

Special Issue Editorial: Screen Dance Audiences – why now?

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Duncan Gray, commissioning editor of entertainment for Sky 1 and the man behind *Got to Dance*, one of several major dance TV shows in the UK, recently declared: 'You get a sense of when the moment is right for something – and for dance, this is that moment' [1]. Gray's remark refers to the escalating numbers in the UK participating in dance, from street to clubs and community centres and also watching dance, from Covent Garden ballet through to streetdance. This is also the moment for screendance, with a plethora of activity across the globe, constant evolution of forms through the development of new technologies, and with the internet and social media transforming how audiences relate to and interact with dance and also vastly multiplying audience and participant numbers. The increasing popularity of 3D film in recent years is fuelling enthusiasm for dance on screen, with several major filmmakers and choreographers embracing dance in 3D [2]. Moreover, in a range of new media developments, dance increasingly crosses the boundaries between human and digital bodies and physical and virtual environments, such as in the well known example of Paul Kaiser's and *Shelley Eshkar's classic Biped (1999)*, a collaboration with choreographer Merce Cunningham filmed by Charles Atlas, or in the recent experimental work of Igloo (Bruno Martelli and Ruth Gibson) [3].

Not surprisingly, the vibrancy of the screendance scene has whetted academic interest in the topic. The AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) is currently funding a Screendance Network (2009-2011) which in 2010 launched *The International Journal of Screendance*, a joint venture between the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA and the University of Brighton, UK. The journal is aimed at 'all those interested in the intersection of dance and the moving image including film and video-makers, dance artists, producers, composers as well as the wider interested public' [4]. The phrase 'the intersection of dance and the moving image' indicates that 'screendance' is an umbrella term which at this juncture still combines two distinct areas of activity, each with their own diverse foci and agendas. It is therefore not

surprising that a key and recurring debate within screendance is about where the relative emphasis on dance or on moving image lies within the work and in constructing the target audience. This concern runs through all the contributions to this special issue on 'Screen Dance Audiences' and is made explicit within Karen Pearlman's position paper 'If a dancing figure falls in a forest and nobody sees her...'. Pearlman's provocation is directed particularly towards those screen dance makers who she argues fail to engage explicitly with how their work is watched by audiences. In particular Pearlman argues that a particular manifestation of screendance, which she terms 'dance on camera', frequently sits uneasily in its relationship with an audience. Rather than achieving a powerful ambiguity, this lack of clarity fails to be fully convincing.

This challenge of a complex mixing of modes frequently reflects the background of the makers in diverse fields which can include film, video, TV, social media, visual arts and music as well as (or instead of) dance; and which are often distributed across platforms such as television, cinema, specialist festivals, the internet and galleries. Indeed, in a range of discussions of dance on screen [5] the form is consciously articulated as *hybrid*, in constant development and transition, whether we are talking about the ubiquitous prominence of dance in music videos (from Beyoncé to Michael Jackson); the presence of dance within the narrative of a film where the characters are dancers or happen to dance (such as 'Strictly Ballroom' or 'Grease'); dance within reality television programmes ('Strictly Come Dancing'); dance within musicals (including Bollywood); dance within the framework of experimentations with the form or function of new media (Alex Reuben's film 'Linedance', co-choreographed with AfuaAwuku), all of which are manifestations explored within this special issue.

Dance on screen, then, can certainly not be considered as a single genre that is experienced in a single manner, as is reflected in the plethora of terms used to describe it - screen dance, dance media, video dance, dance on screen, dance on camera, cinedance, choreocinema, dansical . . . The problem of categorisation that results from the bringing together of dance and screen media and the notions of hybridity that result should therefore require us to consider whether we also need to think about hybrid (or simply different) forms of spectatorship. The notion that dance on screen challenges existing concepts of spectatorship runs throughout Sherill Dodds' *Dance on Screen*, such as when she writes that 'with its bold, playful and unpredictable images, video dance calls into question our expectations of the televisual medium' [6].

It is interesting that choreographer Wayne Eagling judges the merits of the 3D version of his 'Men Y Men' according to how well it can render the effects of live dance. 'It's good, very lifelike, almost as if you're watching from the front of stage' [7]. Indeed, the liveness of the dancer is a ghost that haunts screendance, as is wittily suggested by the title of Bill T. Jones's 'Ghostcatching' (1999), a piece created in collaboration with Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar,

which uses data extracted from Jones's dancing body through motion capture to animate visual material devised by means of drawing and computer composition, and plays with our sense of how the screen succeeds (or not) in 'capturing' the dancer's movement [8]. Karen Pearlman's article in this Special Issue articulates some of the problems and questions raised by the difficulty of defining the role of the screen dancer in terms of existing conventions. Some of these issues reflect the unresolved ghostly presence of screen dance's invisible, live, other. However, if the presence of a live dancer continues to 'haunt' its audiences and unsettle dance's relation to the screen, screendance also challenges the conventions and expectations of both live performance and screen media by constantly evolving new modes of engaging with and involving live audiences as collaborators and even as dancers themselves, which can lead to new forms and scales of active spectatorship and also social exchange. These aspects of screendance are addressed by several contributors to our Special Issue, through exploring the viewing strategies of spectators of 'Strictly Come Dancing' (Karen Wood); the migration of Bollywood dance out of the film screen in dancing the 'Bollywood dream' (Ann David), and forms of participatory choreography produced by social dance media (Harmony Bench). Filmmaker Alex Reuben, interviewed by Matthew Reason, explores the lived, physical space of the viewer, where the scale of the image and the space of the cinema are crucial to the spectator's embodied experience of dance on screen.

Important themes that run through the contributions are issues of audience scale and modalities and motives of engagement. Who has access to screen dance in global and local contexts, and to what extent do audiences participate in and shape its development? What are the different meanings of being 'active' audiences of screen dance, whether people are sitting at home watching TV, ensconced in their cinema seats, performing 'Bollywood' in class or on stage, witnessing or participating in crowdsourcing, flash choreographies or viral choreographies? For instance, what motivates viewers of dance on television and how active is their engagement through kinesthetic empathy (Wood)? How does screen dance engage audiences on physical and emotional levels (Reubens), and what kinds of filmic codes should screen dance observe in order to facilitate spectators' interpretive involvement (Pearlman)? What fantasies are mediated by Bollywood cinema for viewers and participants in the UK and how are they shaped by global and local contexts (David)? How do dance media and social media combine to create a hybrid art practice of 'social dance media' that both engages audiences and creates new modes of participation through popular culture (Bench)?

It also seems appropriate that the contributors to this special issue take a range of methodological approaches to engaging with the question of how a hybrid form might variously engage the spectator. Appropriately for enquiries that seek to focus on the motivations, pleasures and rewards that audiences gain from engaging with dance on screen,

both Wood and David embed their analysis of popular engagement in dance in empirical research. Reuben's contribution is that of the practitioner, where intuition and working through the 'gut' is combined with thoughtful and engaged retrospective analysis of why and how his work engages with audiences – the interview format allows Reuben's own voice, his own tone, to be present in a manner that is always valuable within academic publications. Bench offers a more traditional scholarly overview, using her position to map out longitudinal arcs relating to how changing technology might herald a return to an emphasis on dance as a primarily social art form. Finally, Pearlman offers a provocation, from a perspective rooted in her position as a practitioner/researcher.

Pearlman's provocation also highlights the relevance of this debate concerning Screen Dance Audiences to wider issues about spectatorship – and it is with great pleasure that we present this small selection of papers on Screen Dance Audiences in *Participations* and in the context of a larger discourse on Audiences. The debate concerns hybridity; that of both the media or art form and of the audience. We might comfortably recognize that audiences adopt different viewing strategies for different arts forms or different platforms (cinema, broadcast television, recorded media, reality television, live theatre or dance performance) in a manner that is suggestive of a virtuosity in audiencing. What the collective debate about screen dance audiences might also indicate is that as art practices increasingly operate slippages across forms so audiences become attuned to an ambiguity of form and adopt a hybridity of viewing strategies.

Notes

[1] *The Times* January 12, 2010

http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/the_way_we_live/article6984071.ec, accessed 28th October 2010.

'The dance revival: one nation under a groove. Young and old, male and female, accomplished and appalling, the British are putting on their dancing shoes again'. Jane Mulkerrins.

[2] Dance critic Judith Mackrell remarked on Gaby Aggiss' and Billy Cowie's 4-screen 3D video installation 'Men in the Wall' (2008) that '[the] 3-D figures . . . appear to detach themselves from the screen and inhabit the same space as the viewer. <http://artsresearch.brighton.ac.uk/research/academic/aggiss/reviews>)

Accessed 29 October 2010.) Wim Wenders' 3D film on the renowned choreographer, Pina Bausch is due out next year, and Wenders is reported as saying that '3D and dance are made for each other'. Prominent choreographers like Shobana Jeyasingh and Wayne Eagling are having their work filmed in 3D.

[3] The topic of dance and media is too vast for this present issue. Igloo's work will be discussed by Sarah Whatley in her chapter in *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Contexts* (forthcoming, Intellect).

[4] http://www.screendance.org/Journal_Press_Release.html, accessed 28th October 2010.

[5] For example: Judy Mitoma, Elizabeth Zimmer, Dale Ann Stieber, *Envisioning dance on film and video*, London: Routledge, 2002; Sherril Dodds, *Dance on Screen: Genres and Media from Hollywood to Experimental Art*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001 (2nd edition, 2004); Stephanie Jordan and Dave Allen, Eds. *Parallel Lines: Media Representations of Dance*. London: John Libbey, 2003.

[6] Dodds, *Dance on Screen*, 2001: 120.

[7] 3D dance takes a great leap forward

'The 3D revolution is coming to dance'. ? guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 28 September 2010 22.15 BST

Judith Mackrell. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2010/sep/28/3d-dance>. Accessed 28th October 2010.

[8] For more information and to watch excerpts from 'Ghostcatching', go to <http://openendedgroup.com/index.php/artworks/ghostcatching/>.

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