Review Essay

Claudia Rosiny

Line Dances (seven cinematic journeys) — seven films for web and new media.
Directed by Daniel Belton. Dunedin, NZ: Good Company Arts, 2010.

They look like human creatures in artificial cobwebs of lines—Daniel Belton, head of Good Company Arts, based in Dunedin, New Zealand, created and directed seven dance films under the headline *Line Dances*. And, in fact, lines are the joining elements in all these films, which vary between five and twelve minutes. The unique aesthetics of the imagery are remarkable, combining human beings performing dance movements into a graphic environment that is often detached from any real spatial perception. On the surface of the cinematic image, *Line Dances* looks like a formal dialogue between human beings that resemble animated representations of human characters on one side and geometrical patterns on the other. Throughout this approximately seventy-minute program, a black afterimage dominates these "seven cinematic journeys," as *Line Dances* are subtitled. The intermediate sequences always return to this blackness in which blurred images of an old fashioned camera show up. Each "Line Dance" has a title: *Saint A in B*, *Portrait of an Acrobat* , *Realm of the Curtain*, *Harlequin on the Bridge*, *Equilibrist, Perspective with Inhabitants, Realm of the Curtain*. As you read them, they do give some narrative hints, as they refer to pictures with the same title by Paul Klee.

Indeed, the idea of interacting human figures with abstract lines and geometric systems resulted from Belton's research on Modernism, especially the drawings of Paul Klee and the background of the Bauhaus movement. Some of Klee's pictures in fact seem to emerge out of the image like his squares in red connected with fine lines in *Portrait of an Acrobat*. And the use of baton reminds us of the famous Bauhaus baton dances, which Gerhard Bohner reconstructed in the 1980s. Belton uses Klee's quotation, "One eye sees, the other feels," as a guideline to indicate what he wishes to achieve in his films. He wants to exhaust the visual and physical potential of dance. Common stereotypes like a ballerina, an acrobat, or a harlequin are a strong contrast to these simple graphic lines. Formalism and emotional potentiality seem to melt; you don't have to be moved, but maybe these fairytale-like figures call up sensations and souvenirs of whatever we associate with them.

Paul Klee's drawings were Belton's inspiration, but his artificial images also awaken references to early experimental and abstract film of this period (the 1920s), such as the "dancing" of painted patterns that Len Lye, Hans Richter, Walter Ruttman or Viking Eggeling created. These pioneers of experimental film were artists who applied drawings directly on the film material, the celluloid.

Belton's most exciting passages are those when the interaction between moving bodies and geometrical forms leads to a metamorphosis: the lines stretch, bend, and curve, initiated through the movement of a figure; then suddenly there is a pulse in a line and the geometrical patterns become natural. In the first film, which starts with a white afterimage, the lines serve foremost as a surface, as spatial references on which the figures start to move. Later the lines form a building with an abstract cupola: "the lines exaggerate the corporeal, and develop texture within the space," as Belton describes his idea.[1] Belton works with multilayered images, with duplications of his figures that emerge out of the black and fade back, seemingly into outer space. Often the duplication—for example of the ballerina and fool couple—is displayed in a smaller size and the motion of the mirrored couple has a slight retardation. *Line Dances* are strongly cinematic insofar as there is hardly any reference remaining to a stage perception. We seem to look into a nirvana space that has a ground, but no limitations in all directions. The screen is the stage but with no resemblance to a theater stage. A high grade of abstraction is also achieved by a mainly black and white image. Sporadically, the figures change to color, which adds an accent of realism and narrativity to the characters.

In addition to multiplications of figures, Belton also works with size and magnitude, setting them like small toy figures in his creative playing field. Whereas the ballerina symbolizes the dance world, the fool in theater history is the figure that has freedom to query and contest. With these strong character types he also interrogates the conditions of theater and dance.

The third aesthetic level next to the figures and forms is the elementary sound track, splashy piano music, composed and played by Anthony Richie. It is possibly the monotony of the sound that at times lengthens the hour-long program. But it is different if the films are watched in the closeness of a dark cinema, as they were when premiered last October in New Zealand. Regardless, as Daniel Belton and his Good Company's numerous video dances have already been selected for countless festivals and gained scores of awards, it is certain that *Line Dances* will tour and find its audiences. At the end of January 2011, *Portrait of an Acrobat* was selected for the oldest Dance on Camera Festival in New York City. Seen in the context of the rise of a new genre, video-dance, which emerged in the 1980s, *Line Dances* offers an interesting link to art history and a unique film concept. All films can be watched on Daniel Belton's website www.goodcompanyarts.com, the photos and videostills at www.dance-tech.net.

References

Good Company Arts. Dundein, New Zealand. http://www.goodcompanyarts.com/main.html.

Notes

1. See http://www.goodcompanyarts.com/main.html.