

Video and its Narcissistic Potential in Dance: Four Examples in Video Art and Experimental Film, Stage Dance, and Screendance

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It seems commonplace today that video suggests multiple aspects of narcissism, a state in which the self and the image fuse. But, what are the hallmarks for dance and how does the medium offer these mirroring and reflexive aspects? Stimulated by Rosalind Krauss's "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism" (1976), the following article looks briefly at different examples of video art, which are interesting for the field of screendance today. I will look at work in the period of the seventies by the German video-art pioneer, Ulrike Rosenbach. As a representation of experimental film, I chose a film by Norman McLaren from Canada, which takes the subject under consideration here for its title. Following an early example of camera use on a ballet stage in "Live," by Dutch choreographer Hans van Manen, the last example is "Motion Control," by British choreographer, director, and promoter of screendance, Liz Aggis. My intention is to outline some common aesthetic aspects that characterize video as *the* reflexive medium, as Yvonne Spielmann titled a book on the subject, thirty years after Krauss.¹

When Krauss wrote her article, the electronic functioning with immediate feedback was the new technical aspect of video. Before the invention of tape recording, video had a "live"-character in so-called closed circuit arrangements; the images shot by the video camera were simultaneously shown on a monitor. Performance artists experimented with such installations and used the monitor as a mirror, as Krauss explains, citing male artists like Vito Acconci or Peter Campus. Ulrike Rosenbach, like her female art colleagues in that early video period, used their bodies not only because of their mirroring potential, but also to emphasize the presence of their bodies. They played with disappearance and the doubling of the body image. In this way, video added to the art of performance by bringing the human body into focus. In the context of postmodern discourses, of collage techniques, of contesting art and its role in society, in addition to a move towards the synthesis of different art and media, video offered an applicable reflexive and psychological potential for artistic statement, as Krauss points out. For female artists like Rosenbach, Nan Hoover or Carolee Schneemann, beyond narcissistic self-reflection, video was a possibility to express women's concerns. The use of video as a medium to document their art was a step towards liberation from the male-dominated media and its accompanying male gaze. The mirror effect between the real body and the media body also had an effect on the audience. The public was confronted with its electronic reproduction. In that sense, video was a new medium, which demanded an intensified reflection on art.

Rosenbach premiered a performance "Isolation is Transparent" (1973) in New York City. A semi-transparent screen divided the performance space, as well as Rosenbach's body

actions, which were similarly divided between “live” performance (behind the screen) and their projection on a video monitor (which presented images shot by a camera stationed above the performance space). The audience was able to view both sides of the divided performance space, the “live” performance, and the video monitor simultaneously. However, Rosenbach’s nearly naked body could only be seen through a diffusive screen whereas the images on the monitor were “real” and clear.

Norman McLaren, known for his many film experiments with animation, produced, as his last film, a dance film visualizing the legend of Narcissus. “Narcissus” (1983) starts like a simple studio document of a classical dance; it is only in the second half that the images become independent, as a result of pixilation or the doubling of images of the same person. Whereas in the beginning Narcissus dances with a real body double, later the viewer cannot even determine if it is real or a filmic double. Additionally, McLaren plays with the possibilities of filmic space—the double “hangs” upside down from the top of the frame, evoking a distorted narcissistic image.

When cameras became less heavy and more flexible in the seventies, some choreographers experimented with video cameras on the dance stage. Van Manen produced a singular performance with Henk van Dijk (a former dancer). In “Live” (1979), Coleen Davis dances a solo, which is filmed by van Dijk and simultaneously projected on a big screen. The audience in the theater—as in Rosenbach’s performances—sees both the dancing body and the close-ups of body details, as well as the camera in action. What becomes interesting in relation to the reflexivity of video is when Davis uses the camera as a mirror—a counterpart and a dance partner. There is a moment when van Dijk moves onto his back and Davis steps above him, so that the projected images are swirling. The imaginative (Lacan) is best visualized by the potential of the video medium.

In “Motion Control” (2001), Liz Aggiss performs a solo. This screendance again shows a dialogue between performer and camera. An intensified confrontation of body and camera is evoked by numerous filmic means including: a subjective camera, worm’s- and bird’s-eye view, as well as whip zooms, or McLaren playing with turning the camera upside down.² In an enhancement of a constellation, similar to “Live,” “Motion Control” exhausts the potential of video with a camera that is controlled by computer. Aggiss’s screendance offers another additional level, revealing the mediated aspect and leaving out a simple account of narcissism. Interspersed within the end credits, we see the same shots as in the beginning of the film, but this time registered by a second camera, which ultimately unmask the mediated constellation.

What these examples show is that video as a new medium in the seventies enforced an aesthetic of narcissism, as Krauss assessed in 1976. Video and film are mediums with a high reflective potential; or as Krauss provocatively claimed: Narcissism is “*the condition of the entire genre.*”³ What Krauss punctuates less is the potential of the medium in relation to the human body and dance. In addition to her thesis, I offered some examples that show the mirroring, reflecting, and eventually narcissistic potential of video and film in relation to dance, which is often accompanied by a clever use of space in different subgenres. The mirroring and self-reflexive aspects that were new in the early days of video art still offer a high potential for screendance today, especially when it is transformed to a high-tech screen dance like “Motion Control,” which unfolds its reflective impact by parodying, stylizing and unmasking the narcissistic configuration.

References

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Notes

1. See: Spielmann, *Video: The Reflexive Medium*.
2. Aggis, Liz. "Motion Control." YouTube video, 8:19, posted by "brighton 2009," March 16, 2008. <http://youtu.be/8ZNXk1JZems>.
3. Krauss, "Video," 61.