

Envisioning Dance on Film and Video

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Published in 2002 by
Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001
www.routledge-ny.com

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE
www.routledge.co.uk

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The Pew Charitable Trusts is gratefully acknowledged for their support in the preparation of *Envisioning Dance on Film and Video*.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 0-415-94170-9

CHAPTER 40

Dancing with the Camera: The Dance Cinematographer

Evann E. Siebens

Rare is the cinematographer who specializes in shooting dance. Most directors of photography gain their experience in other formats, mostly narrative shorts and features, documentaries, or perhaps experimental films, before working on projects that involve dance. Why is this? Perhaps because most dance films are not large commercial projects, and good cinematographers command high salaries. Second, in spite of the explosion of dance film, most film schools and film sets where camera people learn their craft teach the art of text-driven, narrative films. Although many of the techniques and philosophies are the same, there are certain aspects to shooting dance that can be taught only in a rehearsal studio. Unfortunately, many of the choreographers and dancers who move into the film world, although versed in shooting consumer-level video, are not experienced in shooting film or high-end video, so that they are intimidated by the technology of the camera. And, as many choreographers-turned-directors have discovered, the choreography alone is not what makes the film; it is the successful transposition of the dance onto celluloid or tape that is the key to the new, augmented field of dancefilm.

This essay aims to explore some of the technical and theoretical aspects of dance film as a genre, leading to an understanding that dance cinematography, when it is fully realized, is like “dancing with a camera.” First, I’d like to clarify some terms. Although filmed dance is often seen as a single genre, there are actually many subgenres within the form, including dance documentation or archival work, documentary, and dance film or dances created for film. This list could also include stage works being translated for the camera, excerpted promotional tapes used by dance companies to gain bookings, narrative shorts or feature films that include dance as a plot device, and even films in which actors spontaneously break into song and dance, otherwise known as musicals. However, I will refer to the first three forms when discussing the different aspects of shooting dance.

One of the first things I notice about the ways these terms are understood is that cinematographers with no experience in dance, when called on to film dance, often make the same stereotypical choices. Just as it is not appropriate to shoot only close-ups of feet and hands when documenting a choreographic



Left: Yannis Adoniov in *Ceci n'est pas un danse*, a film by Evann Siebens. The title references the work of René Magritte and Michel Foucault. Photo by Tomi Paasonen.

Right: Yannis Adoniov in *Ceci n'est pas un danse* by Evann Siebens. Photo by Tomi Paasonen.

work for archival purposes, so it is not essential to do a wide shot from the back of the audience when creating a dance for the camera. It is a joke in the community that shooters not versed in dance are either fascinated with feet or are busy focusing on a pretty girl who stands in the corps de ballet while the Swan Queen and Prince Albrecht are in the middle of their grand pas de deux. This is particularly true of archival documentation during a multiple camera shoot, or when shooting a documentary, in which events happen in the moment and what is being recorded is up to the person operating the camera.

First I will address the technical, then the philosophical, and finally the artistic aspects of shooting dance. Technically speaking, one of the first questions is whether to use film or video. To emphasize the difference in media, one could almost compare it to the difference between ballet and modern. Essentially, the best dancers can and will do both, but there is still considerable animosity between the two genres. I believe that the medium should be suited to the type of work. For example, shooting an archival document on film would be prohibitively expensive. Most documentaries, beyond the supremely well funded—Fred Wiseman's *Ballet* and Matthew Diamond's *Dancemaker* are two examples—are shot in some sort of video format. Yet there is a poeticism to the way film, whether 35mm, 16mm or even Super 8, looks compared to video. Most of the successful creative dance films in the 1990s have been shot on film. I believe this has less to do with the actual look of the film than with the rigor that shooting on film demands. The low cost of video can bring with it a mental laxity; one can shoot and shoot and never worry about the cost. Often this means getting ten mediocre shots instead of the one really great shot that emerges from a synchronicity between the camera and the dance.

The choice of camera can also have a big impact on the final look of the film. A 35mm Panavision camera is very different from a Super 16 Arriflex, which is itself very different from a Super 8 camera. Similarly, within the genre of video is a whole family of formats: Beta SP, Digital Beta, DV Cam, Mini DV, HI8, and others. Although small digital cameras are revolutionizing filmmaking, particularly in the documentary field, they will not put the film industry

DVD 33

out of business. The more expensive the camera, the more control you have over functions such as focus, exposure, and manual zoom, and the better the images you will be able to create.

Although operating technique differs from camera to camera—and particularly between film and video—there are essential techniques common to all of them. The most obvious of these is focus. In film, one usually uses a prime lens with a fixed focal length or size (wide, normal, or telephoto). Focus is measured with a measuring tape, and the depth of field, or area that is in sharp focus, is dependent on the distance between the subject and the film plane, complicated also by the lens's focal length and f-stop. With a zoom lens, as found on most video cameras, focusing technique is different; the shot can be changed on an ongoing basis owing to the shifting focal length of the lens. This can be helpful for documentary work during which it is not expedient to stop and change lenses, but it poses its own problems when shooting dance. As a dancer moves toward the camera, the focal length between the dancer and the camera changes, meaning that the operator has to follow or rack focus. This is a very challenging camera move, and one that is usually operated by two people on a film shoot. With dance, because the subjects are so often in motion, keeping them in focus becomes one of the main challenges of the cinematographer.

Exposure is another tricky technical skill. With film, the cinematographer carefully calibrates a light meter reading for each shot, checking for different light intensities in various parts of the frame. In video, exposure is often treated more haphazardly, resulting in overexposed or underexposed figures, particularly when shooting subjects on a faraway stage with theatrical lighting. Almost every dance cinematographer has experienced a glowing, indistinguishable figure on a black stage. With video, one should expose for the hottest or brightest part of the frame, as it is easier to adjust an underexposed image than an overexposed one in post-production.

Intimately related to exposure, and often overlooked or misunderstood, is the concept of color temperature and white balance. Simply put, different kinds of light affect how the camera reads an image. With film, this is manifested in different kinds of film stock: daylight or “outdoor” film versus tungsten or “indoor” film. An outdoor shoot requires that the film be daylight balanced; an indoor shoot requires that the film be tungsten balanced. With video, however, the kind of tape remains the same regardless of the light, but the white balance must be adjusted. White balance is the difference between daylight (5400 degrees Kelvin) and tungsten (3200 degrees Kelvin) light temperatures. Problems arise when you start to mix different kinds of light. On a film shoot, windows are carefully covered with orange gels to neutralize or “balance” the daylight that spills into a location lit with tungsten lights. With video, this is often more difficult: what dance videographer hasn't been shown into a studio with large windows that allow daylight to enter, yet that is lit from above with fluorescent lights? To turn the lights off means that it's too dark, but to cover the windows is usually impossible owing to considerations of money and time. Unless you're working on a very well-financed shoot—which means that you would probably be shooting on film in the first place—a compromise must be reached. If you balance for tungsten light with daylight streaming in, it will make the whole image look slightly blue, whereas balancing for daylight with some tungsten light will create an orange effect. In my experience, the orange or “warm” tones will be better accepted by an audience than a blue, unnatural effect.

There are also special considerations for dance film that have to do with theoretical rather than technical matters. To my mind, one of the fundamental issues has to do with changing perspective from a stage focus to a film focus. This has implications for the shape of the “camera stage,” the director’s ability to focus the gaze of the audience as well as camera movement.

Camera space is the inverse of stage space. A proscenium stage narrows as it recedes; it is wider at the front than at the back. When we look through a lens, however, the space is narrowest at the front and widens as the subject moves farther away. This simple spatial difference has tremendous implications for choreography, particularly for the exits and entrances of dancers as seen through the camera’s eye.

Another difference between stage space and film space is that the film director gets to decide where the audience lays its gaze. This is manifest in the basic differences of shot size: close-ups, medium shots, and full shots. Many people believe that dancers should be shot in a full frame, with plenty of head and foot room. For archival documentation, this is obviously the best practice since the point of the work is to capture the choreography in its entirety. However, to shoot a creative dance film in a continuous long wide shot is to miss the power of the close-up and the subtleties of choreography: a turn of the head, a movement of the hands. This freedom is what makes filming dance so exciting, though style is personal and depends on the aesthetics of the director. One dance film may feature a series of long, carefully choreographed moving shots, while another will consist of short, rapidly edited still images, creating the choreography through the editing as much as through the movement.

Camera movement is another hotly contested area that depends on style. Reacting against the roving camera and kaleidoscopic overhead shots of Busby Berkeley, Fred Astaire famously stated, “Either the camera will dance or I will.” He firmly believed in the integrity of the choreography and the dancer’s performance, whereas Berkeley was notorious for creating revolutionary cinematic techniques, the most famous being his signature kaleidoscopic overhead shot. Astaire and Berkeley’s differences sum up one of the conundrums facing the dance filmmaker: Which will move, the dancer or the camera?

From a practical standpoint, camera movement changes whether the instrument is on a dolly, on a crane, or hand-held. Large film sets will have the means to create extensive, smooth camera moves, whereas a low-budget documentary will generally depend on a hand-held camera. There is something supremely satisfying about shooting hand-held, as it gives the operator freedom to move with the action. For me, this is the method in dance film that comes closest to “dancing with the camera.” It represents a synergy between the dancer and the filmmaker that is crucial in my work. When I am familiar with the choreography of the piece I am filming, or when it is my own choreography, I am able to move with the camera along with the dancers, which produces a magical sense of kinesthetic movement. Similarly, documentary filming can be extremely similar to dance improvisation, as you must be aware of your surroundings and the action going on around you at all times, and react accordingly.

Alternately, there is the still tripod shot that has movement choreographed within the frame. One of the main principles of cinematography is to create depth in the frame, composing the various elements—whether they are moving or static—on varying planes within the frame. This is what makes a two-dimensional art form appear to be three-dimensional. When shooting dance, I often shoot diagonals in order to create the illusion of depth. Doris Humphrey said

in her treatise, *The Art of Making Dances*: “Put the dancer to walking on one of those diagonals from up right to down left, and he is moving on the most powerful path on the stage.”¹ Many choreographers instinctively use this diagonal, and if you are shooting a stage performance, it is extremely powerful to have the dancer travel away from and towards the camera, creating a strong sense of movement while leaving the camera in one place. Even if you are not shooting a stage, positioning dancers so that one is close to the camera and one is far away, for example, creates a sense of depth and satisfying composition.

Truffaut’s cinematographer Nestor Almendros wrote the following about composition and the role of the cinematographer:

Horizontal lines suggest repose, peace, serenity . . . Diagonal lines crossing the frame evoke action, movement, the power to overcome obstacles. Curved compositions that move circularly communicate feelings of exaltation, euphoria and joy. In the art of cinema, the director of photography’s skill is measured by his capacity to keep an image clear, to “clean it,” as Truffaut says, by separating each shape, be it a person or an object, in relation to a background or a set; in other words, by his ability to organize a scene visually in front of the lens and avoid confusion by emphasizing the various elements that are of interest.²

The background or horizon line that Almendros refers to is essential for alerting the viewer to the spatial relationship between the subject and the rest of the objects in the frame. With dance, however, there is a tendency to shoot in a space either entirely black or entirely white, which can mean that the horizon line is lost. When shooting in a neutral space, it is necessary to create a horizon line or to erect an alternate structure against which the dancer’s movement can be measured. I once shot a black-and-white film in a black space and did huge dolly moves alongside the moving dancer, only to realize in the editing room that, without the horizon line, it appeared that neither the dancer nor the camera was moving at all.

The problem of the horizon line is solved when shooting on location rather than in the studio or on stage. I prefer “real” locations because they bring an essence to the dance that can never be duplicated on stage. In fact, shooting on location is one of the main reasons for putting dance on film in the first place. It also creates a sense of familiarity for audiences used to viewing films in “real” spaces, and it usually gives a narrative aspect to the film as well.

Finally, most dance films are edited to some degree, and the cinematographer must keep this in mind at all times, using techniques that I call “shooting to edit.” For example, novice cinematographers tend to keep a single dancer centered in the frame at all times. Not only is this bad composition, ignoring a basic tenet that it’s preferable to keep objects in the frame off center (also known as dividing the frame into thirds), but it is also the best way to get your editor to curse you. Watch how feature films are edited. Often an edit will come a moment or “beat” after a character has exited the frame, giving a sense of completion and closure to the scene, before going onto the next shot. You need to let this happen while you are shooting, letting the dancer exit the frame before moving to the next composition.

If you are trying to create continuous motion or movement, it is impossible to edit together two shots that are the same size and shot from the same angle. You will have what is called a “jump cut.” This technique can be used very effectively and will be accepted by the audience if the motion is continuous, yet jump cuts are often abrasive and make the viewer question the truthfulness of the action. Again, look at feature films. A long, wide shot will be edited together

with a medium shot, but because the movement is continuous, you watch it without questioning the reason for the edit. If you are shooting, you need to be aware how the film is going to be edited. If you are making a creative dance film and have control over the set, you can shoot the same movement from two different angles or with different size shots, overlapping a place where the edit can happen smoothly. If you are shooting a documentary with a video camera, however, you need to have your hand on the zoom at all times, changing the focal length of your shot constantly so that the editor can edit a “scene” together seamlessly.

In my view, dance film is a merging of the principles of dance and film, not just the shift of dance onto film. As a dancer and now a dance filmmaker, my favorite part about dance is not watching it, either on stage or on screen, not talking about it, not even filming it, but doing it. Yet when I shoot dance, I often feel the way I do when I am dancing. Essentially, I have transposed the experience of kinesthetically moving through space into dancing with my camera. I could be shooting hours of footage for a documentary, but I could still tell you the five or six shots that are magical, where I am in synch with the dancer and the movement: I often get shivers up my spine.

Shooting dance is a very visceral, creative, and non-intellectual experience. I strongly believe that dancers can make excellent cinematographers. There is a stereotype that cinematographers can only be big, burly men. Dancers, in particular women, need to buck the stereotype, get over their technology phobia, and pick up the camera. Dance film is a visual art that involves movement, strength, and physical awareness. What better field for a dancer?

NOTES

1. Doris Humphrey, *The Art of Making Dances* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1959), 75.
2. Nestor Almendros, *A Man with a Camera* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 13.