

Reflecting on Light Moves Festival of Screendance 2018

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In a hotel lift in Limerick recently, I found myself standing next to a man carrying a small wooden box by its handle. It is clearly a homemade receptacle, and I am intrigued to know what it contains. In response to my query, the man opens the front panel of the box and inside there are three shelves, each one populated by crowds of miniature model soldiers. "I'm here for a national gaming convention," the man explains with a flush of anticipation. I recognise his excitement as being similar to my own on this first morning of the latest edition of the *Light Moves Festival of Screendance*.¹ Two nerds in an elevator, off to satisfy their different personal obsessions.

Founded five years ago by Irish artist-curators Mary Wycherley and Jürgen Simpson, and produced by Jenny Traynor and Dance Limerick, *Light Moves Festival of Screendance* has in a very short time become the 'must-go' event on the international dance film calendar. Combining presentations and papers, labs, special events and films, the 2018 *Light Moves* line-up was as richly thought-provoking as ever. The backbone of the event is a series of screenings of works selected from an open call for submissions, curated into themed programmes which this year included *Timings*, *Remembering*, and *Journeys*. For me, these themes, or sub-categories, seemed to flow into wider ideas around grief and loss that emerged in many of the presentations and conversations over the three days of the festival.

"Editing is grief," said visual artist Annie Pfingst on the first morning of the festival. She was being interviewed about *In Memoriam* (2016),² an environmental dance film that she made with movement artist Helen Poynor. The synthesis of a shared practice of 20 years, *In Memoriam* was filmed over three seasons in an ancient mossy grove in South West England, close to where the artists live. In it, Pfingst's camera bears witness to Poynor's process of working—in movement and stillness—through the pain and desolation of grief, as located in her body and the landscape she inhabits. The result is an evocative and meditative screendance work in which framing and editing mimics the grieving process. That there is a profound sense of loss attached to choosing one shot over many others when piecing together the film, suggests that the artists' relationship to the moving image material they have created has intense personal significance.



This slippage between the deeply personal and a more forensic attention to formal processes feels appropriate and timely. I sensed among the artists, producers, commentators, and presenters at *Light Moves* a shared desire to reassess the value and role of what we do; to question existing structures and biases, to re-order what has been before, and yet also to look back to a time when things were perhaps less complicated.

Ancestral loss, and the melancholia surrounding it, is the starting point for *This is How I'd Like to Die* (2018), a talk by Canadian filmmaker Laura Taler. Here Taler presented her latest film work, which she both directs and performs in, although in truth we saw few actual moving images. She instead shared the research, questions, and concerns—both personal and artistic—which occupy her in what she calls her “performing mourning” practice.³ Taler recalled the moment in the process when she realized that, in looking to articulate something about absence and grieving, she needed to return to the village in Romania that her mother had left many years before; to re-insert her own theatrical persona—complete with long wig and peasant skirt—into this familial environment. Along with her attempt to transform private questions and personal emotions into screen-based images, Taler also questioned how these might be shared and understood by an audience. She described her desire to “give feelings shape so that people can share them.”⁴ However, as Taler herself pointed out, whose are these feelings in the first place and has she the right to be feeling them, let alone tell them as her story? This raises questions about the nature of autobiographical work, of what and whose stories artists may tell, and—with her particular set of circumstances—Taler highlights a tension in the spatial and temporal distance/proximity which results from “being where you don’t feel that you belong,”⁵ whether that is today, or in the past.

Different kinds of loss also ran through Simon Ellis’s presentation-performance *Between Faces*.⁶ He began by telling us about a survivor of the 2018 tsunami in Indonesia who, describing the experience of having lost everything, said: “I have my body ... and my phone.”⁷ This anecdotal framing suggests the essential—and existential—role that these digital devices have assumed in our everyday lives. In the context of screendance, Ellis used the dubious centrality of the smartphone as a means of “drawing attention to the movements, timings and spaces that characterize our interfaces with screens,”⁸ and in doing so, he critiques our assumptions about how we engage with ideas, culture and, most specifically, dance. One of the questions Ellis’s talk brought up for me was *what is lost and what is gained by filming dance?* It is not necessarily a new question, but one which can usefully be revisited as technologies and their contexts evolve. If nowadays everything can—and often is—captured for posterity, what does it mean to edit? Taking the ‘real’ time to place images into an order to be played back to an audience in analogue seems laborious, clunky, and perhaps too definitive today. Instead, Ellis suggested a more fleeting, ephemeral relationship to images might take place, one that “involves a different set of eyes ... (which) Kim Louise Walden describes as *peering* as opposed to the “glance” with television, and the “gaze at the cinema screen.”⁹

As I reflected on Ellis's paper, I returned to the image of editing as grief. Is editing a grieving process precisely because our embodiment is now extended to our smartphones? We have reframed the interface between us and the world that surrounds us, and as a result live and film our lives—and dances—relatively indiscriminately. How does this tendency to record everything—eschewing pre-determined, consciously choreographed and framed shots in favor of long, fluid, unarticulated captures—affect our approach to editing? If the structure of a work has typically become the result of *omitting* rather than constructing moments, perhaps it is inevitable that the emotion of editing has become one of loss, a feeling of absence. In that sense, the edit of a dance film becomes less an imagined reality and more a fragmented memory of moments, rendered separate from the present primarily by the passage of time.

Mourning is also about time, and temporal (as well as spatial) distance, which expand and contract within the emotional field of the mourner, often without warning, meaning, or logic. In Marisa Zanotti's film *Entangled* (2018), perceptions of time emerge as a concern in which loops of archive, shapes, and screen configurations phase and dance in relation to the different sections of composer Matthew Whiteside's score. The only human presence discernible on screen is a short clip of a couple dancing a social dance—archival footage, possibly from the time of the early cinema. Like particles of dust, they spin, step apart, come together, fade away and fade in again. Through Zanotti's editing, they become fleeting glimpses of a moment that is never explained, at which none of us were present, but which etches itself into the viewer's consciousness as memory. The programme note tells us that the theory of quantum entanglement and specifically the work of the late Northern Irish physicist John Stewart Bell provided the sound and image inspiration for *Entangled*.

Another film in the same programme that stems from scientific research is Evann Sieben's *Time Reversal Symmetry* (2018). This work was developed as part of a project bringing together artists and scientists at *TRIUMF*: Canada's national laboratory for particle and nuclear physics. In her response, Sieben puts herself (with her dog Pina Bausch) in the frame, as she carries out everyday activities such as walking, circling, and sweeping. Filmed on a 16mm camera, the work uses in-camera split-screen and shot reversal to represent the oscillating dance between matter and antimatter. Its formal structure, relaxed aesthetic, and the pedestrian quality of the physical actions are also a nod to experimental cinema and the post-modern dance tradition.

Perhaps it is indicative of this century's altered world-view, melancholic weariness, or absence of hope, that the oldest film to be screened at the festival was for me the most uplifting. Sitting amongst the *Light Moves* audience for a screening of Dziga Vertov's film classic, *Man With A Movie Camera* (1929), with a newly commissioned accompanying score, I experienced editing as optimism.

The film is hugely influential in the development of cinema, and at *Light Moves*, the images and the edit still resonate ninety years later. The highly textured, shifting electronic soundtrack was performed live by composers Neil O'Connor and Dunk Murphy. The sound accompanied the audience through the different qualities of the film, sometimes highlighting tiny details—the glance to camera by a smart woman seated in the back of a carriage, the scrunched face of a tightly swaddled new-born—at other times, sweeping up the viewer in the frantic, joyful momentum of the emerging modernity of city life.

Dance Goes On (2017) is the first feature-length film by the Hong Kong artist, designer and photographer Stanley Wong (aka *anothermountainman*). In his stylish work, Wong presents ideas of life, ageing, and the intense vibrancy of his home city through an exquisitely observed group portrait of his long-term friends, three veteran dance makers, Xing Liang, Mui Cheuk-yin and Yuri Ng. This is a finely intimate film, which has at its heart a spacious timelessness that belies the frenetic onward momentum of the city and its culture. If there is a sense of loss to be identified here, it is in the awareness of a disappeared time, when these individuals were at their physical peak and presumably more central to the on-going cultural life of the city.

Absence pervades the most recent work by Irish visual artist and singer Ceara Conway. *Dochas: Hope (Part 1)* (2018) is a film performance project in three parts, based on the story of Connemara fishermen who took five boats back to their community in the 1950s. Two of Conway's films were screened as part of the *Remembering* programme of short works at *Light Moves*. The voices of the community whose history inspired the work were absent, and yet we heard and saw the artist's voice, someone who was not part of the real-life events. In her social research, Conway had also noted the absence of women's voices in the telling of the community's story. As an artist film-maker, Conway harnesses such absences to striking effect in the pared down edit and vocal soundtracks of the films. *Dochas: Hope. (Part 1)* (2018) comprises only two shots: a medium wide shot of a woman (Conway) singing to camera as she is lowered down the concrete wall of a canal lock, and a point-of-view shot of the barge, as it enters the coffin-like cavern of the same lock. The simplicity of the work belies its complexity. Seen and discussed in the context of the festival, it revealed further ideas of montage as lack, loss, or absence. The artist's formal choices force us to come face to face with a story whose characters, details, and even truths are no longer there, or perhaps never even existed.

Who is—and is not—present is in itself a pertinent question that speaks to the very nature of festivals. At a time when more and more screendance festivals are taking place every year, it is more important than ever to reflect on their nature: Why do they exist? Who and what do they include? Who are they for? In an essay in her latest collection *Call Them by Their True Names*,¹⁰ the American writer Rebecca Solnit analyses the value of "preaching to the choir."¹¹ She says that whilst "The *phrase* ... properly means hectoring your listeners with arguments they already agree with,"¹² the term can have a more

generous interpretation—the idea of a “common ground [which is] not the destination; it’s the starting point.”¹³ I find this helpful when thinking about the value of festivals in that preaching to the choir can be a way of describing the behaviour of people who agree about the existence of something, collectively attempting to deepen their understanding of that thing. When people who are invested in the common subject are speaking, Solnit points out, they have the opportunity to articulate, excavate and practice that subject in-depth and to a level of specificity that would be lost, even wasted, on anyone else.

Given my experience as a regular participant of screendance festivals, I recognize clearly the way curated events (that include incidental and accidental interactions) enable us to shape, assess, critique, and articulate what it is that we do—or want to do, or want not to do, or want not to be done—regarding our chosen art form. When at their best, festivals—such as *Light Moves*—create the space for us to test out ideas, and to challenge each other to watch, make, think, speak, and write differently.

Biography

Katrina is a director and screendance artist whose creative, scholarly and educational work is at the forefront of the international field. Her collaborative films, installations and on-line works have been presented at venues and festivals worldwide. Since the early 1990s, she has been regularly awarded funding from public and private organisations, institutions and arts councils.

A much-sought after teacher and lecturer, Katrina has taught screendance and related subjects, both practice-based and academic, in the UK, Australia, Germany, USA, Canada and China. Katrina is currently Associate Lecturer at Bath Spa University, England, Visiting Lecturer at the University of Limerick in Ireland and Visiting Teacher of Graduate Screendance at the University of Utah, USA. Katrina is the author of *Making Video Dance, a step-by-step guide to creating dance for the screen* (2006), the second edition of which was released in 2019.

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Notes

¹ lightmoves.ie, 8-11 November, 2018.

² *In Memoriam*. Dir. Helen Poynor & Annie Pfingst.

³ *This is How I'd Like to Die*, Dir. Laura Taler.

⁴ Idem.

⁵ Idem.

⁶ *Between Faces*, Simon Ellis.

⁷ Idem.

⁸ Idem.

⁹ Idem.

¹⁰ Rebecca Solnit, *Call Them by Their True Names*.

¹¹ Idem, 72.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Idem, 73.

References

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