#### **Review of An Evening of Film at Siobhan Davies Studios, London 19/10/2023** *Claudia Kappenberg*

### Abstract

A review of three films by Siobhan Davies, *All This Can Happen (2012), The Running Tongue* (2015) and *Transparent* (2022), and discussion of her shift from live performance to working with the still image and film. Davies's work is described as a kind of archaeological practice with long-form choreographic projects which are underpinned by a 'poetics of responsibility'. Offering a reservoir of images and relations and allowing for innumerable different viewing experiences, they invite audiences to see for themselves and to grasp what embodied liveness is within each instant.

**Keywords**: All This Can Happen, The Running Tongue, Transparent, Davies, Hinton, poetics of responsibility, archive, spectator, body, dwelling, liveness, long-form choreograph



Image 1: Siobhan Davies, Transparent (2022), Transparent Still-11.jpg, Credit: Siobhan Davies Studios.

The International Journal of Screendance 14 (2024) <u>https://doi.org/10.18061/ijsd.v14i1.10139</u> © 2024 Kappenberg. This article is published under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/ Here engages a carefully woven relationship with democracy, with a general assembly of looking, with a full spectrum priority: all things carry and convey; all things bear witness and must be borne witness to; everything is illuminated, whether seeding burst or animal, woman or the weather, business or a building, worker or such woodland, gesture or the book.

Gareth Evans, "Mundane: Thinking through All This Can Happen." *The International Journal of Screendance*, Vol 7 (2016).<sup>[1]</sup>

An Evening of Film<sup>[2]</sup> presented for the first time under one roof the trilogy of films All This Can Happen (2012), The Running Tongue (2015) and Transparent (2022), which choreographer Siobhan Davies made in collaboration with filmmaker David Hinton, Hugo Glendinning and numerous others since she moved from making live work to choreographing for the screen in the early 2010s. The event also marked the handover of the artistic leadership of the Siobhan Davies Studios, an investigative contemporary arts organization and base for independent dance artists, which Davies envisaged and directed since 2006 and which has facilitated ground-breaking work in bringing choreographic practices into conversation with other art forms and research practices.<sup>[3]</sup> An ongoing questioning of her creative approach has been part of Davies's practice since she started dancing and choreographing in the late 1960s and An Evening of Film was an opportunity to look across the most recent body of work.

Described by Davies as "cinematic collages choreographed into a web of images, sounds and ideas," the three films span a decade of investigation and also draw on a vast body of live work.<sup>[4]</sup> They broadly explore the experience of living from the perspective of moving bodies, and they make the case for choreographic practices on and off screen to be much more expansive than the performance of dance. At stake is the notion that dance is not just a transient celebration of the moment, but that it includes long-form choreographic work which is based on extensive periods of gestation and maturation, constituting bodies of work that have potentially long-lasting impact.

At the time of the screening in October 2023, London's arts scene was framed by two major gallery shows, Women in Revolt at Tate Britain and RE/SISTERS at the Barbican Gallery, both extensive surveys of the work of women artists and feminist practices over a good six decades, celebrating their protesting and protecting and their demanding that things should be different. In a catalogue essay for the Barbican's RE/SISTERS, curator Alona Pardo reflects on the work of the artist Helène Aylon and her project Terrestri: Rescued Earth (1982),<sup>[5]</sup> for which she collected contaminated radioactive earth in an ambulance and delivered it to various institutions in the US. Pardo writes: "Aylon's performance was rooted not only in human-nature relations but, more importantly, the 'poetics of responsibility'."<sup>[6]</sup> The notion of a 'poetics of responsibility' as proposed by Greg Garrard as part of an examination of ecocriticism is an alternative concept to the rather outdated 'poetics of authenticity', according to which one could go 'back to nature' for a redemptive experience and unmediated encounter.<sup>[7]</sup> Instead of a binary concept of nature versus human society, the 'poetics of responsibility' envisages a constructive engagement with the world in all its facets whereby human activities and labor are accordingly re-evaluated beyond capitalist economics. Perhaps a 'poetics of responsibility' permeates the work of many of the artist visionaries in RE/SISTERS. It also appears to underpin the complex tapestries of Davies's films, through their relentless examination of human experience in relation to the wider spheres of cultural histories and natural sciences, plant and animal life. The following review will discuss the three films in order to reflect on these intentions in Davies's oeuvre and on the creative processes involved. Secondly, the review will consider more broadly why Davies moved from working with live bodies to working on screen, considering her long-standing interest in photography and the still frame as well as her concerns with the trajectories, histories and potential futures of dance.

All This Can Happen (2012)<sup>[8]</sup> was the subject of an entire issue of *The International Journal of Screendance* (2016) as Siobhan Davies's first major screen-based project and milestone in her choreographic journey, and as an astounding, epic as well as tender, 50 minute audio-visual collage which draws on literature, the pre-history of cinema, film archives, and Davies's choreographic language.<sup>[9]</sup> The film offers a rich, sensorial encounter of screen space that echoes Davies's live performances but also intensifies the proposition of infinite possible pathways and relations: here the continuous time and space of live events has splintered into multitudes.

The film was the first artistic collaboration between Siobhan Davies and filmmaker David Hinton, their friendship having begun in 1984 when Davies was the subject of the *South Bank Show*, a British television arts magazine, directed by Hinton. Hinton's interest in challenging cinematic conventions and his passion for found footage was a perfect match for Davies's fascination with the details of everyday movements such as standing, walking and running. In a bookshop in London's Charing Cross Road Hinton chanced upon Robert Walser's novella *The Walk* (1917), which became the narrative framework for their first collaboration and examination of the physical, emotional and social act of walking.<sup>[10]</sup> The familiar activity provides the pace for the film and entwines Walser's reflections with moments from his every day and with a dramatic historical context. The film is entirely composed of archival footage from the early days of cinema, thereby deeply embedded in a history of picture-making. The many frames are woven into a kaleidoscopic split-screen edit which plays with, up to, fifteen frames simultaneously. Every inch of the screen is therefore alive and pulsing, forming a seemingly infinite tapestry of textures, shapes and gestures. The core of this choreographic work is an almost forensic study of the shapes, movements and textures in the archival filmstrips, described by Davies as a "kind of archaeological practice" for the exactitude with which she and Hinton proceeded in the edit room, working frame by frame.<sup>[11]</sup>

A desire to tease the audience's attention to detail led Davies and Hinton to freeze numerous clips, again and again pausing on a single frame and pairing it with other frames. This display of single frames leads to a repeated suspension of movement and time, set again into motion with short movement sequences which rekindle the sense of flow and potentiality of the ordinary and the everyday. The approach draws, for example, on Davies's and Hinton's long-standing fascination with the work of French scientist and chronophotographer Etienne-Jules Marey and his breaking down of movement into sets of still frames, a scientific matter-of-fact approach to movement in which a visual poetry and magic emerge out of the revealing of movement itself. In All This Can Happen, the hands of an office worker are suspended in midair as they sort through a draw of index cards, and the jump of a child is temporarily arrested along with the movement of its shadow. Infinite details become visible in each single frame, providing a surprising feast for the eyes while an equally detailed and textured soundscape by Chu-Li Shewring indulges the ears. Even the texture of the grainy, faded film frames becomes part of the sensorial experience. As Gareth Evans wrote in his review of the film for The International Journal of Screendance (2016), this is a democracy of relations and a "general assembly of looking", whereby every detail counts as does the plurality of elements presented side by side.<sup>[12]</sup> This plurality does not assign status or determine value; instead it obliges the viewer to make choices in how and where to look, when to associate or move on, allowing for innumerous different viewing experiences and audio-visual impressions. As Evans notes:

These frames rarely hold for long; image and energies spill, redirect themselves, breed, split, stutter, surge. Everyone and everything is multiple. Possibility outruns probability.<sup>[13]</sup>

Furthermore, *All This Can Happen* begins with a startling set of shots, in which bodies of WW1 soldiers tumble uncontrollably down a ravine to the sound of battle while a traumatized, bedridden body is locked into pathological repetitive shaking of the head. The charms of the everyday are entangled in the film with scenes from WW1 which testify to the violence of war and to the trauma done to the bodies and souls of

those who are caught up in the machinery of war. Throughout *All This Can Happen*, contorted and traumatized bodies appear and reappear, broken, staggering and locked into convulsions. All of this happens in this film where relations are provocatively contiguous, indeterminate, and where meaning is not a given. The opening scenes were not lost on those watching the film in October 2023 in a Europe marked by Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, and by the brutality unleashed in the Middle East through the attack on Israel and the relentless bombing of the Gaza Strip, all of which bring back terrible specters of history. Reflecting on the screening of the film with Siobhan Davies a few weeks after the event, we both recalled noting the intensity of these images of contorted figures and how much the film resonated with the topical avalanche of terrifying media images.

A more hidden and culturally embedded form of social violence underpins Davies and Hinton's next collaboration, The Running Tongue (2015) <sup>[14]</sup>, a film installation for which they draw on a collection of international proverbs about women entitled Never Marry A Man With Big Feet (2004), many of which are decidedly cruel.<sup>[15]</sup> These proverbs, however, do not feature directly and were given instead to twentytwo dance artists as material to respond to. Expanding on the collaborative nature of their first film, Davies and Hinton limited their own creative direction in this project to providing an overall structure and the setting of detailed guidelines for the selected dance artists. The artists were invited to compose two scenes or 'visions' each, both of which had to be contained within a single frame, have a duration of 10sec, may contain an object that responds to the chosen proverb, and contain the briefest of movements sited somewhere in London.<sup>[16]</sup> Structurally, the forty-four collages are connected through a female figure who is running continuously through landscapes of different kinds, always leading to the next 'vision'. The sequencing of visions is, however, controlled by a computer and devised to be random, thereby providing an ongoing reservoir of scenes rather than a final edit. Collaborating with several animators, in particular Magali Charrier and Noriko Okaku, the visual language of The Running Tongue is largely animated and composed of cut-out landscapes and collaged scenarios, further exploring the single frame as an aesthetic object in which every detail counts. The collaged nature of each of the visions furthermore challenges the notion of a unified or natural space, state or relation. Everything here is visibly put together and arranged, implying that other constellations would be just as possible.

Most notably the female runner is naked while all other figures in the 'visions' are clothed. "Why a woman, and why naked?" I ask Siobhan Davies. She muses whether she would have made the same choice post #metoo and adds that, at the time, she wanted to work with the performer Helka Kaski rather than necessarily working with someone female, adding that clothes also seemed a distraction which would only lead to complications given the changing landscapes and seasons through which the figure was running. Furthermore, Davies notes that she is always keen to see "the body at work", a theme that runs through all her films, be they walking and working as in the first film, running in the second, or being animal as in the third film, when we see either herself or the dancers Lauren Potter and Linda Gibbs performing nude, exploring groundedness in deep crouching positions.<sup>[17]</sup> Davies is keen to resist the sexualizing of the body and wants the body to be itself, at work with mind, imagination and ideas. In The Running Tonque the naked runner is a sort of archetype, traversing different landscapes which at times look like a forest in winter and at other times are reduced to mere lines of color like an imaginary space. The interludes with the runner also function as a kind of relief to the viewer, if not as an escape from whatever happens in the "visions"; some of these visions are quite everyday while others come across as positively bewildering or tense. For example, dancer Lauren Potter's chosen proverb "The she-cat is on the roof and the old woman with blackened eyes is dancing" is devised as a still image in a warehouse kind-of space in which there are many black cats alongside multiple versions of an old lady who is wearing red headphones and dancing. The book would explain that this proverb is Algerian and that the woman wants to prove that she is as agile as a cat, but viewers of the film are left to speculate.<sup>[18]</sup> Artist Simon Ellis chose the possibly more familiar proverb "Women will always be blamed for everything", for which he walks into a still image

in which a floating gun points at the frozen runner Kaska, placing himself behind the gun and firing, but he himself falls into the grass.<sup>[19]</sup> The different 'visions' and their gestures are unlike one another and surprising, and, like the frozen stills in *All This Can Happen*, offer the possibility of seeing a whole story in an instant.

Kaski's strong and wonderfully strident running in the intervals meanwhile suggests an embodied state that connects everything, even though she tends to freeze into a mere image or ghost in each of these scenes, at times half faded into the background. In Charlie Morissey's 'vision' the figure almost runs into the Thames but hovers on its edge, her semi-transparent body merging with the city scape around her which itself merges with another view of the city's skyline. A live body can never be transparent to us, even though it may feel as such to the one who is dancing and sensing, immersed in a moment in time. On screen however, everything is possible: half present half absent, the faded figure of the runner recalls the realm of the imaginary where inside and outside sometimes only differ in tones or shades. As a viewer, we look through the figure and through the buildings onto other buildings and back at the runner in a circular motion that echoes that of the runner. In the process, the solidity of the familiar world gives way to the process of looking, probability meets uncertainty, memory, and fantasy.

The third film in the trilogy, a collaboration with David Hinton and Hugo Glendinning, Transparent (2022) turns towards Siobhan Davies's own research process which she developed over decades and which she has compared to shining a torch into fog, a metaphor which embraces both the uncertainties of such a process and the intensity of moments of recognition. Having started many years ago with research notes on random scraps of paper that were lying around, Davies developed a system of postcards which later turned into tracing paper and acetates onto which she would photocopy images of anatomical drawings or ancient figurines as well as snapshots from rehearsals and any other relevant matter. The acetates allowed her to layer images on top of one another over a lightbox much like the crossfading of images on screen, and to look at as well as through them, observing the shifting of shapes, the emergence of continuity across images, bodies and lines as well as their differences. The film camera in Transparent observes Davies as she moves the acetates, studies and compares, following her eyes, her hands and the shifting images to form an "unfixable archive of movement and experience", but an archive nevertheless.<sup>[20]</sup> Davies was adamant during the making of *Transparent*, that this was not an autobiography but it became nonetheless a deep look into her own learning and choreographic thinking, commented on and narrated by herself. Woven into these explorations are glimpses of work from those she has worked with and admires – the dancers, choreographers, and visual artists.

Having undergone several versions during its production, the final edit of *Transparent* is composed of three parts, the first one going back to her own beginnings with dance and her fascination with studying the working body. Entitled *Animal Origins,* it places photographs of herself in this and that pose alongside anatomical drawings and images from the natural world while the voice-over speaks of her sense of herself as made up from disconnected parts. Images of historical figurines with dangling limbs further echo the idea of the body as a composite. The section leads up to a moment of insight, "as if my body became known to me, and then disassembled again."<sup>[21]</sup> More Greek sculptures, torsos in relief, the bronze hand of the *Charioteer of Delphi* holding the reins of something, a red chalk drawing of a horse on its hind legs by painter George Stubbs and dancer Charlie Morrissey echoing that move of bending, reaching and folding.<sup>[22]</sup> Variation after variation of gestures and poses, sometimes a shape echoes across cultural traces. This is an archive compiled by a desire to learn and to connect while a pared-down electronic soundtrack leaves space and time for the viewer to also engage in study. "I am attempting to draw a figure into my body, to allow a physical memory to well up from my pre-human past (...) to become what I needed to be, rather than what I had trained to be," says Davies in the voiceover.<sup>[23]</sup> The body in service, in other words, the inner workings of muscles and bones over form and ingrained aesthetic

expectations, a quiet but firm statement and conclusion to this first part and journey of Siobhan Davies as dancer and researcher.

The second part, A Lived In Circle, dives into a specific choreography, Rotor (2010), in which four dancers form the spokes of a wheel and walk or run to set the wheel in motion, gradually changing speeds and directions and weaving around each other in a perpetuum mobile that is both a human endeavour of keeping up with one another and a cosmic swirling of astronomical bodies.<sup>[24]</sup> Just watching this makes the viewer dizzy, but the contextual material on screen, the drawings, the images of planetary trajectories and swirling scribbles, give a hint of the precise order and choreographic decisions behind the work. Part 3 is entitled *Transparencies* and is different again, making it explicit that this is Davies's own journey, with the camera following her through London along a busy Liverpool Street or along the quiet canal of Camden Town, the voiceover reflecting on the fact that the more extensive part of her journey is behind her. Nevertheless, Davies herself continues to be a body at work, striding out and imagining that there is a mirror image below her reaching down into the ground as she treads the pavement. As a whole, the film Transparent narrates her story but is also a manifesto about what dance on and off screen can be, through reaching back into antiquity and very different cultural spheres, through engaging with the sciences and other artists' practices, through the visualization of choreographic thinking and the articulation of its propositions. It is a testament to dance on and off screen as a long-form enquiry, documenting its labyrinthine nature but also taking the viewer on a journey where they can study for themselves that which informs and shapes and moves us all. As with Davies's earlier films, Transparent is a cinechoreography of possibilities and tensions in which the bodies are always in process and in conversation, each encounter giving way to the next. Also consistent throughout is the sense that understanding ourselves includes—or even necessitates—understanding of what is other, in a sort of ongoing moebius process where the other folds into the inner and the inner folds into the other.

Davies's trajectory from dancing and choreographing live bodies to working with the screen places her into a long genealogy of choreographing filmmakers past and present; each had their own motivation for this shift from one creative practice to another. For Davies the shift had a long trajectory, beginning with an early fascination with photography and the daguerreotypes of Henry Fox Talbot. These had never felt like still images to Davies as they always needed time to come into being. On the other hand, the documentation of dance had rarely worked for her, be that recording of her own choreographies using early video technologies or the camera at the back of an auditorium, nor publicity photographs and clips. Davies was more interested in what she called scratch tapes, old video cameras that recorded onto cassette tapes and which she gave to each dancer to work with during the choreographic process to record the movement phrases they liked. As Davies recalls, these scratch tapes caught something personal of the dancers, for example when they were switching things on and off or waved to camera to indicate they didn't like the version they had just performed. A first shift came when Davies moved from performing in theatres to working in galleries and other spaces, where she could work more closely with the dancers' minds and imaginations. But film offered something more specific: "Maybe with film," Davies says "you could find those moments, which one can neither see in the theatre or in the gallery space, because you can dwell on moments by stilling them, by concentrating on them for a period of time."<sup>[25]</sup> The notion of dwelling suggests residing within an instant as in a dwelling or a house, but 'dwelling' is often used negatively in that one is not supposed to dwell because we are always supposed to move on and get on. "I like a good dwelling," Davies muses, and the frozen archival frames in All This Can Happen, the 10sec composite images or 'visions' in The Running Tongue, and the slow shifting of acetates in Transparent are all a testament to this endeavor to allow us to dwell, to become a more attentive and pensive spectator than we might otherwise be.<sup>[26]</sup> Davies's pensive spectator is also indicative of the kind of responsibility the choreographer imparts on her audience, to see in and through for themselves and to grasp what embodied liveness is within each instant, so utterly marvelous and intensely delicate.

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But how to dwell in movement without also distorting it? Davies had generally refrained from manipulating movement, rarely intervening as, for example, in *Portrait* (part of *Two Quartets*, 2007), where she broke down the catching of a ball into nine sections and altered the order of the nine moves, so that it would take on a more disorganized quality. When making *All This Can Happen*, Hinton understood that Davies liked the figures to be themselves and therefore suggested not to manipulate the archival filmstrips beyond the changing of speed and freezing of images, and to work with them as they were. Davies recalls that the aim was to "look at movement as if we were looking at it for the first time, which is what the early photographers and filmmakers were doing," such as Vertov's recording of everyday movement, Buster Keaton's visual cinematic humor or the suspension of action in the bell scene in Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*.<sup>[27]</sup> Working with multiple frames of the same instant meanwhile came out of Davies's own experience with live work, where every moment seemed to have many multiples contained within it. In live performance, Davies noted, this sense of multiplicity emerges across several performances as each one is always different from the next, but on screen this can be built into and played out within the filmic space.

Further reflecting on the legacies of dance-based work Davies adds that this quality of dance of being in the moment "is only of that moment because of years of research by that dancer and the ability to fully engage with the arc of the whole process, so that they perform the all of it within that moment." <sup>[28]</sup> Dance as an embodied history and trajectory which is brought to bear on a moment, or a moment that speaks to an embodied history and trajectory. To exemplify this, Davies refers to a split-second in *All This Can Happen* in which the edit captures the look of a boy who is selling newspapers which, she says, moves her every time. For Davies, everyday movement is dense with history, memory, and learning and her desire is to push dance forward, on and off screen, so that it is seen differently, as a long-form enquiry that senses and correlates and bears witness, and whose audiences become eyes and ears, advocate and witness, subversive player, and compatriot.

## Biography

Dr Claudia Kappenberg is an artist, writer, curator and Honorary Fellow at the University of Brighton, UK. She led the International Screendance Network and co-founded the International Journal for Screendance in 2009. Her more recent writing has been published in *Lo Tech Pop Cult: Screendance Remixed (2024), Roland Barthes in/and/through performance* (2023), *MIRAJ* (2021), *Performing Process: Sharing Dance and Choreographic Practice* (2018), *Syncope in Performing and Visual Arts* (2017) and *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies* (2016). In 2020 she co-curated the online Screendance season "grounded" with Fiontán Moran.

#### Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> Evans, "Mundane: Thinking through All This Can Happen," 2016, 15.

<sup>[2]</sup> *An Evening of Film*, Siobhan Davies Studios, St. George's Road, London, SE1 6ER, Thursday 19 Oct 2023, 5.45pm - 10pm.

<sup>[3]</sup> For general information on Siobhan Davies Studios see:

https://www.siobhandavies.com/about/history/

<sup>[4]</sup> Home page Siobhan Davies: An Evening of Film. <u>https://bookwhen.com/siobhandavies/e/ev-spcb-</u> 20231019174500?utm\_source=Siobhan+Davies+Studios&utm\_campaign=7536fee2f4-

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<sup>[5]</sup> Helène Aylon, *Terrestri: Rescued Earth* (1982)

<sup>[6]</sup> Alona Pardo, "Reweaving the Webb of Womanist Ecopolitics," 2023, 19. Note: The notion of 'poetic responsibility' is referenced as follows: Greg Garrard cited in Martin Royle and Kate Soper, Introduction: The Ecology of Labour, *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 20, issue 2: 'The Ecology of Labour' (2016), 119.

<sup>[7]</sup> Garrard, 2004, 168 – 169.

<sup>[8]</sup> Davies and Hinton, 2013.

<sup>[9]</sup> Kappenberg, 2016.

<sup>[10]</sup> Walser, 2013.

<sup>[11]</sup> Davies in conversation with Kappenberg, 2023.

<sup>[12]</sup> Evans, 15.

<sup>[13]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[14]</sup> Davies and Hinton, 2015.

<sup>[15]</sup> Schipper, 2004.

<sup>[16]</sup> For an in-depth discussion about this creative process and the extensive negotiations between Davies, Hinton and the selected artists during the making of the film see: Davies, S., Hinton, D., & Ellis, S. The Running Tongue: Collaboration, Choice and Community. *The International Journal of Screendance*, Vol 5. (2015), 91.

<sup>[17]</sup> Davies and Kappenberg, 2023.

<sup>[18]</sup> Schipper, 2004, 202.

<sup>[19]</sup> Ellis, 2015.

<sup>[20]</sup> Siobhan Davies Studios, Notes on 'Transparent' (2022), <u>https://www.siobhandavies.com/transparent/</u>

<sup>[21]</sup> Davies, Voice over for 'Transparent' (2022), 01:50 – 2:15min.

<sup>[22]</sup> George Stubbs, A Prancing Horse, Facing Right (C. 1790)

<sup>[23]</sup> Davies, Voice over for Transparent (2022), 08:00 – 08:30min.

<sup>[24]</sup> Davies 2010. Note: *Rotor* was presented both as live work and as film, and Davies also invited other artists to respond to the work and exhibit their responses at the Siobhan Davies Studios. For a review of the dance and exhibition see: Sanjoy Roy, *Siobhan Davies: Rotor* (2010).

<sup>[25]</sup> Davies and Kappenberg, 2023.

<sup>[26]</sup> The term 'pensive spectator' was coined by Laura Mulvey to describe the impact which moments of stillness within a cinematic narrative might have on the spectator, and which might allow them to become more reflective. See: Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 2006.

<sup>[27]</sup> Vertov, 1929; Keaton, 2027; Tarkovsky 1966.

<sup>[28]</sup> Davies and Kappenberg, 2023.

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