



Camera on Dance: Research Project

CONCLUSIONS: December 12, 2010

What we imagine is determined by what we know to be technically possible. The aim of this research project was to investigate new technologies available for filming dance and to develop new ways to integrate human movement with body/camera rig equipment. Through my past works in dance film, I realized that dance could not just simply be applied to film, but rather that a new synthesis of both mediums would have to be created. My goal here was to push the boundaries of the vocabulary for dance on film. The result has been a rich and incredibly rewarding foray into unexplored territory out of which has come a plethora of new ideas and possibilities that has inspired an emerging new language for dance on film.

I launched into the first Lab Phase of the project with the following question: How can we attach the camera to a dancer such that their movement is unrestricted by the technology? My collaboration with engineer Walter Klassen began with a physical exploration of his existing camera-to-body rig designs. After some hands-on experiments we concluded that his "Far-Out" rig design would be the best instrument as the base of this investigation. The rig is essentially a harness with a bolted base at the lower spine where light-weight aluminum pipes are attached, at the end of which the camera is rigged. The rig is modular in design and I was able to alter the configurations of the pipes and the camera placement into countless variations, each appropriate to different investigations of movement and perspectives. The rig had a carbon fiber back with suspenders that came over the shoulders. I expressed to Walter the need for a closer fitting harness that moved more ergonomically with the dancer. To this he offered me a leather corset-style harness that tightly fit the dancer's body and allowed for a more effective and responsive relationship to the camera. Once we had the best-suited rig, I tested the limitations of the equipment and the limitations of my movement when I was wearing the equipment.

Now we were ready for the Studio Phase, to put dancers in the rig and begin experimenting in the studio. For this phase I engaged in a creative residency with Ballet Jrger Canada to work with a select group of their dancers and to use their studio facilities. A new set of questions drove this phase: If we try to "see" with the body rather than the eye, how does that affect the viewer's experience of dance on film? If the dancer becomes the camera operator how can their mastery of and sensitivity to movement affect the subject-object relationship in film? I was enthralled by the material we saw after our first few days of working in the studio. By placing the camera on the dancer we achieved perspectives that didn't seem humanly possible. We explored movement through dynamic tension of weight, momentum and gravity and played with the push and pull between bodies. I learned that the dancer's manipulation of the dynamics of centrifugal forces had very beautiful and emotional effects for the viewer. It gave a sense of suspended time and seemed to defy gravity by altering perspectives in surreal and magical ways.

My understanding of composition and framing for the purposes of movement have been significantly challenged. We achieved perspectives of filming dance that were never possible before because of the necessity of a camera operator. Now that the dancer had become the operator I discovered a whole new realm of possibilities and perspectives with the dancer becoming the manipulator of the frame and essentially the "eye" of the viewer. Depending on the configuration of the camera rig the perspective view of the dancer within the frame would change accordingly.



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The dancer's interaction with the camera allowed the viewer a special intimacy. Also interesting was the dancer's relationship to their environment and/or the landscape that became the negative space they moved within. With the dancer as camera operator, they essentially became an architect of their environment, shifting and changing the landscapes through their movement. What and how the dancer chooses to reveal the space around them can be exploited to achieve numerous narrative possibilities.

This brings me to my final phase of the investigation, guided by the question: How can movement inform the narrative potential of film? After a week in the studio I realized that to truly test the possibilities of narrative it was now necessary to explore the work in different site-specific locations. Having learnt that the surrounding landscape itself becomes a character or partner to the dancer we ventured into parks, underground parking lots, and other industrial and city spaces. The effect was mesmerizing. Now we were in a position to really exploit the equipment as a "relational technology". We explored how moving with or against other objects, people or architecture influenced the viewer's perceptions. In this phase I also invited dance artists from different disciplines to get in the rig. Working with Flamenco, Breakdancing and Parkour artists, I wanted to see how different movement styles informed this responsive media. Particularly exciting was the perspectives achieved by dancers who could achieve superhuman feats with their bodies as well as dancers who had a mature artistry in their expression so that the viewer was drawn into the dance in a uniquely intimate way.

A new collaboration worth noting is that of Natasha Myers, who came on board as ethnographer and who helped me explore the language with which to explain what we were seeing. Her current work in the field of biology and anthropology is to investigate what she calls "haptic creativity", which can be defined as a process where new insight can be achieved through improvisational, in-the-moment kinesthetic experiments. "The effect is that one sees more than one saw before, not only because one is learning to see, but also because one is inventing a new mode of seeing." (Myers, forthcoming,). Natasha was excited by this project because it complemented her own research into responsive media technology. Our collaboration has become a rich and ongoing exchange into the meaning created by the exploration of this media.

With regards to my own development as an artist and filmmaker, this project has opened up new horizons both professionally and creatively. Through this research I have discovered an entire new language for dance on film. It is a way to bring the experience of movement closer to the viewer as well as bringing the dancer closer to the act of filming. With the dancer as operator, actor and architect of the space, the dance can now be shot from within, with the dancer as manipulator of the subject /object relationship. Now a dancer's refinement and prowess in movement can be the guiding "eye" of film. It is clear the knowledge and experience I gained in this research will inform and inspire both in my own work and my professional collaborations for a long time to come.

A video gallery of some of the results of this project are available at www.ayelenliberona.com