

# Addendum to Interview: Film Proposal for the British Film Institute

*Siobhan Davies, Siobhan Davies Dance*

*David Hinton, Independent Artist*

## Abstract

This proposal by Siobhan Davies and David Hinton formed part of a submission to the BFI (British Film Institute, London UK). It outlines the collaboration between the two artists and the general idea of a film based on the 1917 Robert Walser story "The Walk." The film was to be made entirely out of found footage and found photographs to create a "choreography of movement images" that would portray an individual consciousness. The proposal describes the overall idea, the deployment of Marey's nineteenth-century chronophotographic films, the structure and key narrative elements, as well as different observational, analytical, and emotional threads of images. The proposal was submitted to the BFI in April 2012, and an agreement on the use of archive between the BFI and Siobhan Davies Dance Company was first issued in May and signed off in October 2012. The proposal is reproduced here with the permission of the two artists.

**Keywords:** *All This Can Happen*, proposal, BFI, collaboration, Marey, Walser, choreography, collage

## The Walk

Siobhan Davies/David Hinton Dance Film Project

*The man who walks must study and observe, with the utmost love and attention, every smallest living thing. The highest and the lowest, the most serious and the most hilarious things are to him equally beloved and valuable.*

– Robert Walser, "The Walk"<sup>1</sup>

## The Idea

*What is the film?*

The film is a collaboration between filmmaker David Hinton and choreographer Siobhan Davies, and is entirely financed by Siobhan Davies Dance (who are funded by

the Arts Council). It is being made initially for film festivals and art galleries, but we also hope to sell it to television.

The film is 20-30 minutes long, and made entirely out of found footage and found photographs. It is a single screen work, but one which often uses several different frames of action on screen at the same time. It is composed using many different juxtapositions, speeds, and densities of images.

The structure, sensibility, and narrative of the film are based on the 1917 Robert Walser story "The Walk," which simply reports what goes on inside the head of a writer as he takes a long walk from the city where he lives out into the countryside. There is no action or drama in the conventional sense. The interest lies entirely in the way that the protagonist observes, experiences, and thinks about the world around him.

The film is a dance film, or a "choreography of movement images." The raw material of the film consists of a constellation of brief film clips, each of which shows a brief burst of movement. Most of the movement consists of ordinary, everyday activities. The choreography lies in orchestrating the relationships between these clips to create a clear and constantly evolving structure of actions.

The aim of this choreographed collage of found images is to create a portrait of an individual consciousness and an individual way of looking at the world.

## **Marey and the Formal Ideas**

### *About Marey*

Formally speaking, our film owes a lot to the nineteenth-century chronophotographic films of Etienne Jules Marey, whose work represents one of the earliest attempts to record movement photographically. He made many studies of everyday actions like walking and running, jumping and throwing, and many studies of animals in motion.

Three key formal ideas in our film derive from our study and experiment based on Marey's work:

1. *Brief Glimpses of Action:* Each Marey film is only one or two seconds long. This has led us to the idea of "a choreography of glimpses." We work with very brief glimpses of action, looping them to give them a distinct rhythm, and then create more complex rhythms by juxtaposing one loop against another.
2. *Variety of Frame Formats:* Marey's works have no fixed frame format, but come in all kinds of shapes and sizes. This has led us to the idea of using many different configurations of frames within the fixed space of a 16x9 film frame. Our film aims for compositional richness and variety through the different ways we arrange different images on the screen at the same time.

3. *Using the Character of Individual Frames:* Each individual frame in a Marey sequence has its own character, because each frame has aged differently. This has led us to much experimentation with the tension between the stillness of a single frame and the movement in a sequence of frames. The constant interplay between stillness and movement is a distinctive aspect of the style of our film.

## **Robert Walser and the Narrative Element**

### *The Aim of the Film*

The aim of the film, like the story, is to share one individual's perceptions of the world, to take us inside the consciousness of the walker, and to show how he sees, feels, and experiences things. We aim to do this with wit, energy, and musicality, but there should also be a resonance about it: in our protagonist's walk, we should all find echoes of the walks we have taken ourselves.

### *Structure*

The film is planned out as 25 one-minute episodes, with each episode inspired by an episode in the Walser story. At the centre of each episode is a mundane event that happens to the protagonist in the course his walk—he posts a letter; he goes to the bank; he visits a friend for lunch—but each such event leads him into rhapsody or reverie which takes him beyond his immediate circumstances into a deeper pondering about life.

### *Different Threads of Imagery*

Each episode will be rendered in the film through the orchestration of different threads of imagery. There will be everyday images which represent things seen by the protagonist, combined with fantastical images of things he dreams about, fading images of things he remembers, forensic images of things he studies...

### *The Complexity of Consciousness*

What interests us most of all is counterpoint: creating different rhythms and meanings through the way we place one thread of imagery against another. In doing so, we aim to show how observation and fantasy, memory, and speculation can all co-exist in the same mind at the same time. We aim towards the complexity of actual consciousness—what we might call “psychological 3-D” or “a cubist portrait of a mind.”

### *The Idea of Character*

Obviously, we are not talking about a conventional dramatisation of the Walser story. We aim to convey the character and attitudes of Walser's protagonist, but we aim to do it from the inside—through showing the landscape inside his head—rather than

from the outside, by showing him as an actor in the world. In a way, we seek new formal means to represent the very idea of “character” in film.

### *A Meditation Rather Than a Dramatization*

What we are trying to render is what life feels like to a particular individual. The finished film adds up to an impressionistic rendering of a singular consciousness. It is a dance of mental images, where everything is connected by association within a single psyche. We might call it a meditation on the Walser story rather than a dramatization of it. We linger over what interests us in the story, and omit what seems superfluous.

### *The Narrating Voice*

The narrating voice in the Walser story is like a stream of consciousness, and we will hear some of this as part of the soundtrack of the film. The “voice” will drift in and out of the film (in the way that you are sometimes conscious of thinking and sometimes not).

It will be more like a musical element than a conventional narrating voice, but it will be carefully counterpointed with the images to illuminate and explain whatever needs explaining in the images.

## **Storytelling Through Found Images**

### *The Use of Found Images*

Every image in the film is a found image. In this respect, our film might be compared to the surrealist collage novels of Max Ernst: it is all about storytelling through the juxtaposition and ordering of found images. Much of our work is to do with scouring the archives to find the images which best tell our story.

### *Three Key Threads*

There will be three key threads of imagery, drawn from three different genres of film, each representing a different area of the protagonist’s experience.

- There will be an **observational** thread of images drawn from documentary films, representing things that he directly experiences and observes on his walk.
- There will be an **analytical** thread of images drawn from scientific, medical, and educational films, which represent his close scrutiny and analysis of the world around him.
- There will be an **emotional** thread of images drawn from fiction films, which represent highly-charged moments of memory, dream, or imagination.

## **The Quality of the Images**

### *Experimental and Pioneering Work*

The type of images we seek are old images. The formal ideas for our film derive from looking at the very origins of cinema, and our basic rule regarding images is: the older the better. We are particularly interested experimental and pioneering work in photography. *Marey*, for instance, represents a moment of discovery, when an action as simple as walking became visible in a new way.

#### *Aesthetic of Ancient Images*

We also love the aesthetic variety of early photography—the range of printing techniques, colour processes, frame formats, and so on, which give the images a vividly alien quality.

We like technical novelties like hand-tinting, and technical aberrations like fogging or fading. We like it when the images are damaged or decayed, or otherwise showing their age.

#### *Different Kinds of Images Render Different Kinds of Experience*

For us, different image textures suggest different kinds of experience—a decayed image suggests the decay of memory, and so on. We use different looks and textures of images to represent different kinds of experience within the same mind—dark memory intersecting with bright fantasy, gloomy foreboding intersecting with pin-sharp observation.

#### *The Fundamental Magic of Cinema*

Every moving image represents a moment of time saved from oblivion. This is the fundamental magic of cinema, and the older the image, the more we feel this magic. We find a lot of poetry in the idea of creating a choreography now out of moments of movement which happened a hundred years ago.

#### Rights and Distribution

##### *Where Will the Film be Shown?*

Our film will be shown, first of all, at film festivals around the world—certainly dance film festivals like Cinedans in Amsterdam and Kinodance in St. Petersburg, and also maybe at festivals of short film and experimental film.

We then hope to sell the film to television. Based on our previous experience, we expect that channels like Arte and ZDF will be interested in buying it. We append information about the distribution of “*Nora*”—the most recent dance film made by David Hinton—to give a sense of the wide variety of places where the film might be seen and sold.

The film will also be shown in art galleries, in tandem with two live pieces specially designed to complement the film, which Siobhan Davies has commissioned from the distinguished contemporary dancers Deborah Saxon and Catherine Bennett.

### Collage, Composition, and Choreography

The three key formal principles of the film are those of collage, composition, and choreography.

- The film is a **collage** in that it is an arrangement of found material, creating a complex, layered way of looking at the world.
- The film will be **composed** in the sense that we have to create visually satisfying compositions of different images within the same screen, but we also have to compose rhythmically satisfying relationships between different movement sequences.
- The film will be **choreographed** in the sense that the central work will be to orchestrate many different elements to create compositions which are visually complex but always clear and coherent and alive.

## Biographies

Siobhan Davies is a renowned British choreographer who rose to prominence in the 1970s. Davies was a founding member of London Contemporary Dance Theatre and in 1982 joined forces with Richard Alston and Ian Spink to create the independent dance company Second Stride. Founding Siobhan Davies Dance in 1988, she works closely with collaborating artists to ensure that their own artistic enquiry is part of the creative process. By 2002 she moved away from the traditional theatre circuit and started making work for gallery spaces. Davies applies choreography across a wide range of creative disciplines including visual arts and film. In 2012, Davies created her first film work *All This Can Happen* with director David Hinton.

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Film-maker David Hinton has won a host of awards for both his documentaries and his screendance works. He has made many films about the arts for television, including portraits of Francis Bacon, Michael Powell, Alan Bennett, and Little Richard. He has also made films about Dostoyevsky, visual comedy, and the Cultural Revolution in China. He has made film versions of two stage shows by DV8 Physical Theatre—*Dead Dreams* and *Strange Fish*—and he has collaborated with many choreographers to create

original dance works for the screen. He has led dance film workshops all over the world.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Walser, *The Walk and Other Stories*.

## References

Walser, Robert. *The Walk and Other Stories*. Trans. C. Middleton et al. London: Serpent's Tail, 2013.