9-22-2017

Essence of Dance and a Camera

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Defining art is very complex but there is a universal understanding that art embraces something intangible; an essence that mesmerizes people. Dance, in particular, has a strong essence of its own when performed live on stage. However, within the past century, technology advanced exponentially with the use of cameras, such that dance may not require a live audience anymore. If a live performance was compared to its recording, would it be identical? Has this transition lost the artistic essence and experience of watching a live performance?

Dance and a camera have infinite possibilities together but my research is condensed to focus on the purposes of: recording to preserve choreography, filming to study repertory or research styles, globalizing dance, and creating hybrids of the two art forms. Hybrids include video dance, choreography specifically envisioned with a camera, and projections integrated with live performances. Each topic is defined and suggested whether or not an essence of live art is lost through a camera.

Have you ever read a book and watched the movie based on the same story and thought they were very different from each other? How about watching the same dance on stage and then on video? The reality is that the “same story” can be looked at in contrasting ways and offer different experiences. Live dance on stage as well as dance viewed on film both have value in their own right and offer various opportunities for the audience to experience. The use of a camera for dance has emerged for different reasons: to make recordings to preserve choreography, to create films to study repertory or research styles, to globalize dance, or to hybridize the two art forms. These different reasons highlight the integrity in dance and film's integration.

This research will focus on the nexus of dance and film. One way to distinguish dance films as an art form or not is to simply understand its purpose for artistic or practical reasons. For an example, when a dance is choreographed for a live audience but then recorded for documentation purposes, an audience cannot value this recording as the same experience that the live audience had. That is not to say that the recording is invalid, but the reason for the recording was simply for archival purposes.

The recording of the live performance is arguably
not the same because it loses the essence of a live performance. When an audience watches an amazing performance live, it is like magic to them. Watching the recording may not be so magical. Yet, the combination of dance and video is growing rapidly in today’s culture. Does the blending of video and dance lose the essence of live art? Where do we draw the line?

How Did Dance and Video Start?
A Little History

Film was first developed in 1895, but sound had not yet been introduced to the recordings. Motion and the rhythm provided by editing were important characteristics of film. It therefore became apparent that dance would play a significant role in film. Many stars around this time period were dancers, or actors who learned how to dance, because it was so important in the film industry.

During the early 20th century, many films integrated dance. Famous examples include Louis Lumière who recorded a variety of various indigenous dance forms, Loie Fuller who experimented with color and light, and Anna Pavlova’s performance of The Dying Swan. It was revolutionary because the invention of film allowed for documentation of famous dancers and choreographers to be recorded. When the video camera had been invented, video had progressed quickly and found purposes beyond documentation (“Dance”). Many directors and choreographers began to experiment with the manipulation of lighting, color, and editing tools.

With the end of the “silent era” circa 1928, a whole new genre for the film industry was created: “musicals.” From the 1930s–1950s, major Hollywood film companies produced musicals with elaborate song and dance routines that served important narrative purposes. Dance was choreographed specifically for the camera. Choreography included complex geometric patterns, tight frames and precise military-like motifs. Directors also became creative in positioning cameras through different angles or putting cameras on revolving platforms (“Dance”). The relationship between the dancer and the camera was one of their top priorities in creating exciting musicals.

Television was developed in the 1960s and broadcasts could be viewed by everyone with a television set. The public was now able to see live stage productions in their homes, something many people would otherwise not be able to see. Companies such as Marie Rambert’s Mercury Ballet, Uday Shankar’s Indian Dance Compa-

ny, Bolshoi and Kirov Ballet all made television appearances.

An important American choreographer who developed dance on video was Merce Cunningham. He believed video provided another way to look at dance. He experimented with camera to dancer relationship, depth of field, camera framing, and many more aspects that provided foundational ideas on what makes successful video dance (“Dance”).

Health and fitness boomed in American culture, which supported a lot of dancing on film. Famous films include Saturday Night Fever, Dirty Dancing, Fame, Staying Alive, and Footloose. These dance films steered away from the idea of narration through choreography and utilized dance to suggest social identity, romance, and other “fantasies of achievement” (Bench).

These time periods utilized dance to produce many successful Hollywood movies but also many avant-garde screen dances. A great example of these screen dance experiments is Maya Deren’s Study in Choreography for the Camera. This film features a continuous movement sequence while the scenery changes every few seconds. Different sceneries included forests or different rooms in a house. Her work uses the manipulation of the camera to create dance sensibility. The camera zooms on different body parts, sensitive to the dancer’s movements.

As the 1980s continued to progress in dance and film, two dance seasons were screened on BBC television, Dance Month and Dance International. They both featured classical repertoire and contemporary works from mainstream dance companies. In the 1990s, festivals were celebrated specifically for collaboration of digital artists and choreographers (“Dance”). Many choreographers showcased their work or presented excerpts of an experiment they were working on with video and dance.

In the late 1990s when CD-Roms were introduced, some artists began to explore this format. Carol Murcia collaborated on a CD-Rom titled Who Killed Me? This project was based on a murder scene that involved six suspects. By clicking on a suspect, the user can travel in different virtual spaces and watch dance sequences and clues to solve the mystery. With the use of video and dance, technology has progressed very quickly to immerse itself with computer programs, gaming, and virtual worlds.

Today, there are limitless ideas in what video and dance can do. The topics covered in this article will only skim the surface of the possibilities of video and dance but will help to analyze whether a camera holds the integrity of live performance or not.
Documenting Dance

Dance documentation serves many needs of dancers and choreographers. This encourages conscious planning and good preservation of documentation. There are three important components of dance documentation: representing the process, representing the performance event, and representing the cultural impact. Documentation is important in the long term for availability to students, scholars, and other performance studies. It also serves to preserve choreography so it can be reproduced and studied in the future. In the short term, it can be a tool for audience building, publicity, grant applications, and rehearsal aids (Libby).

Recording in filmmaking and videography is the most used methods for dance documentation as opposed to written notation systems, photographs, or published articles. Videos are the most accurate in capturing choreography and camcorders are very affordable.

Professional documentation with a whole team of producers is not prioritized by choreographers. Most choreographers and dancers settle for recordings with mobile devices or amateur video cameras to keep records of choreography. Dance also receives less attention than other art forms and cannot find opportunities to preserve important dance pieces. However, with eager efforts to support dance documentation, scholars have more opportunities to develop theories and criticism to allow dance to establish itself in academia (Libby). There would be also be more recordings that can accurately capture choreographers’ intent.

The accessibility of videos is also very important to dance companies. These recordings can easily be converted to a DVD format or uploaded onto the internet for personal or promotional use. Low budget companies or independent artists can easily record rehearsals and document footage with decent quality. With some editing experience, they could easily use the footage to market their work to the public.

Live performances provide videography challenges. Stage lighting is critical to the clarity of the video. The camera cannot effectively capture lighting effects as they are witnessed live. The camera also tends to flatten the dance into a two-dimensional wide-screen shot. Most choreographers have to understand these compromises when looking at their footage. Another disadvantage with videography is technical errors. Using it to document choreography, it would be tragic for equipment to fail or to have uneven recording results. Also, without proper permission and copyrights cleared, videos cannot be viewed publicly (Libby).

Recording a dance is not a substitution for live performance, however, the accessibility to dance videos are an incredible reason to record dance. YouTube has allowed public exposure around the world. Many companies have their own accounts and post clips of actual performances or a sneak-peek into rehearsal processes. This benefits many people around the world and also companies because it is a sly marketing tool.

However, two components are missing in these documented videos of a live performance (Miller). They are the essence of live dance and the spontaneity. The essence of live dance comes from a direct relationship between the audience and performer. It is something intangible that creates immense power to audience members. A relationship still exists between a dancer and viewer through a camera but it is different between a dancer and a live audience member.

Spontaneity happens in a live performance because the audience, and even the dancers or choreographer, do not know exactly what may happen next. From a broken lightbulb on stage to amazing pirouettes that have never been done in rehearsal, spontaneity exists in the present and not in the recording. Videos of live performances can be uploaded as raw footage of everything that has happened but it is not spontaneous anymore. It is history that happened to be documented. In any event, videos are usually edited to remove spontaneous events such as the broken lightbulb. The essence of a documented live performance is lost on camera.

Globalization Through Video

In the 21st century, technology has advanced to a tool called “livestream,” where anyone who has access to the internet can watch a video in real time. People all over the world have the ability to watch a live performance on television or a mobile device. Similar to documentation, “livestream” records a live performance and happens in real time, so the spontaneity of a live performance is not lost.

Livestreaming is also a marketing tool. If a local company wants to gain publicity, they can easily send links for people in other locations to watch performances. A lot of companies also livestream from their own website to force viewers to visit the webpage (Hellwig).

A lot of livestream performances are not choreo-
Video Dance

Video dance is a hybrid of an old art form, dance, and a relatively new art form, video. These two create a new art form called “video dance.” In this case, the video camera is not a passive element left on a tripod to wide-screen shot a performance like a documentary, but an equal partner to dance. This means the dancer must be respected by the camera and vice versa. There are no rules in this type of art. There is an infinite amount of variables to play with including time, space, and energy. Encapsulating a project of video dance is a lot of responsibility, considering the expectations of not one, but two art forms. However, it can be a rewarding experience to experiment with all of the rich possibilities.

As video dance began to establish itself as an art form, there are critics that say video dance is an object and not an art form. This is not to understate its artistic integrity but to view it as one would view a painting or a statue, not a live performance. The dance is not happening in real time. It is then a relic of the past, a report captured and stored on video. It is static, exactly the same each time it is viewed (Rosenberg).

When making a video dance, the videographer must understand that a dancer is working and feeling internally when performing. The video camera can only capture an external being, so the best effort to capture the kines thesis of the dancer’s act will result in the most successful shot. The video maker must also need to know and love movement. He or she must be kinesthetically aroused to attribute the respect to dance within the shots. On the other hand, the dancer needs to work with the camera by being aware of the camera’s location and understanding the vision to be expected of the video dance (Mitoma).

One aspect about video dance that really separates it from the other purposes of recording dance is its ability to manipulate the audience. During a live performance, an audience has many options as to where they focus their attention: one particular dancer, the whole picture on the stage, the scenery that has been molded, or the baby crying two rows in front. With a video dance, the audience can only see and hear what the camera captures. The video points to exactly what the videographer wants the audience to see. This aspect allows directors to give clear focus to their audience, without missing details.

Video dance also allows scenes to switch quickly. In a live performance, there are usually only a few scenes that can be used. The scenery on stage is not only expensive, but changing the scene too quickly will confuse audience members. In a video, the viewer is prepared for changing scenes just like in movies. The scenes can also be shot in many different locations and stitched together through editing.
Despite all of the advantages video dance has over a live performance, there are a few aspects that are lost in video dance. A video camera sees only one element of the whole picture. The dancer cannot be seen in his or her three-dimensional wholeness. The scenery and props are also flattened in the perspective that the camera chooses. Most importantly, the aura is missed through the medium of video. A mechanical reproduction of the body, prop, scene, and lighting, are all captured without its live aura. Walter Benjamin believes that the aura is “what drives us to attempt to reproduce the performance arts.” Aura could possibly be re-generated as the aura of art of video dance, but it cannot capture its raw footage’s aura.

One of the video dances that I have studied is from Jacopo Jenna’s Camera Coreografica. This piece is a short, five-minute project that focuses on one dancer. The camera zooms in on body parts in very quick, staccato edits to reflect parallelism of the quick, staccato movements of the dancer. After every burst of movement and precise edit, the camera always returns to a wide shot of the whole dancer in silence.

The director of this video dance claims to have a minimalist approach to observe and appreciate gestures of the body. Only through the medium of a camera can this objective of a piece be fulfilled. The camera really gets close to the body to allow the audience to analyze, break, and re-compose what those gestures are. The director also uses editing tools such as an unstable frame to create a non-organic body. The editing process is often under-appreciated but adds a lot of artistic layers to the final piece (“Camera Coreografica”).

Another aspect I noticed about this piece is the added sound effects. The video is silenced as sound effects are added on top of it. Most of the sound effects reflect what the dancer is doing. The sound that is being manipulated in the video has a large impact on how the audience may perceive the movement. For example, when the camera zooms on the dancer’s feet, a loud tap is heard. With a closer look, I can see that the feet are lightly brushed on the floor but I perceived the dancer to have stomped the floor with much more energy because of the sound I heard. When recording a video, there is a lot of extra noise that is caught by the camera that may not be wanted. By silencing the actual video and adding the sounds separately, the editor has a lot of control over how the dynamic of movement is perceived with sound effects.

Another video dance I reviewed was Rapt Production’s Well Contested Sites. This video dance contrasts with the first. Camera Coreografica was an experimental video that played with the relationship of the camera and the dancer. Well Contested Sites is a much longer video with a clear purpose. It was shot in Alcatraz by a team of artists who were incarcerated at some point in their lives. They believe that there are a lot of geniuses locked in jail cells that do not have the opportunity to grow and blossom to their potential. The videographer wants to raise awareness to the extreme policing in urban areas, social and economic inequalities, and inaccessible jobs and education for people who are released by the criminal justice system. The video captures the prisoners’ bodies as the ‘contested site,’ meaning, their bodies are vulnerable to the institution’s control and segregation (“Well Contested Sites”).

Video dance was chosen as a medium to raise awareness to this important issue. A video could easily contain facts and inspire empathy with an audience but crossing over with dance allows a whole layer of aesthetics and artistry. The video uses a lot of metaphors with the choreography and displays an imagination of life behind bars. It is important to realize that this project’s directors felt their best hope to reach audiences was through their choice of video dance. The use of dance gave the directors an opportunity to artistically recreate this human experience. Video has given the directors the opportunity to film the actual scene from a prison cell, and create edits to emphasize the purpose of the video. Video is also a medium that can easily be marketed and seen by many people globally.

This video was shot in actual prison cells. The image is much more powerful than cardboard prison bars that would have been propped for a live performance. Cameras allow videos to be taken anywhere. Audiences do not want to see cardboard sets in a video but real scenes and realistic props, which differentiates itself from stage performances.

The camera constantly pans the jail cells horizontally and zooms on the dancers’ gestures. The camera has motifs as well the dancers. Motifs are important in choreography because it allows the audience to recognize patterns that glue many different ideas together. The camera can sometimes provide choreographic-like motifs. This is an example of how the camera and choreography have equal partnership.

Camera Coreografica and Well Contested Sites are only two of many examples of video dance. Video dance is an art form that exists separately from live performance. Although video dance does not have an essence of a live performance, it has an essence that exists on its own.
Video Projection Design

Video projection design is a still-emerging field. Most of its possibilities have yet to be discovered. Artists in this field concentrate on experimenting with live performance and projection. All that is needed is image and space. From there, it can vary from little interaction between the projection and dancers to a lot of interaction (Skretch).

Projection designs are limitless. They can include animation, scenery, lighting, cinematography, recordings, live performance, and so on. Projections are therefore utilized from background enhancements to essential roles in a live performance (Miller). With today's technology, projection can be manipulated for any special use. Many people today are familiar with projection use with dance through viral videos of dancers creating an illusion to interact with projection. For example, a projected ball can bounce up and down but a dancer creates the illusion that he or she is throwing the ball.

Having a projection of dancers and actual dancers on stage can create a lot of visual "noise." "Noise" refers to how many activities are going on a stage. Although criticized, this approach is not discredited. To appeal to most audience members or critics, many choreographers are concerned with how busy the stage is. Adding a projection adds twice as much noise than the choreography of the dancers on stage alone. I asked Professor Miller how a choreographer might choose to control how busy the stage is. Adding a projection adds twice as much noise than the choreography of the dancers on stage alone. I asked Professor Miller how a choreographer might choose to control how busy he or she want to fill up a stage and she believes that there is no limit. Having a lot of action on stage is an aesthetic preference. Whether the audience appreciates that much movement or not, the choreographer is making an intentional decision (Miller).

A projection design is cost-efficient. Most theaters that host dance productions are already equipped with projectors so choreographers do not have to provide their own. The real cost comes from labor and equipment for compiling the video to be projected. Many choreographers wish to experiment with lighting or timing with a projector. To gain access to a projector for rehearsals can be quite difficult. Unless the choreographer has easy access to a theater or school that can rent or lend out their projector, it would create obstacles for the choreographer (Miller).

Another benefit of projection is its substitution of scenery or backdrops. Some choreographers prefer a tangible set on stage and others do not mind a projection. A projection in this purpose is not only cost-efficient, but it allows for many scene changes. Rather than setting up multiple backdrops and hiring artists, the projection will include all of the background changes necessary. It also omits time needed to prepare or move physical scenery on and off stage.

An example of screening dance in projection is a piece called, Singing Myself a Lullaby, designed by Douglas Rossenberg and Ellen Bromberg. They collaborated with a dancer, John Henry, who was diagnosed with AIDS at the time. This project addresses the epidemic of AIDS and self-identification.

Knowing that Henry would not be able to perform rigorous dance sections in the future, they videotaped the material. As John’s illness progressed, more video footage was used to replace his dancing. The producers watched Henry’s health slowly decline. During performances, there was a real contrast between his real image projected when he was healthier to the dying man performing on stage. The cross-fade from projection and flesh was a representation of displacement of his actual being. When Henry passed away, his digitalized self remained forever.

This projection showed video images of John scaled to larger-than-life displays. Close-ups emphasized aspects of illness that could not be seen on stage. Even though Henry had passed away, bits of him remain in footage to complete the piece.

For the producers, this video projection project created an everlasting memory of Henry on screen. His flesh and bones are re-corporealized to digital data. The project not only raised awareness of AIDS and self-reflection, but kept John with them forever.

Although projection use in dance is a very broad topic, its future deserves recognition. With the use of different software such as eMotion, Qlab, and Vezzer, interactive projected effects are created (Skretch). These tools are three-dimensional and react to motion happening on stage. These effects can be manipulated in infinite designs to take an audience into a virtual world.

Pixel was a show in which dancers moved with interactive projection mapping. It premiered at the end of 2015. This is an unusual interaction of human movement and illusions. This new type of interactive mapping has sparked the interests of many choreographers today. It takes the audience into a virtual world they have never seen before.

Projection design is a very broad topic. Projectors have been used as substitute backdrops or equal partners in a performance. Projection is used to enhance the art-
istry of a live performance, which is a useful aid. It can also replace live performance such as Singing Myself a Lullaby, but loses the essence of a live performance.

**Conclusion**

The use of video and dance grew over decades and rapidly increased to include many different methods of implementation. Today’s technology has developed with such an acceleration, that given the necessary resources, almost anything is possible to create a choreographer’s vision.

Touching upon the different fields of video dance was to ultimately ask: why even use video with dance? It is always important to ask this question because integrity is vital in the arts. Is it necessary? Is a piece of choreography recorded with the right intent? If not, then there would be no need to merge video and dance together. If video dance is declared as an art form, it should be respected as its own art form. If recording for documentation, then the video should be respected as documentation as opposed to a replacement for live performance.

To answer the question that started this paper off, “does dance lose its essence behind the camera?” the answer can be difficult. When recording live, staged performances, yes, the essence is lost. A live performance is magical. There is a real connection between the audience and performers. Feeling the essence and power of a performer that can inspire an audience is an element that cannot be preserved. It is lived through the spontaneity of the performance!

Documentation and research of recordings do not have the essence of a live performance but it is not needed. These purposes use the practicality of a video to aid in re-staging or researching. If a recording of a live performance is being studied, it is understood that the experience of watching the recording is different from watching that piece live.

Livestreaming a performance is debatable whether or not the audience is at a disadvantage in watching the performance at home on their computer screens rather than a theater. Livestreaming is very cost-efficient and allows people to watch a show that is not performing locally. Camera zooms are also an advantage. In fact, someone would be better off watching a livestream than a live performance on the fifth level balcony with binoculars. The camera creates a relationship with the audience and a performer in real time. These are all benefits to livestream, but the essence of a live performance is still lost.

As for video dance and interactive projections, these technologies have an equal role in the art form as dance. A video dance is not to be mistaken as a recording of a live performance. It is intentionally recorded for a television audience and not a live audience. It has so many other tools that allow video dance to create its own essence, different from live performances.

In the example of Well Contested Sites, its purpose was political. The video dance was designed to capture the audience’s attention and inspire change, just as how a live performance would strive to do. The artistry in video dance is no less than that of a live performance. Video dance was a medium chosen for this project because the director felt it to be the most accessible to his vision. With the camera, he created a powerful piece of art.

So, where can the line of “essence” in dance on camera be drawn? This article has touched upon documentation and livestream, which are practical uses of video for dancers and choreographers. They serve many purposes for us but ultimately lose the essence of a live performance. Video dance, on the other hand, cannot be compared directly with live art because it serves a different purpose. It is a whole new art form on its own and creates its own essence. These topics are still very subjective so the “line of essence” can be drawn differently by an individual. But before that pen begins to draw a line, understanding integrity of any art form is the first step.

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