

Some Thoughts on “Nowness” and “Thenness”

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In *Death 24x a Second*, Laura Mulvey reflects upon the presence of stillness within the moving image. Over the course of her book, she writes about freeze-frames, photo-films, performed stillness and, in particular, the presence of the individual still frame inside the filmstrip. She identifies the “digital delay” that is part-and-parcel of our contemporary experience of domestic, media viewing, and which enables us to take for granted the arrest of movement of any film at will. The presence of the individual still frame can be felt in a way that was not previously possible for most of the twentieth century, outside of the privileged space of the editing room. Mulvey suggests that, as with photographic images, the still frame at the heart of the moving image is a reminder of the irretrievability of the past and thereby of death.

In writing about motion and stillness, Mulvey considers the viewer’s consciousness of time in film media and how our relationship to the cinema of the twentieth century has been irrevocably changed. The world of cinema has transformed into a universe of historic documents; materials that reveal themselves to us in ways that were not previously available when these films were first disseminated and experienced. At the end of the twentieth century, as media begin to converge and fragment, what had once been understood as the essential and distinct powers of still and of moving images, particularly their relationship to time, were called into question.

I am drawn to Mulvey’s chapter “The Pensive Spectator” for many reasons, though in the context of discussions about choreography and the moving image, I shall focus on two. Firstly, I would like to think about the fact that performance seems to be all about “nowness” and that photography seems to be all about “thenness.” As a filmmaker and former dancer, I have been thinking about my film practice and I am curious about the time register of two of my films: one, a video that is all movement, flux and lively performance, and the other, a film constructed entirely out of static re-framings of photographs of people who are now dead. Mulvey’s essay thinks about time across different kinds of film, and I wonder if this could guide me in thinking about the question of time in relation to dance films in particular. Secondly, read in the context of dance film and video, Mulvey’s discussion about our fascination with halting, delaying, and repeating movement surely describes the curiosity, pleasure, and drive of the choreographic impulse.

The encounter with the camera

I realised retrospectively that my experiences of filming (especially of filming large groups of people, as I have often done) have been very elaborate performances in themselves, with rules, roles, behaviours and processes, which, in turn, have shaped the performance of my subjects. The same must be true of photography—particularly nineteenth-century

photography. They may be an unlikely pairing, yet I think of both my films, *You Made Me Love You* (2005) and *Why Colonel Bunny Was Killed* (2010), as a kind of tribal portraiture. They are each concerned with the performance provoked through the human encounter with a photographic apparatus: one a twenty-first century video camera mounted on a travelling dolly, the other a nineteenth-century still camera mounted on a static tripod.



Still from *You Made Me Love You* (2005).



Still from *Why Colonel Bunny Was Killed* (2010). Courtesy of the Council of the National Army Museum, London.

You Made Me Love You comprises a single travelling shot in which the restless motion of a group of dancers constantly escapes the edges of the containing frame—even as the shot and its human subjects seem to seek a point of equilibrium and stasis. In *Why Colonel Bunny Was Killed*, the images consist of static re-framings of still photographs—the only actual movements are those of the viewer's eyes scanning across the screen surface and the movement of the interval—the jump between different static images.¹ In choosing to write about two such different films, I am of course conflating two fundamentally distinct, opposite, cinematic representations of time. Duration, understood as an individual's experience of time in film, is identified with the temporal experience produced by the individual shot (*You Made Me Love You*). Conversely, montage, the ellipsis and collapsing of time, emphasises the break between shots (*Why Colonel Bunny Was Killed*).

Stillness and distance

Much has been written about the affective properties of photographs, including Roland Barthes's well-known memoir, *Camera Lucida*. Looking into a photographic image, my awareness of the moment of registration and its distance from the present moment—the time of viewing—is foregrounded. A photograph presents itself to me as a question: What were the circumstances of the framing of this photograph? Who is behind the camera? What happened immediately before or after the shutter closed? Viewing still photography, I instinctively measure the distance between myself (now) and them (then), as well as the effect of the 'pastness' evoked. However, re-contextualised through an image-sequence, the fixed, self-contained world of the still image becomes a world that is waiting for something to happen; it adopts aspects of the linear trajectory and future anticipation associated with the moving image. As a result, the photographic sequence makes for a potentially interesting dialectic between viewer and image, which can at once become a reflection on the past and an anticipation of the future-of-the-past, the anticipation of cause and effect.

One of several colonial group portraits in *Why Colonel Bunny Was Killed* is reproduced here. Everything about this image emphasises the distance between them and us: the dress, the objects, the staging, the gestures, and style of self-presentation. Yet shockingly, the transparency of the photographic resolution, the absence of grain or other artefacts (such as dirt or damage), undercuts this distance. Because of the impeccable resolution of the antiquated image technology (the large-plate negative and silvered print), I find the detail of the subjects much more penetrating than those in the glow of the video surface of *You Made Me Love You*. The polo players are as still as stone, but their presence is more tactile and penetrating than the human liveliness of any contemporary photography that I am familiar with. Particularly when magnified into close-up sequences, the detail—of the light in their eyes, the texture of their skin, and the polish of their fingernails—is by turns uncanny, present and distant all at the same time.

As an artist, I understand that distance is a powerful tool for provoking reflection on realities that are otherwise too close for us to attend to. I enjoy the spookiness of distance. And yet, I notice that while the tactile presence of the polo-players may spook and arrest a viewer, even the smallest movements in the dancers' (admittedly huge) faces in *You Made Me Love You* enable their liveliness be felt as closeness, as actual contact.



Stills from *Why Colonel Bunny Was Killed* (2010). Courtesy of the Council of the National Army Museum, London.

Performance, process, and time

Historian Elizabeth Edwards titled her essay on British portrait postcards of the early twentieth century, "Little Theatres of Self," highlighting the theatrical, performative nature of portrait photography. The photographer of the polo-players had to produce a single image that is capable of representing a temporal sequence of events, a narrative. The photograph provokes a symmetrical choreography (a staging of sorts) and a performance (of deportment and expression) with some shared rules (sight-lines, for example). The props refer

to a polo match that took place before the photo was taken. The group is displayed in an orderly pyramid arrangement that designates them as a team and perhaps, as winners. Each holds an erect pose and follows the common rules—crossed arms and/or legs and a confident gaze directed by each member into a different and arbitrary middle distance. The outcome of the polo match is announced by enormous trophies displayed on two tables on either side, which are theatrically draped with black cloth. The ritual of polo is represented through the ritual staging of photography (both rituals are presumably important aspects of colonial life). Here, a temporal, performative process (the sporting competition) is collapsed into a representational tableau that is characterised by the choreographed pose, by symmetry, and by fixedness.

In *You Made Me Love You*, the roving camera-on-wheels provokes a choreography of sorts—a startled flocking motion—as dancers seek to restore their relationship to the centre frame. This in turn provokes a series of spatial and social adjustments, a process of micro-negotiations amongst the dancers. The video documents the state of flux of the physical process (dancers are constantly slipping out of the frame) and the more interior, sensory processes (perceivable in small, concentrated looks and movements across surfaces of faces). We witness a range of individual senses of personhood and self-presentation, now tentatively, now boldly, expressed. This too is the documentation of a process; only here process is defined by instability, uncertainty, and flux.

The single shot is a measure of time: theirs and ours. In *You Made Me Love You*, the camera's unedited performance makes felt the time of its recording. As they negotiate each other, the camera's, the dancers' and the viewer's looks are caught up together in a single measure of time. The time of recording and the time of viewing are bridged in the unfolding of the shot and also in the exchange of looks, the direct address of the dancers who seem to seek-out and return the viewer's gaze. When filmmaker Adam Roberts writes in "Notes on Filming Dance": "All I can say with such a film is: *This* is happening," he is touching not only on the redundancy of interpretation but on the immediacy, the privileging, of the "presentness," the "newness" of performance, which persists in films of dance.

Avant-garde film and contemporary dance

Photography invented stillness. By means of its special incision into time, photography, once upon a time, suddenly made visible things that could not ordinarily be seen. The image sequences of Edward Muybridge and the composite images of Etienne Marey stilled the body's motion in order to expose its hidden pathways. Later, in 1921, filmmaker Jean Epstein wrote of being entranced by the special powers of the film close-up and of slow motion to reveal things that the human eye could not detect: "*This eye, remember, sees waves invisible to us.*"²

Laura Mulvey opens her chapter by reminding the reader of the perceptual revolution opened up, first by photography's invention of stillness, and later, by the invention of mechanised motion, of speed and the mechanised eye of cinema, and of the profoundly transformative effect of these for filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov, Jean Epstein, and René Clair.

To delay movement, whether as a compulsive intervention into the "body of the film" or into the body of the dancer, not only frames and objectifies movement, but also reveals its mechanics, something not perceivable in everyday life.³ Describing the "digital delay" of

image technologies at the end of the twentieth century, Mulvey addresses the intervention into the flow of time and space in a film that disrupts the gesture of an actor and transforms it into something, which I might understand as a choreographic gesture—that of the dancer. In his essay, "On Dance Film," Adam Roberts asks what it is that distinguishes the flow of movement of an actor in narrative cinema from that of dancer in a dance film. As we are reminded in "The Pensive Spectator," the pleasure of delay and of repetition is the pleasure of the dance: a delight in movement (of film or of the body) for its own sake. Contemporary dance, like avant-garde film plays to our own curiosity about the nature of the body, or of film, and our desire to look at its movement. Unlike narrative cinema, dance film and avant-garde film have no need to conceal or dissolve the time of their registration in favor of, in the service of, a story time. Instead, there is a special pleasure derived from the awareness of the "constructedness" of choreography, as there is of avant-garde film. Avant-garde film and dance can draw us into the materiality and construction of the body or of the film and its projection.

The choreographer isolates and re-orders the body's gestures from everyday norms and performs them back for us to witness, recognise, and reflect upon. The delay and interruption of the conventional flow of movement, which Mulvey describes, is a version of the work of the choreographer. When we delay gestures digitally or choreographically, we dissolve their causality and imply an alternative logic. Stripping action of its causality, the choreographer offers us traces of the body's journey through space and through time. Significance lies in this disruption or displacement; it is what is left once I have been deprived of what I thought was logic, or a certain order of meaning.

As a delayed and over-extended gesture—say a handshake—starts to be understood as something strange, comic, or disturbing, the witnessing of the performance as a process requires the shedding of familiar interpretive frameworks.⁴ As viewer-witness, we are invited to pay attention to the changing perception of a once familiar object as it is transformed through repetition, delay, or stasis, simultaneously bringing the act of perception itself into question.

References

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Notes

1. Triggered by the memoirs of a medical missionary on the Afghan borderlands from 1890-1912, the film *Why Colonel Bunny Was Killed* (2010) is constructed entirely from still photographs and sound recordings.
2. Jean Epstein, "Bonjour Cinema and Other Writings," 13.
3. Mulvey, *Death 24x*, 181.
4. Choreographer Siobhan Davies, speaking at the Screendance Symposium at the University of Brighton (February 4, 2011) broke off to shake hands with Sarah Whatley, an action that lasted for several minutes. The video works "Home Stories" by Matthias Müller or "Alone Wastes Andy Hardy" by Martin Arnold eloquently re-configure cinema's gestures with illuminating results.