

Dancing For the Camera 2001

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The Work of Dance in the Age of Corporeal Reproduction

The line between dance for the theater and dance made for the camera is becoming increasingly blurred in this age of digital reproduction. Digital media has created a non-linear, decentralized culture which renders the “original” moot. In other words, one copy of digitally reproduced data is as valuable as any other copy. As dance lives in the body, both the dancer’s and the viewer’s, it resists digital reproduction. However, artists working with the moving image are persistent as well and continue, often with great success, to overcome the problems associated with reproduction of the corporeal experience of dance

There are many similarities between the current practice of dance and the practice of film and video production in a digital world. The dance world is decentralized in much the same way as digital culture. Contemporary dance is created in virtually every country in the world and World Dance is no longer simply a way to describe dances created outside of the United States. Much like television or film, the production and consumption of dances are disconnected. For instance, a dance may be created, processed, and set in a studio in Nebraska and premiered in a theater in Paris. In this way dance mimics other art forms and media practices in that a dance is generally not viewed at the site where it is created. It must be broadcast to the viewer in much the same way as film or video must be broadcast. One might think of a performance of a choreography as a broadcast of the choreography in real time. This is a kind of corporeal reproduction. The work of dance in this case must be corporeally reproduced at each site. Obviously, that is significantly different than the act of inserting a videotape into a VCR or threading a film in a projector. But even so, the film, as it runs through the projector, is in a sense resurrecting the

original. The “liveness” of a dance is in the resurrection of the original as well. Each performance brings the dance back to life. In the same way, each viewing of a screendance is an original as well. The act of viewing a screendance requires one to resurrect the original. That resurrection is an interactive performance that requires the viewer to participate as the receiver of the broadcast data and to suspend her historically based expectations about dance. Dance on screen may often be at odds with dance as we have come to recognize it.

"The body" is a complex system of signs, symbols, mnemonics and codes. It communicates to the viewer, at a glance, a multitude of information. When the dancing body is placed in an environment such as a film or video landscape, in other words contextualized by its method of presentation, other layers of meaning and metaphor conspire to create additional narrative. If a dancing body is placed in an environment in which additional information is present in the form of text, images, other performers and an audience, the viewer's experience is likely to be informed by all of the above. That is to say, the viewing experience of a live performance is mediated by all of the factors of that performance including the physical location and the distance of the viewer to the performer. The experience of one viewer in the theater is always quite different from another if only due to the location from which one views the dance. Of course the viewer's own personal history is also a factor in the production of meaning as well. When the dancing body is inscribed in the domain of technology, the complex system of the production of meaning is further complicated through techniques of recorporealization; of re-making the dancing body within a technological environment. In the theater the body is presented as it is, in the present. In screendance the body is presented as it was, in the past tense, yet frozen in time. This is further problematized when one considers that in the process of framing, lighting and editing, the body represented on screen is an amended,

constructed body, a body that may or may not exist and a body which may defy the laws of gravity, nature and time.

As dance is more and more created in the shadow of media, it is interesting to note how dance has been affected by film and television techniques, not only in the structure of dances but in the integration of media into dance works for the theater. As screendance has become a viable artform around the world over the last 20 years it has influenced a generation of young dance-makers. And while the earliest cine-dance mimicked theater dance, the opposite now may be true; that theater dance often mimics screendance or film in its use of “jump cuts” and non-linear narrative, in a sense creating a kind of corporeal reproduction of technologically mediated performance.

In any case, it is clear that the influence of film, video and new technologies on dance is quite strong and that out of the marriage of these two genres, important and compelling works of art are being produced around the world.