

Thinking about Audiences: a dance film-maker's perspective. An interview with Alex Reuben

Matthew Reason
York St John University, UK

Volume 7, Issue 2 (November 2010)

If screendance (not that he likes that terminology) is considered a hybrid form sitting between and across dance and media then Alex Reuben is appropriately diverse in his influence and background. Training originally in fine arts and design, Reuben was a DJ before he started to make films and his work combines dance and music and appears across platforms in arts galleries, on TV and at International Film Festivals. His work is very much about human movement on screen yet at times contains little of what might be recognisable from traditional art or theatre dance forms. I interviewed Reuben in London in August 2010 and, as he discusses, his work is hard to categorise, hard to pigeonhole in a programming strand or within an academic discourse. His work therefore presents clear problems in terms of when and where to watch it and also, for the viewer, provokes questions about what is being watched, why and with what viewing strategies in mind.

In the interview I deliberately set out to explore with Reuben how he conceptualises his audience when making screendance works. I did so partly because I'm fascinated with audiences and with this special issue in mind but also because as a filmmaker Reuben has a strong and recurring interest in what recent advances in neuroscience and understandings of cognitive perception might tell him about his audiences. There is a strong interest in neuroscience amongst dance practitioners and I was particularly interested to find out why this was from a practitioner who has engaged with the material in a reflective manner.

Inevitably asking a practitioner about how or why they do things is always problematic. For all practitioners part of the answer is that it is instinct, informed by experience. With Alex Reuben, however, it is also interesting to see how conscious engagement through neuroscience with the idea of how audiences watch feeds back into his own reflection on his processes after the event. In other words after making his films he remains interested in them: honestly curious

about how and why they work; curious about what his unconscious, improvisational processes produced and what might be said about these after the event.

The objective of an interview is always to allow the interviewee to speak through their own words and having reflected on my own motivation for the particular questions I asked I'll end this introduction here. I am delighted to present the interview here along with three pieces – *Que Pasa*, *Routes and Line Dance* – of his always varied and ever engaging work.

Matthew Reason: Could you tell me a little about your background and how you got into making dance films?

Alex Reuben: When I was a kid the thing that really fascinated me about watching TV was when music and dance came together. The things that really moved me right from a really young age would be footage of something like Jackson Five and formation or individual artists, it could be James Brown or Elvis Presley, that involved movement on screen. It hypnotised me like magic. Later I studied fine art and was a DJ but I would continue to observe dance. And so when I started making films with the money I made from DJ-ing it was very apt to continue the journey.

In 2000 I saw this beautiful dancer, Louise James, dancing in *Simply Boogie* - a club in Brixton - to a track off an album by Horace Silver that I used to DJ and I just loved the way she moved. It wasn't technical, it was rhythm and fluidity and the movement was very natural, sexy and it just seemed to sort of possess within it a whole load of ideas that at that time I was interested in but not consciously so. This then became my one minute film [Que Pasa](#) [1].

Reason: So although your formal training is in art and design you've always had an interest in both dance and film?

Reuben: My interest is cinema. I loved cinema, music and dance. Music made me dance at home, in discos, and later in nightclubs from an early age. I was a DJ because I loved to see individuals improvise in dance. I often think that dance film is the origins of cinema. The silent film was a very physical language; not just the obvious candidates, who were fantastic, like Chaplin or Keaton and so on which is very clearly physical theatre, but also in the first tests of film and video, they were often done with dancing; strange considering there was no synched

music to be played back. And also, even in advertising, like whiskey, some of the earliest ads were of dancers. It was very strange and a signifier of the cultural importance of dancing.

And if you look at some of the most revered directors, you often find it's a very physical and choreographed language. Not only directors like Maya Deren, but also Stanley Kubrick (e.g. *2001 A Space Odyssey*), Claire Denis (*Beau Travail*), Martin Scorsese talking about his choreography in *Raging Bull* and Eisenstein, in a very physical, dynamic form of editing. For me editing is choreographing, or rather it can be choreography.

Reason: It is interesting that you say your interest is 'cinema', rather than film. Would you say all your works are made for the cinema?

Reuben: I realised that I was doing that subconsciously before I realised consciously. Yes, I love cinema. That's what inspires me. Now, don't get me wrong; I love TV. I really do. And I grew up really engaged with things like Dennis Potter and I think, particularly *Pennies from Heaven*, was landmark TV and especially important for dance film because you had a popular TV series that all of a sudden moved between spoken narrative and musical. No TV series did this and it stopped me in my tracks as I grew up.

But what I like to do...when I draw, and when I studied art which was where I began, I don't like drawing small. I actually need the physicality of movement. I feel as though I'm dancing and drawing when I make films. So, I think my things work best in cinema.

Reason: Is it also something about the scale of cinema that is important to you?

Reuben: When you're in this position of something so big, your head can almost dive into it as if it was a pool of water; you can be immersed because you're in cinema conditions. Although sadly they can't make it as dark nowadays as they used to be because, ideally, you'd want to be blacked out so you've got no peripheral vision. In a very simple and visual sense it's something big that really moves you, like sculpture.

I do recognise that to an extent if you become engaged with something, all of a sudden sometimes it doesn't matter how big or how good the image is. However, there are two things here; we're talking about looking but half of the medium is hearing and you just can't get away

from that unless you're going to make a truly silent film. So when you watch something on a computer monitor, most people have just got the sound coming out of these rubbish speakers. Even the Mac speakers, they are better than most but they're still not okay, and the sound is narrow; the sound is not wide, or it's enclosed by headphones, removed from physical spatial effect. Now, this is really important because of the importance of both the sound and image working together as equals. If the sound is bad then they don't really work as well because there's such an emphasis on the synthesis of the image and the sound.

Now, with home cinema systems, obviously the sound is much wider and this affects your physical empathy with what's going on, your kinaesthetic empathy if you like. It's a huge part of it. And I think, also, sound carries the subconscious, carries your experience of watching. No, watching is the wrong word, 'experiencing'! Which is with much more than the image.

Reason: It is ironic then that we are reproducing some of your work here on a really small scale. However, isn't this inevitably how a lot of people will see, and hear, it?

Reuben: Yes. I do think there is an argument that what people are seeing then is a different thing. It is a different experience. What I think is particularly incorrect is when people are making comments on watching work and most of the time, sometimes in academic or critical circles, they're doing that on this little monitor, which is absurd. This is not the same experience as... OK, perhaps it's not absurd but it's not good to take from that your generalisation about the wider area. And by far, the most theatrical and greatest experience of watching dance film, for me, is – not the only one – it's in the cinema.

Reason: You mentioned *Que Pasa* earlier, could you tell me a little more about this film?

Reuben: As I said I saw the dancer in a club and then Louise James, the dancer danced for me in a sheer dress in front of a blue screen. And then I matted out the background details so it was just black and white and what it does as a result is for me a kind of narrative.

Reason: Could you expand on this for me. How and why is this film a narrative? It is only a minute long but there is a kind of narrative there:

Reuben: Because Louise starts from point A and moves through a precise minute to point B taking us on a journey that encapsulates a combined, anthropological history in her movement - her backgrounds, emotions, responses, improvisation and individuality. It's also sensuous and maybe an emotional narrative to both perform and observe or empathise with. *Que Pasa* to an extent is about watching an exquisite drunken dancer and thinking, how can I capture that? Louise's dance is fascinating from both an anthropological and creative side, someone's individualism that is a true expression of someone improvising, and improvisation is core to what I do. I have a physical, guttural response, I'm interested in this physical side, what's going on in the mind and in the body when you watch a film.

The silhouette came from the physical emotional response I had to watching large, abstract American expressionist paintings, such as Marc Rothko or Ellsworth Kelly. When I look, inside the gallery at the real painting – and they are vast – I literally want to dance with it [Kelly] or I feel physically sucked in [Rothko]. I almost have to put my hands out to stop myself being pulled in. It is an interior, sculptural experience that I tried to combine with Louise's fluidity and body history.

I feel like I'm drawing in dance film and exploring how the mind creates a 3d impression in consciousness. This happens instinctively after the event. It is always a gut response, following my emotions, loving dance. I reflect and break it down after, often through many years.

Reason: Are they some of the reasons why you've become very interested in neuroscience?

Reuben: Yes, it's fascinating. I've always been fascinated in what is going on inside the brain as we watch things. This includes movies or TV when I was a younger, when I remember being really mesmerised by the texture of dance and sound on screen. When I'm DJing I often feel that the production and textural quality of sound is as important as the rhythm – it prompts the selection. So when working on a screen I'm interested in how it hasn't really got depth but I'm trying to give it one, trying to penetrate the surface of something that doesn't exist in 3D. And I like to think of this in terms of the way that neuro-research suggests that nothing physical exists in sense data as instead it is a chemical engagement in the brain.

I made a short called [Line Dance \[2\]](#) where looking back on it now I think I explored some of these ideas subconsciously. The film uses motion capture to strip back dancers to basic elements, such as stick people, in order to show the sheer beauty of human movement. And

the stick people or bones model then changes to dots, producing an abstraction that looks like DNA or neurons firing. I like to think of this as an externalising of emotions or reactions that are going on in the brain as we watch. *Line Dance* explores how little information people need and how we really seek to fill in the gaps, how we seek out human narrative and human shapes. I set out to draw and choreograph with real dancers, unconsciously, this created two dimensional figures in three dimensional space, with a 4D outcome, placing texture on the screen. It has been really interesting to show this film to neuroscientists and see their reactions to it, to all these ideas I didn't have in mind consciously when I made it but I now can really see are there [3].

Reason: And now you're driven to research that further, but obviously you're not a scientist; you're not a neuroscientist, so what is the fascination with that? Why do you think you have that fascination with that kind of research, that kind of science?

Reuben: Well, it's a big question. It was instinctive, like my work, just the zeitgeist. Before I managed to start meeting people working in those areas. I just did it on my own because it fascinated me. Just going to talks, there's starting to be quite a lot of interesting people going to super art and science events such as at the Dana Centre, Wellcome Trust, and likewise through the questions I asked, they started to take an interest in me, which was great. So another of my films, *Routes*, has shown at the Wellcome Trust in a neuroscience conference and in 2009 I received a Jerwood Charitable Trust grant, to develop 3 dance film ideas around what I call *Choreogeography*, which includes the neuroscience ideas. Watching Dance researcher, Karen Wood, approached me about the *Kinesthetic Empathy* conference after a *Moves* film festival screening and talk I gave in Manchester.

Anyway, what is it? First of all I began to think, I'm interested in improvisation, so I'm interested in where that comes from and what's happening, and what's happening in the brain. And secondly, when I look at improvisation, what fascinates me is how this is a more honest movement. So I became interested in what is truth exactly – something I was studying in Philosophy at night school [Birkbeck, University of London]. And in dance, I realised what I was looking at in my films is natural movement, so what is truthful movement?

So as I thought along those lines, I also began to hypothesise, from a purely non-academic point of view, that I think some movement may also be, potentially inherent. We could carry some information at birth and it's part of our characteristics. So I'm also interested in the biological as well as the neurological sense.

There is a common, potential problem with this kind of possibility being used negatively in terms of racial stereotyping or biological determinism but I think we have to be careful of not being scared to explore relevant areas. As part of a big picture, genes may be one part of how we move, just as they are part of what we may look like or what illnesses we may experience.

I guess *Que Pasa* was the thing that really got me thinking, because in *Que Pasa* there are fair chunks of it where the screen is blank, and it's only a minute long. And yet people appear to like watching this film. And you could say that's like watching paint dry. First of all, the sound is still going and the sound is carrying your consciousness. And secondly, there is the research by Professor Zeki into how the brain starts to fill in the gaps in successful paintings. And I do think *Que Pasa* is like a painting. It's leaving you to fill in the gaps. And it's abstract. So in actual fact, how do we know it's a body? And I realised with *Que Pasa*, and I keep coming back to it as one of the first ones, is I'm almost trying to build a big sculptural space and it's something to do with the ears and the mind and the space, how the brain... I can't explain it. It moves both my stomach and my brain and it's an instinctive thing.

So that's when I started to actively thinking about how can I move this on and really incorporate research into neuroscience in my dance, in my films consciously but not make documentaries. I'm not interested in making documentaries *about science*, I'm not interested in what usually happens between art and science in that way. I'm interested in making work.

I think all these are things that subconsciously I'd been doing in my films for a long time. But since I started to look at neuroscience I've been more consciously asking myself, why do people react so emotionally to this film or that film? I've always been very grateful for whatever responses people have had to my films and I began to be consciously interested in why these things work. And so I started listening to scientists like Professor Zeki and so on, seeing what they said about paintings, why some paintings are successful and I realised that some of those things, like the brain filling in gaps to create narrative, was what was working with my films. I am fascinated in how the science tells us that we have this illusion of being in reality but we all know if we think about it that the brain is just converting sense data. So the sense data comes in and it lies to us all the time – one example being in terms of how little of the world we actually see in focus, but how we translate that into a world that is entirely in focus as scientist Chris Frith explains so clearly. Basically we convert the sense data into our image of the world. Well, cinema is not reality is it? It is just sense data that we immerse ourselves in.

Reason: So again just thinking around that interest in neuroscience, do you think your focus on neuroscience and your conscious awareness of how people watch has influenced how you think of audience and how you make your work?

Reuben: Well, that's a really complicated question because I'm... from an artistic point of view, I think when you make work as soon as you start making that bit of work for more than one person you're on a downward spiral. I think what an audience responds to in art is personal expression and the more personal it is, the more truthful it is and the more an audience engages with it. So it's not arrogant to say I don't think of the audience at all. I think the best way to think of the wider audience is to think of nobody but yourself and what moves you most and to be in touch with your feelings. Unfortunately a lot of Western art, in that I include countries that have taken on a Eurocentric, academic way of creating work, is that they're not listening to their emotions. They're not making work that is guttural and from here [indicating stomach] and what they feel as much as anything else. So from that point of view, I'm only making it for myself, and I'm lucky that it engages with people. But I don't think it's luck. I think there's a method to do doing that. And it's not just instinct. I think it's for the reasons I've just described.

But now, from working instinctively, now I'm engaged with, and really excited about what neuroscience is bringing to my ideas. And that is affecting what I'm going to be doing next. But even that started subconsciously. I'm kind of loath to almost... I'm not sure, I don't always like talking about work before I've made it but there's a whole lot of work that I was doing in Brazil [4] that has a particular way of framing it and I began to unpack afterwards why I was doing that. And then I realised it was parallel with my interest in science and neuroscience. But also it's to do with politics and gender and culture, such as how I frame something.

But it comes the other way around because I look at... I began to see that in a lot of my images, photographs especially, I was using... there's almost a dead centre dividing line in the middle of how an image is composed [See figure 1 below].



Figure 1. Belém do Pará, Amazon, Brazil, British Council / ACE residency, Alex Reuben, 2009

And I thought why am I doing that? What is prompting me to do this? They are compositions that people like but I then try and unpack, and I realised that it was because I was just, I think, looking at, it wasn't just the aesthetic but I think what was affecting the aesthetics was looking at a society that was incredibly cut down the middle and the gap between rich and poor, and art and the establishment or academia and feeling, being so far apart, and the distribution of wealth being so far apart. These also were reflections and connections re the UK, given perspective by my situation in Brazil. And I realised, I'm pretty sure that this was affecting my creative sensibility. This is an interesting area, I think, about how artists make work.

So the answer is yes and no. The answer is half of me, yes, is working with these ideas in mind... Half of me, no, is working instinctively. These things are filtering in and I'm interested in... if philosophy and neuroscience is beginning to converge and say, 'well actually there's no such thing as improvisation', what does it mean when we make a certain movement in dance? And that's what I want to explore.

Reason: And there is a connection here surely between your interest in how and why people move in particular ways and your interest in anthropology. This is very much present in [Routes](#), another of your films which you've already mentioned in passing.

Reuben: *Routes* (48', HDV, ACE 2005) is interesting because there's been some snobbery. It's to do with, well it's not really choreography if you've got a camera and are just filming people dancing. And it's quite interesting that sometimes conservative dance academics

don't read it anthropologically. You have to do a lot of research to find out why someone is dancing barefoot on a wooden board because there aren't really many books that are going to tell you that. Years of instinctively watching dance in clubs taught me a little, subconsciously.

That's why dance film is so rich and important as audio-visual anthropology as well as distinct, artists work with an emotional trajectory in its own right. For example the opening shot of *Routes* is a form of barefoot, Appalachian flatfoot dance on a square wooden board, which combines all sorts of roots and references: Celtic, Scottish and Irish Step; Ghanaian and Nigerian barefoot Step; Irish floorboards, English slavery boatdecks; Northumbrian Clog; Tap; Jazz and Native American Indian Stepping - the first step of Hip-Hop! So it's got history, colonization and slavery in one dance. As mentioned, neuro-biologically I find it fascinating to consider if there are certain, cross-cultural universals across humans, such as banging your feet on the ground to make noise.

Crucial is the fact that the dancers are not dancing to the music. The musicians are playing to the dance and it's an exchange. I'd argue that it's a more of a choreographed dance film if you've got a camera and you're filming found movement, than if you set out to design a dance film like *Que Pasa*— a film language entirely dictated by dance. If you look at each scene, it's shot with my response – my dance if you like – in the space to the form of that movement and sound. And I'm making those decisions about directing in dance film language and film language on the spot. The form of cutting and the form of directing in each situation is completely different and that's because I'm adapting to the improvisation and choreography but it's more improvisation of the movement and the sound as well. And this is important, and more difficult in my experience, than storyboarding shots.

So for example in the first scene with the dancing on the wooden floor, I don't cut... I don't cut out of that and I did in an earlier version. And it's very easy to do proficiently in film language and film making, to say oh, the camera's shaky there... at the edit the first thing you do is you go to a cut-away. I had loads of cut-aways. It's easy to do. So you go to a scene of somebody watching or lights in the distance... There are tons of things you can do. And I didn't do it because it stops the audience's empathy with the situation, stops you being engaged, and stops the excitement, the dynamism and the freedom or truth if you like.

And *Routes* is definitely cinematic and definitely, I think that's why cinema critics like it and why it took off a bit because all of a sudden, one of the top critics in the country [\[5\]](#) talked about the film not in a categorising way but just talked about it as pure cinema. So all of a sudden I realised they see it as pure cinema. What critics were talking about, it was all of a sudden reinforcing what I felt subconsciously in my love of dance and movies.

Reason. It is also interesting to see a film that could be described as ethnographic but that contains so little language.

Reuben. Because the language is dance and sound, a language of cinema. The narrative connections are there in each propelling link in movement and sound and the physical journey in the landscape from the Appalachians at the top of the deep south down the Mississippi, to New Orleans and in history from colonisation, to slavery, to Katrina.

There were words in it originally, interviews. And other stuff, I was dancing in it for one. And when I first made the decision to take myself and the words out it was like a weight off my shoulders. It was like I'd found the original language that I was striving for. Like DJ'ing and my first feeling.

In Q&As after *Routes*, many people say they wanted to dance and that they were waiting for the words, or / and maps, but then they forget and sink into a different experience and language, a kinetic empathy that creates a different kind of emotional story and journey. It's narrative, and perhaps like early cinema? I tried to communicate the deep talent, contradictions, kindness to me, and beauty of peoples dance. A remarkable concentration of forms, from a small area, that colonised the world.

You could say that one of the fascinations of dance film and with *Routes* in particular is the same as wildlife programmes. We're just fascinated by the way people move. And maybe we're getting bored with how people talk or we trust less, we trust words less. I was becoming alienated from forms of art and academia. Certainly the reason, with dance and sound as the language, for taking the words out of *Routes* was my dismay at how words have taken us to war in Iraq, lies, and how that could allow pinpoint bombs to be dropped on Iraq and yet not get people out of New Orleans in a hurricane. I had marched in a democracy, it made no difference. David Kelly died. Bombs went off in London all around the Place, where I worked part-time in dance film. And I thought what's the validity of words anymore? So this could also be one reason why directors, not just dance film directors, are working in similar ways. People like Sherman Ong, Claire Denis, José Luis Guerín, Apichatpong Weerasethakul [6]. There are certainly people who make me feel, ah, I'm not the only person thinking like this. There is a reason why we are working in this way. Certainly, I have become increasingly alienated from using words in my film because I just thought that's not my language.

But one of the reasons why *Routes* works, and doesn't work sometimes, is first of all, it's hard to categorise. Where in a programme do you put it? How are they going to sum it up? How is someone going to write about it? So it's not drama, it's not documentary, it's not art experimental, it's not... what is it? It's a very hard question to answer. And at the same time, that was its advantage; that's why a few critics could write about it just as pure cinema. It didn't even enter the discussion re category's. And that's why maybe the only place it could go is cinema. I like the word, movies, because it contains the word, move. And why movies are called movies was because they are literally still images that move through a projector and that our brain cannot process individually. And this is obviously great to put in the context of dance and movement.

Notes

[1] *Que Pasa* (1', DV, 2001) was included by Steve Jackman of The Place Videoworks, *One Minute Wanders* at the pioneering *Dance on Screen* film festival at the Place developed by *Artists Development*, headed by Theresa Beattie. *Que Pasa* was bought by Jennifer McLachlan, Jan Younghusband and Margaret Williams for Channel 4's innovative *4dance* series and recently won a *Choreographic Captures* prize.

[2] *Line Dance* (5', MC, ACE / MJW / Channel 4 TV / MJW, 4dance 2004) was commissioned by Jennifer McLachlan, Jan Younghusband and Margaret Williams. Nominated for best British short Film at Encounters film festival.

[3] It can for example connect to ideas presented by Prof. Alain Berthoz, Director of the Laboratory of Physiology of Perception and Action at the Collège de France, at the [Watching Dance: Kinesthetic Empathy](#) Conference earlier this year, where he talked about the importance of the eyeline – the gaze – in perception of movement.

[4] As a British Council / Arts Council England, *Artists Links*, Artist in Residence 2008-9.

[5] Geoff Andrew, BFI Head of Programming /Time Out, nominated *Routes* in his top 20 films of the decade alongside Ingmar Bergman, Michael Haneke, Claire Denis, Abbas Kiarostami and Pedro Almodavar.

[6] Winner of the Palme d'Or in Cannes in 2010.

Biographical Note

Alex Reuben (www.alexreuben.com) is a film maker whose work has been commissioned by Arts Council England, Sadlers Wells Theatre London, Channel 4 Television and received nominations for Best British Short Film with screenings at the ICA, The Cinemathèque, Paris and Memphis Brookes Museum of Art. Before this he was a DJ in the pioneering London nightclubs, *Those Rhumba Nights* and *A Night in Havana*. His DJ-ing influences his films which combine dance, music, politics and painting. In 2008-9 he was Artist in Residence for the British Council in Brazil and received a Jerwood Charitable Trust Grant for development of *Choreogeography* and dance films.