# The Gaze Within: The Camera as a Reflective and Transformative Tool in Bharat Sharma's *Andretta Trilogy*

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## Abstract

This paper is structured from a conversation with choreographer and dancer Bharat Sharma. The observations here reflect his *Andretta Trilogy* (2011–2015), a series of experimental dance-films created at the Norah Centre for the Arts in Himachal Pradesh. Presented in the form of an extended commentary, the paper weaves Sharma's responses with theoretical frameworks from the study of screen-dance history, foregrounding the camera as a tool of reflection and transformation. Sharma's voice highlights the improvisational origins of the trilogy, the negotiation of roles as choreographer, dancer, and filmmaker, and the unique affordances the *screen* offers in contrast to the stage. The paper here positions the *Andretta Trilogy* as an example of screen dance practice in India that departs from documentation and spectacle, instead functioning as a reflective practice of memory, ecology, and corporeal transformation. Sharma's close engagement with editing, landscape, and improvisation exemplifies how screen dance may emerge not from conceptual grand designs but from embodied responses to circumstances, space, and technology. While respectful of Sharma's artistic voice, this paper also critically situates his films within larger discourses of screendance, suggesting their relevance to debates on authorship, the archival body, and *geo*-choreography. Ultimately, arguing that Sharma's work demonstrates how the camera can serve as a partner in times of creative lull, reanimating the choreographic imagination and offering a lasting archive of ephemeral movement.

**Keywords:** Indian dance, screendance, choreography, authorship, memory, archive, ecology

Screendance occupies a liminal zone between dance and cinema. Emerging from early 20th-century cinematic experiments and developing into a global interdisciplinary practice, screendance has consistently interrogated the relations between body, movement, technology, and space. In contrast to the ephemerality of live performance, screendance offers a new corporeality – edited, reframed, and archived – that outlives the dancer and choreographer. The camera is not merely a tool of capture but an active choreographic partner, capable of directing the gaze, reconstructing temporality, and transforming the dancing body. In India, however, the relationship between dance and the screen has largely been dominated by popular cinema. "Song and dance" sequences—ubiquitous across regional film industries – have shaped cultural understandings of dance on screen, privileging spectacle, melodrama, and glamour. This mainstream presence has left little space for experimental screendance practices that engage with the camera as an aesthetic and philosophical collaborator.

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Bharat Sharma, is a senior practitioner of Indian contemporary dance whose career spans over five decades. Trained in Mayurbhanj Chhau under Krishna Chandra Naik and in Kathakali with Sadanam Balakrishnan, he later expanded his repertoire through studies in modern dance, ballet, and jazz at the Nikolais-Louis Dance Lab and the Ruth Currier Studio in New York. The son of dancer Narendra Sharma - one of the pioneers of Indian contemporary dance and the founder of Bhoomika Creative Dance Centre, Bharat Sharma has performed extensively in India and abroad, both as a soloist and in the ensemble contexts. His choreographic works, such as Pathik[i] (1988), Swapnakosh[ii] (1990), and Nightingale[iii] (2008), exemplify his ability to interweave Indian and global movement vocabularies. Beyond performance, Sharma has been an influential teacher, mentor, and administrator, serving as director of Bhoomika Creative Dance Centre and contributing to the wider institutional landscape of Indian dance. One encounters Bharat Sharma as an enthusiastic dancer who is almost always there at the prime auditoriums and centers of New Delhi, watching dancers who are his contemporaries as well as youngsters in supporting them. My brief interactions with him have always been on such occasions. His recent foray into dancing for the camera through the *Andretta Trilogy* marks a significant extension of his practice, situating him among the few Indian choreographers who explored the camera as a partner in choreography.

Against this backdrop, dancer–choreographer Bharat Sharma's *Andretta Trilogy* represents a significant intervention both to understand dance history and the medium used. Central to his practice are the principles of the fixed frame and dissolves, developed through low-budget experimentation and technological self-learning. These methods enabled a reimagining of the body, space, and narrative, producing a body of work that resists the "garish" aesthetics of mainstream Indian cinema. Created at the Norah Centre for the Arts (NCFA) in Himachal Pradesh, the trilogy emerged from improvisation, low-cost experimentation, and a sustained engagement with the Himalayan landscape. Unlike Bollywood's obsessive framing of the body, Sharma's work seeks a quieter, more reflective gaze. His films – *Still Framing* (2011), *Stilled Framing* (2013), and a planned but unrealized third part – foreground the camera as a device for choreographic discovery, editing as an extension of movement practice, and place as a co-author of performance.

## Improvisation and Impetus: Origins of the Andretta Trilogy

When asked[iv] about the conceptual impetus behind the trilogy, Sharma immediately downplays the notion of a fixed plan:

> I wouldn't say there was a conceptual impetus in making the Andretta Trilogy. It was more kind of a response to our larger project … focused on the Kangra Valley. … The NCFA was a very inspiring space. And the training program was very, very good, so I thought of using them. Most of the things later on evolved through hit-and-trial improvisation. (Sharma, 2025)

This situates the trilogy not as the outcome of a carefully designed project but as an improvisatory response to circumstance. The films were catalyzed by three factors: an inspiring site (NCFA's organic architecture amidst the Dhauladhar mountains), an unusually strong group of dancers

available for training, and Sharma's own experimentation with affordable technology. Crucially, Sharma identifies his engagement with consumer technologies – Apple computers, iMovie, and later Final Cut Pro – as a turning point. *"Is there a low-cost way of making films?"* he asked himself, recognizing the prohibitive costs of professional production. This gave rise to an aesthetic of limitation, where a single tripod-mounted camera, without panning or close-ups, became the framework for improvisation:

> There was no way I could have used panning or close-ups … so I decided I'll just keep a frame and then improvise with dancers and see what comes out. (Sharma, 2025)

This embrace of constraint recalls postmodern dance strategies, such as Yvonne Rainer's "task-based" improvisations[v], where limitation itself generates discovery. The fixed frame became both a boundary and a source of creative possibility. In Sharma's words, *"*slowly a visual narrative emerged*"* as he experimented with editing sequences in the Apple application of iMovie. The app, therefore, allows a space for choreographic catharsis. Screen to screen editing, though initially daunting, became revelatory: a means to discover choreography retrospectively, in the act of arranging, cutting, and juxtaposing filmed material. By the time of *Stilled Framing*, Sharma had upgraded his technology – HD cameras, a better computer, and Final Cut Pro – yet the ethos of improvisation persisted. The trilogy, as imagined by him, was never about cinematic polish but about discovering what choreography might become when mediated by the screen. In this sense, Sharma's practice resists the dominant paradigm of *Indian* film dance, with its emphasis on spectacle, glamour, and narrative excess. Instead, it pursues what Laura Marks (2000) has called a "haptic visuality"[vi]: an aesthetic that privileges texture, slowness, and embodied perception.

## Navigating Roles: Choreographer, Dancer, Filmmaker

One of the trilogy's most striking aspects is Sharma's assumption of multiple roles. He not only choreographed and danced but also directed, filmed, and edited the works himself. When asked about this duality, he reflected:

> At one level it was easy … I clearly saw that my role as a dancer was at the back seat and I was seeing as a choreographer. And then I did not see myself as a filmmaker, but … how can the bodies be used within the frame? So, yes, it was the choreographer in me, which was in the forefront, and through that process … I was looking at the frame (Sharma, 2025).

This reveals a hierarchy of sensibilities: the choreographer guides, while the filmmaker's role is secondary, almost invisible. Sharma never sought to become a filmmaker in the conventional sense; instead, he used the frame as a choreographic tool, a prosthetic for seeing.

The implications are twofold. First, authorship becomes concentrated. Unlike typical film productions where cinematographers, editors, and choreographers negotiate collaborative tensions, Sharma's films present a unified vision. Second, this duality reshapes the choreographer's gaze. By thinking through the frame, Sharma redefined choreography not only as the arrangement of bodies in space but as the orchestration of bodies for the camera.

He describes the fascination of working with fixed frames:

> Just standing still frames and then letting dancers … move through that … was becoming very fascinating, and the frame was just guiding it (Sharma, 2025).

Here, the frame dictates choreographic choices, prompting dancers to interact with corners, edges, and thresholds of space. The result is not a translation of stage choreography into film but the emergence of a new choreographic vocabulary specific to the screen.

## Affordances of the Screen

Sharma's reflections on the screen's affordances highlight both practical and philosophical dimensions. He notes:

> At one level, [film] was a way to choreograph innovatively and see through the frame, which could be … held for posterity. The filmed choreography then provides an alternate to a live stage … another perspective … adding another layer to the thinking process and also looking at the choreographic content. (Sharma, 2025)

Here, the screen is valued both as an archive and as a creative partner. On the one hand, it preserves ephemeral movement; *"keeping dance intact" is* a crucial function in a field where memory and transmission are fragile. On the other hand, it introduces new dimensions of perception, allowing choreographers to reimagine movement through editing, framing, and sequencing.

He also emphasizes the modest scale of his productions:

> At the most, I must have spent around 5000 rupees per film. … The dancers … were themselves very excited, because for them also, it was a new thing, a new way of looking at dance. (Sharma, 2025)

The low-budget, collective ethos contrasts starkly with mainstream cinematic dance, underscoring screendance's potential as an accessible, grassroots practice. Sharma however, had the advantage of Bhoomika Creative Dance Centers'[vii] resident company of dancers, sustained through a Ministry of Culture[viii] salary-grant scheme, while residencies were supported by Bhoomika's funds. Most of the technical equipment was purchased from his personal savings, with some items drawn from Bhoomika's existing inventory.

As an observer, I identify two principles that define these films. Similar to choreographic movement, both dimensions consistently recur, expand, and evolve temporally.

- **The still frame** – anchoring a fixed perspective.
- **Dissolves between cuts** – chosen as the exclusive editing transition, creating continuity and improvisatory possibility.

For Sharma, "In both films, there's no other joining between two cuts, it's always a dissolve. … By fixing up two or three ideas, it was helping me to improvise further." (Sharma, 2025). This

emphasis on *dissolves* aligns with his broader aesthetic of slowness and reflection. Dissolves extend time, blur boundaries between images, and invite viewers into a meditative gaze, offering a reflection and resistance to the sharp cuts and fast edits of commercial cinema.

Equally significant is the role of landscape. Sharma edited the second film in Kandabari, Himachal, while caring for his ailing mother. He recalls:

> I had this beautiful view of the mountains … so the whole [editing process] was inspiring that way. (Sharma, 2025).

The Himalayan landscape thus enters the films not only as backdrop but as atmosphere, shaping the rhythm of editing and the sensibility of the gaze.

## Editing: A function of choreographic and thematic play

When asked whether themes of gender, ecology, memory, or body–place relations guided his work, Sharma responds candidly:

> I clearly did not have any thoughts in my head when I was making film on thinking about gender, ecology, memory or body–place relations. … I see much more as an organic way of looking at what is the task ahead for me. How best I can do it and what exactly the situation offers me. All these issues may, you know, come up … but it was not a very conscious frame. (Sharma, 2025)

This response is striking for its honesty. Unlike academic framings that often seek to identify thematic intentions, Sharma situates his creative practice in an "organic" mode, where issues such as ecology or gender emerge incidentally rather than as predetermined frameworks. His comments emphasize responsiveness: to space, to dancers, and to circumstance. *"*The mud and texture and all that … these were all there, and that's what was spurring me to get into films," he explains, underscoring how ecology was present not as theory but as material environment (Sharma, 2025). At the same time, Sharma acknowledges that such issues are not absent. He notes that in the second film, a relational dynamic between one man and two women introduced *"*an element of sexuality," though this too was not conceived as a statement on gender but as a "human emotional response to the given space and dancers". This highlights the tension between critical discourse and artistic process. From a scholarly perspective, one may read into these dynamics questions of gender, desire, or relationality. Yet for Sharma, these were not starting points but emergent qualities of the choreographic encounter.

This distinction matters. As Kyra Norman's[ix] work in the essay, "New Material: Natural Elements and the Body in Screendance"*,* has been discussed and argued, as a result of how site-responsive screendance often produces meanings that exceed authorial intention; the body–place–camera triad generates resonances that may be read ecologically, politically, or affectively, even if the artist did not set out to inscribe them[x]. Similarly, ecofeminist theory reminds us that embodiment within landscape inevitably carries connotations of ecology and relational ethics, whether or not they are consciously foregrounded[xi]. Sharma's refusal to claim a methodological approach to these themes is not a dismissal of them but an insistence on creative honesty. His films, therefore,

invite a dual reading: on one hand, as works born from organic, improvisational engagement with space and dancers; on the other, as texts that inevitably carry ecological and gendered resonances when situated within critical discourse. This is perhaps their most valuable contribution: they resist being reduced to didactic statements, instead embodying the complexity of artmaking where intention, accident, and environment coalesce.

In this light, Sharma's editing practice – rooted in dissolves, in allowing time to flow and images to overlap – may be understood as both aesthetic choice and thematic metaphor. The dissolve embodies precisely the kind of porousness he describes; themes of ecology, memory, and gender seep into the films not as deliberate insertions but as layers that overlap and blur. Editing becomes the space where unplanned resonances are given form, where "issues flowing through" (Sharma, 2025) find their quiet articulation.

## The Unfinished Trilogy: Vision, Constraints, and Unforeseen Endings

The *Andretta Trilogy* remains an unfinished work – but this should not be read as failure – but as evidence of the dynamic and contingent nature of creative processes of performance making. The absence of a third part arose from a convergence of artistic and practical constraints. The original group of dancers, integral to the first two films, had dispersed to pursue their own careers, with several going on to achieve notable recognition. The newly recruited dancers, by contrast, were still in the early stages of training and lacked the maturity and familiarity of the original ensemble. At the same time, government funding for residencies at the Norah Centre for Arts had ceased, making a return to the site financially unviable. Sharma recalls that his vision for the third film demanded a new and more complex approach to framing: a "top-down" perspective that would have required scaffolding, a full technical crew, and lighting for night sequences. He had imagined using the *mud flooring* of the NCFA as a backdrop for these high-angle shots, extending the aesthetic principles of the earlier works into a new exploration of spatial perspective. Yet such ambitions necessitated resources that were not available. The trilogy's unfinished status thus illustrates a familiar predicament in the arts: when expansive creative visions encounter the limits of circumstances, the work remains suspended, gesturing toward what could have been a new aesthetic.

## Towards a Reflective and Transformative Screendance Aesthetic

Taken together, Sharma's reflections on the *Andretta Trilogy* illuminate how screendance may serve as a tool of reflection during times of creative stillness. The films were not born of abundance but of scarcity – limited budgets, modest technology, and a choreographer navigating transitions in his artistic life. Yet these very constraints enabled transformation. The fixed frame became a canvas for improvisation, teaching Sharma and his dancers to rediscover space through its edges and corners. The dual role of choreographer-filmmaker compressed authorship, producing a unified gaze where the body and camera co-evolved. The still frames and dissolves created a slow, meditative visual language, resisting cinematic spectacle in favor of reflective intimacy. And the Himalayan landscape, both in filming and editing, infused the work with atmosphere, memory, and presence.

From a critical perspective, the trilogy raises questions about what screendance in India might look like beyond Bollywood's shadows or even heavy equipment documentation of choreographic works done by dancers. Sharma's films exemplify an alternative genealogy – rooted in site-specificity, improvisation, and technological modesty. They suggest that screendance need not aspire to cinematic grandeur but may instead cultivate intimacy, slowness, and reflection. Moreover, his practice demonstrates how editing is not simply post-production but choreography by other means. The "filmed, edited body," as Douglas Rosenberg[xii] argues, becomes a new corporeality – archival, collaged, and enduring. Sharma, embracing the *dissolves,* literalizes this process: bodies melt into one another, time stretches, memory blurs into presence. The films become archives of both movement and atmosphere, documenting not only dances but the very conditions of their making.

In this sense, the *Andretta Trilogy* may be read as an auto-ethnography. Sharma, navigating personal transitions and caring for family in Himachal, uses the camera to process his own history. The films serve as both public artworks and private journals, inscribing the 'gaze within' onto the screen. The *Andretta Trilogy* offers a vital case study in how screendance can function as a reflective and transformative practice. Far from being derivative of cinema or mere documentation of stage works, Sharma's films discover choreography through the camera. They reveal how improvisation and technological site-responsiveness can yield a meditative aesthetic that resists spectacle while opening new possibilities for the body on screen.

Sharma's *Andretta Trilogy* demonstrates that the camera can be more than a recorder; it can be a partner, a catalyst. In moments of creative pause, it offers artists a way to re-engage with space, memory, and self. In this sense, the films stand not only as documents of dance but as enduring meditations on the transformative power of the gaze within. As Sharma himself observes,

> There was definitely an element of emotionality in the visual narrative, which I wanted to infuse from the beginning in the making of these films – an attempt to distance myself from the 'cerebral,' a normative that was prevalent in those years in terms of 'the body' and 'the frame.' I wanted a feel to the texture of all visual frames (Sharma, 2025)

This insight encapsulates the ethos of the *Andretta Trilogy*: a body of work shaped not by cerebral abstraction alone but by an insistence on affect, texture, and atmosphere. In its unfinished yet enduring form, the trilogy affirms screendance as a medium where reflection and emotion converge, and where the camera becomes not only a tool of framing but also of feeling.

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[i] Pathik: One of Sharma's earlier works (1988), Pathik is a dance piece that reflects a journey motif, weaving together elements of travel, transition, and movement across landscapes, both internal and external.

[ii] A major choreographic work by Bharat Sharma staged with his company Bhoomika. It combines classical Indian movement vocabularies and contemporary form, exploring dream-like imagery and spatial dynamics.

[iii] Conceived with Tripura Kashyap, Nightingale draws on Sarojini Naidu's poems from Golden Threshold. It juxtaposes impressionistic images—palanquin bearers, Indian dancers, fishermen—to evoke lyrical fragments and emotional resonance.

[iv] This paper emerged from an intuitive interest in further understanding from him the intention of making these dance films, as he presented his work as part of the Raza Foundation's Art Matters Series – Dance & Architecture. In his presentation he takes us through his creative journey as a choreographer. The paper develops from a follow up conversation with him specifically about his work and choreographic attempt with the camera. The conversations happened in July & August 2025.

[v] This concept of the "task-based" improvisation is derived here from Rainer's work "The Mind is a Muscle" documented by Catherine Wood in 1968. Rainer's work also has been documented and notated through and via the screen and the parallels made here between Rainer and Sharma's thought process a delightful coincidence.

[vi] Marks, 162. 2000

[vii] Bhoomika Creative Dance Centre is a premiere national performing arts organization that has been in the forefront of infusing a new spirit in Indian dance since its inception in 1972. Initiated by a group of progressive artists, the centre evolved a dance company known for innovative and experimental choreography that has attracted critical attention in major festivals in India and abroad.

[viii] The Salary Grant Scheme of the Ministry of Culture, Government of India is designed to provide sustained financial support to established cultural organizations in the fields of music, dance, theatre, and related arts. Under the scheme, approved institutions receive assistance to pay the salaries or honoraria of their core artists, teachers, or performers. The aim is to ensure continuity of practice, provide security to artists, and enable institutions to focus on creative and pedagogical work without depending entirely on project-based or commercial income.

[ix] Norman, 13. 2010.

[x] Vitaglione, 96. 2019.

[xi] Galo-Cruz, 2025.

[xii] Douglas, 68. 2012