

Delayed Reactions

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Laura Mulvey begins the final chapter of *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* by saying that: “In the 1920s, for filmmakers such as Jean Epstein, René Clair and Dziga Vertov, the cinema opened a revolutionary, mechanical eye that transformed human vision. It opened up new perceptual possibilities, accentuating the changed ways of seeing a familiar external world already affected by the stillness of photography and the speed of mechanised transport.”¹ She cites Vertov: “Did a risky jump for a slow-motion camera. Didn’t recognise my face on the screen. My thoughts were revealed on my face—irresolution, vacillation and firmness (a struggle within myself) and again the joy of victory.”² Mulvey goes on to propose that today, another transformation has taken place: new technologies (the VCR, DVDs) have “opened up new perceptual possibilities, new ways of looking, not at the world, but at the internal world of cinema. [We have] . . . accumulated a recorded film world, like a parallel universe, that can now be halted, or slowed or fragmented.”³ These technological developments enable us to experience the work of Epstein, Clair and Vertov and others in a very different way from that of their contemporary audiences. Our ability to pause, rewind, or fast-forward the moving image is relatively recent and yet already assumed.

Three concepts that Mulvey develops in her exploration of the significance of this perceptual shift seem to offer particular scope for thinking about specific questions around screendance: firstly, *the parallel universe* invites reflection on screendance’s relationship to the accumulated world of screen media; secondly, *the cinema of delay* offers a perspective on debates around movement and stillness on screen; and thirdly, the notion of *the pensive spectator* prompts consideration of the pensive practitioner; that is, how we might draw on, and work with, an awareness of the transformed conditions of spectatorship that Mulvey addresses.

The Parallel Universe

To begin with an obvious example of artists engaging with the recorded film world, we might consider David Hinton’s work with Rosemary Lee on *Snow* and on *Birds*, in both of which the artist draws directly from ‘the parallel universe’ for raw materials, creating new work entirely from archival footage. More generally, we might observe that the conventions of cinema often adopted in screendance works (such as beginning one’s film with an establishing shot) demonstrate an awareness of, and engagement with, the parallel universe and its established codes.

More broadly still, an awareness of the fabric and structure of the parallel universe, shared by artist and audience, can now be seen to inform live works, as well as those on screen. For example, the 2010-2011 live- and video-performance piece, *White Caps*, by UK b-boy company Champloo, overlays the live action of performance with video-projected titles, credits and interstitial texts, as well as incorporating segments of video informed by cinematic conventions, into the flow of live action.

More broadly yet—and whilst Mulvey's writing is focused on cinema—our parallel universe, as the totality of all that exists on screen, must surely embrace the various screen-based histories from which screendance artists draw. As such, our parallel universe offers space for reflection on works that place themselves in a video-art lineage, for example, as much as those that are informed by the history of cinema.

The Cinema of Delay

Mulvey asserts that the new technologies (VCRs, DVD players, etc.), which enable the viewer to halt, slow, or fragment elements of this parallel universe (to pause, fast-forward, or rewind the film) create a *cinema of delay*. This "act of delay reveals the relation between movement and stillness as a point at which cinema's variable temporality becomes visible."⁴ In this act of revelation, Mulvey sees "an affinity with the early avant-garde and the aesthetic exploration of movement and stillness as a privileged quality of cinema."⁵

The aesthetic exploration of movement and stillness is naturally central to much live-dance and screendance practice and discourse (see André Lepecki's *Exhausting Dance*, for example). At the Open Source Video Dance Symposium of 2007, Claudia Kappenberg built on Lepecki's line of enquiry in her paper, "Exhausting the Screen," to question the assumption that the 'dance' in screendance necessarily requires constant motion.⁶ Elsewhere, Kappenberg has observed that "the attachment to, and reproduction of, familiar forms of dance within screendance is due to a complex historical trajectory which saw, on one hand, a critical stance towards the mediation of dance through technology and, on the other, a legacy of primarily Hollywood cinema, when dance was indeed made for film."⁷ For Kappenberg, this attachment and reproduction unquestioningly assumes that dance requires bodies to be in motion, an assumption challenged by Lepecki, amongst others. Kappenberg identifies a trend in "current international programming of dance on screen [in which] the on-screen bodies tend to appear in a 'constant state of agitation,'" and responds that: "We need to ask what kind of subject it is, which constantly changes shape, shifts weight and changes its position, agitates its limbs and bends in all directions?"⁸ Mulvey offers us another vantage point for thinking around movement and stillness in screendance. In particular, her writing invites further consideration of the mechanisms for moving and stilling the screen image, the act of delay, and the space for reflection that is created when the image is stilled.

The Pensive Practitioner

Mulvey talks in some depth about the introduction of the still image into the moving image, and it is from Raymond Bellour's exploration of the spectator's reaction to the still frame that Mulvey draws her chapter title. "Raymond Bellour's concept of the pensive spectator anticipated the thoughtful reflection on the film image that is now possible, a way of seeing into the screen's images, shifting them and stretching them into new dimensions of time and space."⁹ This line of thought returns Mulvey to her writing of almost thirty years earlier, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," where she identified: "three 'looks' inscribed into fiction film. First, the look of the camera records the one and only moment of registration. Secondly, the looks of the characters are inscribed into the fictional time of their diagetical world. Finally, there is the spectator's look at the screen, repeatable across film's history."¹⁰ At the time, she wrote:

"This complex interaction of looks is specific to film. The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical filmmakers) is to free the look of the camera into the materiality of time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment.¹¹ For Mulvey, the cinema of delay has realised such a transformation of spectatorship: "The spectator's look, now interactive and detached from a collective audience, can search for the look of the camera while also asserting control over the look within the fiction."¹² Mulvey suggests that, whilst made possible by technologies, this transformation is "consciously produced and actively imagined."¹³ I am interested in opening up a discussion of how artists, curators, and audiences might acknowledge and work with this transformation in the ways in which our experience of screen works has shifted—both the expectation that works can be paused, rewound, repeated, curtailed, as well as the familiarity with the parallel universe—and how this might be changing the ways in which works are made, presented, and experienced.

Clearly, interactive installations and online distribution of screendance offer opportunities to explore these processes. However, many screendance works are created for single screen, cinema-style viewing. Although an increasing number of works are available online or on DVD, it is typical for screendance works to be presented in evening-length programmes for a collected audience. As screendance artist Simon Ellis recently observed, this presentational format "is almost entirely for practical purposes, but it is impossible as a filmmaker to predict the ways in which the rhythm or dynamic of the evening influences the way in which your work is experienced."¹⁴ In response to this, Ellis created *Look and Look Again*, a pair of short, silent films, which are presented without credits, and which are intended as "a gentle effort to begin to manipulate an evening of short films by having two films presented non-consecutively" within the same programme.¹⁵ Such an approach, on the part of what we might call the 'pensive practitioner', to consider the context in which one's work is viewed, seems to offer some of the "pleasure of decipherment" that Mulvey discusses.¹⁶ In making an intervention into the presentational format of the screening, this work invites the active curiosity of the viewer, and foregrounds our engagement in the process of making connections between the separate works of the evening's programme. Given the increasing availability of screendance in formats to be viewed in isolation (online, on DVD, etc.), the layering of choices and connections made by artists, curators, and audiences, through a considered—pensive—approach to the time and space, in which works are shown before collected audiences, seems particularly rich in potential. How might we explore and experience the playful possibilities for artists, curators, and audiences in coming together to share and engage directly with screendance works, and what are the implications for the ways in which work for single screen is created, presented, or experienced? Mulvey cites Annette Michelson, who writes of the "sharpening cognitive focus and . . . ludic sovereignty . . . open to those who, since 1896, have played, as never before in the world's history, with the continuum of temporality and the logic of causality."¹⁷ This playful, powerful curiosity (previously only available to those with access to editing technologies) is now available, asserts Michelson, to anyone with a video recorder. This is easily experienced when watching alone, but what happens when we watch together?

In his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), Walter Benjamin proposes that "with the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended."¹⁸ With the advent of the VCR, Mulvey argues, the experience of the viewer

has been irretrievably altered. Within the range of the available material captured by the filmmaker through the camera, Mulvey's pensive spectator now has the ability to expand or contract the space of the screen, and to extend or curtail movement contained therein. How then do we acknowledge and make room for this in our work?

To return our attention from the spectator to the artist, Mulvey suggests that such curiosity, such pensivity, on the part of filmmakers, produces "new relations and connections... sequentially or simultaneously, out of which new oscillating, shifting, representations of time may be experienced."¹⁹

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Notes

1. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, 181.
2. Dziga Vertov, "Kino Eye" in *Film Makers on Film Making*. Edited by Harry M. Geduld, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1967, 91, quoted in Mulvey, *Death at 24x a Second*, 183.
3. Mulvey, *Death at 24x a Second*, 183.
4. *Ibid.*, 182.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Claudia Kappenberg, "Exhausting the Screen."
7. Claudia Kappenberg, "Does Screendance Need to Look Like Dance?" 91.
8. Kappenberg, "Exhausting the Screen," 30, 31.
9. Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 195.
10. *Ibid.*, 190.
11. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 26, in Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, quoted in 190.
12. Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 190.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Simon Ellis, "Spruiking Look and Look Again," *Skellis @ Posteros: On Dance, Art & Things* (blog). <http://skellis.posterous.com/>.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 193.
17. Annette Michelson, "The Kinetic Icon in the Work of Mourning," *October* 52 (1990), 22–3, quoted in Mulvey, *Death at 24x a Second*, 187–88.
18. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 12.
19. Mulvey, *Death at 24x a Second*, 196.