female main character climbs onto the cross, pouring wine out of a beaker into the mouth of the female Jesus, while she sings. The female Jesus falls off the cross.

“In Hinton’s film versions of” both of “Lloyd Newson’s stage works, *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* (1990) and *Strange Fish* (1992), movement sometimes operates as a force shifting across and between bodies that become exchangeable, with continuity maintained through choreographic and filmic operations. Both films feature a shift from the individual to the collective through figural and filmic movement and a destabilisation of subjects and time-space, in this case to make sociocultural observations that go beyond individual stories or situations.” (Brannigan 2011, 133)

4. Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker

The dance film *Fase*, whose title is a made-up word, is based on Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker’s choreography, “Fase, four movements to the music of Steve Reich”. Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker stated that “*Fase* is particularly about a powerful and accurate structural composition” and that “the intention was for the three basic elements: light, sound and movement to have a continuity and exchange to them.” (De Keersmaeker 2013, *Early Works*, DVD *Fase*).

Steve Reich’s four compositions, *Piano Phase* (1967), *Come out* (1966), *Violin Phase* (1967), *Clapping Music* (1972) were published separately. The film reproduces this order in its chapters.

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Piano Phase is filmed in a spacious location with stage-design interventions; the two female dancers are lit with four spotlights, two of them superimposing their shadows. The stage lighting presents places where the dominating nuance is blue. The first shot of the film advances from an establishing shot to an extreme close-up of the overlapping, yet dephased shadows, as the dancers execute the same choreographic phrases. As early as the first five minutes, the editing features extreme close-ups of moving parts of the dancers' bodies. Once a new choreographic phase is introduced, the shot changes, as they are filmed from above. As we will subsequently see in *Violin Phase*, there is an initial choreographic phrase, which dominates the choreographic discourse and to which the dancers or, in the case of *Violin Phase*, the only dancer return(s) periodically. The technique of introducing a new shot size or camera movement to match a new choreographic phrase is consistently used. The meaning lies in approaching the dancers in a manner which capitalises on their moving bodies and the expressiveness of their faces. The sound overdubbing conveys their sustained effort in this choreography. The clearest example of the compositional technique of phasing, used by Steve Reich and choreographically transposed by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker appears in a full shot of the dancers, in which they execute dephased pirouettes. The director obtains spectacular shots by using a crane effect (the end credits feature a Steadicam operator). The first chapter of the dance film seems to have a double ending: returning to a full shot parallel to the stage-design background (the editing continues with the first separate close-ups of the dancers), which is then repeated in different lighting.

In *Come out* Steve Reich recorded as a sample the sentence end "come out to show them", a fragment from the initial audio recording. The dancers are filmed in a utilitarian building with extensive window panes, as the lighting has the same blue dominating tinge like in *Piano Phase*. The director uses fast editing in order to create a sequence, which imitates the repetition rhythm of the recorded sample. Like in *Piano Phase*, director Thierry De Mey draws near the dancers at the beginning of the film. Sound overdubbing by the dancers is introduced in close-ups, intensifying the cinema experience. A lighting installation made of neon bodies is activated once a new choreographic phrase is introduced. The sample reaches a stage in which the words are not intelligible anymore.

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At the beginning of the *Violin Phase* chapter, dancer Anne Theresa De Keersmaecker is filmed in way that does not immediately reveal her identity. There is an approaching movement of the camera, manifested through ever tighter variations of the same shot, such as an angle from above. Because of the perpetual motion, classical shooting script indications, such as frontal, profile or semi-profile cannot be applied. Once the intensity of the choreographic figures increases through a pirouette, the dancer's aural presence is recorded and conveyed. The camera also approaches the dancer from a platform built like a stage, covered with material resembling sand. Now is the contextual link between location and stage design clarified (one of the corners of the platform points towards a path of the park, which ensures a naturally bright perspective). The bird's eye view acquires meaning by capturing the dancer's trajectories between the centre and the line of the circle initially outlined on the platform. These resemble the represented form of human DNA, "the subconscious reproduction of the double spiral movement of the DNA, discovered by geneticist James D. Watson and neuro-physicist Francis Crick" (Mavhima 2021, 118).

The dynamization of the minimalist choreography can be constituted by the point in which the dancer executes a lively leap, connected to a previous medium shot, which shows her happy to dance in front of the camera; Anne Theresa De Keersmaecker does not only dance from the perspective of a person, she affirms her femininity. As a punctuation point within the choreography, the creator stops in similar positions, being filmed in three successive shots, as if the dancer tried to end the musical illustration. Stopping is integrated in the dance, becoming a gesture – a part of the repertoire of gradually introduced movements (among which leaning and leaping).

The camera substitutes the centre of the circle, the rotation of the dancer, presented in fragmented manner up to this point, being now fully taken in by the photography in one shot. She multiples the drawing made step by step, all through the choreography the base of the movements remaining that of turning the torso and the arms to the left and to the right. Beside progressively adding new movements, Anna Theresa De Keersmaecker combines choreographic figures previously presented separately: the pirouettes increase in number, often in a single phrase. One of the them is

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filmed as taking place at the centre of the circle. Such phrases end up by replacing the dominant role of the initial movement.

In a tracking shot which sets out from a path of the park, the camera approaches the “stage” and the dancer, this being, in fact, the first time that the camera is situated outside the stage space. The first from a series of several shots seems to be filmed from a vehicle, which stresses the impression of the velocity of the dancer’s movements. Her final posture is captured from above, as the dancer remains still in the middle of the circle.

5. Conclusions

Dance film has evolved from Maya Deren’s shorts, inspired from the poetry of different worlds, the fascination with dreams, surrealism and movement towards an epic, sometimes narrative substance as in the case of the dance-theatre piece *Strange Fish*, sometimes towards an associative substance as conceived by Pina Bausch, reaching the 21st century as a representation of the ambitions of contemporary dance in total absence of any narrative requirements. To what extent contemporary dance is capitalised on through techniques of video manipulation can be the topic of a different study, although revealing movement first necessitates an attentive observer and maybe subsequently an involved one.

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