

## TOM: A Review

Jo Cork, *Independent dance artist, choreographer and screendance-maker*

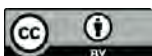
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Originally intended as an installation displayed across silver-threaded transparent screens, dotted over the stage of Sadler's Wells, the work *Tom*—by Wilkie Branson—has been reimaged as a dance film.

This film captures an entire world in each of its images, just as Tarkovsky would have the filmmaker aspire to do. Pausing on a single frame, I am struck by its saturated atmosphere and the thick visceral feel of *Tom's* world emanating from it. It is this quality, in all of its images, that gives the film an unyielding grasp on my attention throughout its fifty-five minutes duration, and which makes the images feel so inimitable and unique to the work.

We first, as viewers, glide into the workshop in which the film became. Seeing the shelves full of models we are yet to see come to life, we absorb the dust, Stanley knives and tiny paintbrushes, all revealing the meticulous process of the film's construction. As the room disintegrates into a digital, psychological space, we understand that this is a prelude which makes us feel both empowered in our omniscience, and naively curious—as we acknowledge the deep craft of its creation, as yet unsure about its particular form.

My brain is unsure of how to process the emerging visual and yet quickly accepts this peculiar world. There is a distinctive melding of animation, horror and thriller genres, dance, a look of video games, and perhaps even a feel of extended music videos. The electronic score, composed by Benji Bower with sound design by Mat Clark, utilizes very little real sound and this disembodiment allows us to deeply envelope ourselves, as we defect from the aural reality of our world, and instead tune in to the sonic language of *Tom's*. The images are painterly at first. There is something of Dali in the deadwood tree we see within the first couple of minutes, and I am immediately struck by the recognition of gaming aesthetics—I remember the ability to turn around, as Lara Croft,



and see a completely different horizon behind me—and have a sensation of being drawn into a complete world of which I am absolutely a part. The sense of movement in space, generated by the choreography of the camera, betrays what we understand of the capacity of the 2D image—our understanding of its potential to envelop us is expanded. We know, by our experience of ‘flying’ in arcs, swoops, and in our ability to hone in to close-up detail, the dimensions of the world’s spatiality, and we soon feel comfortable as our transient perspective generates a flow that allows us to understand our surroundings and feel at ease here. The significant contribution of gaming aesthetics and their triggering of such mind-states allows the film language of *Tom* to do something new by rekindling the relationship to the screen for those who came to adulthood with gaming, offering an orientation through which the viewer quickly feels incorporated in the film’s world. It is this mechanism perhaps, that dictates my committed emotional investment in the protagonist... He is not a character in a film, but a human entity in a world I myself have entered. I am compelled to extend to him, not my witnessing judgement, but my empathy and compassion as a fellow human.

We first meet Tom alone, and as we encounter his multiple incarnations we come to understand the complexity of his humanity. The sense of him as an entity is emphasized as we relate to the idea of multiple versions of self—all existing within us simultaneously. The release date of the film, in the beginnings of the first UK lockdown in March 2020, provided a particular context for heightened reception of this notion by its viewers. Trapped in our own, newly lonely circumstance—with each viewer discovering the censored depths of their own psyche in the wake of too much time to think—we feel a kind of kinship with Tom as he reflects our immediate personal experience.

This concept of multiple-selves is accentuated by the camera movement in relation to the choreographed movement. Dance is normalized as part of this world and as such, rather than an emphasize, it becomes the primary vehicle for emotional and narrative expression. The camera moves with complexity, or ‘dances’ throughout the film, and provides composition enough to serve the numerous dances we see by individuals in amidst pedestrian scenes; they simply occur within our tracking or orbiting field of vision. We encounter the dances as we encounter fleeting senses of self; each seeming defined and characterized, yet their installment being but a contribution in a flux of state—a run of thread in a much broader tapestry.

Twenty minutes in, signaled by Tom removing his coat in preparation to lay himself bare to us, our relationship to the danced movement shifts. Filmed differently from other scenes, Branson comments:

I wanted to bring the audience to a much closer relationship with him there. Using a 360° camera allowed for more organic and dynamic camera movements in conjunction with the choreography—it’s much more of a duet, which makes you feel more *with him*, in his proximal space.<sup>1</sup>

The choreography of the camera and the movement work deeply together here, so that the space in the film appears to extend with the movement rather than the body extending into the space... Our relationship to the space becomes the space's relationship to ourselves, and by this converse perspective of relationship, we come to be everywhere. We are in every parallel universe, embodying every possible self.

Revealing of the human condition, a particularly poignant dream scene about half-way through shows a young boy standing beside and then climbing over a cliff edge. It's for the first time here, that we hear lyrics in the score; a female vocal suggests themes of motherhood, bringing with it a mode of protection, while also hinting at familial bond between the man and child. The image of a toddler in immediate danger has our hearts in our mouths and we find ourselves prioritizing our care for the welfare of the child over the various adult Toms—In the same moment, we are enlightened to our own experience of apathy toward our adult-selves—our tired despair—and we relate to Tom's lack of motivation to save himself. The use of lyrics in the score here not only renews a conventional connection to more mainstream viewing, but also works with the imagery of a young boy alongside adults to activate the mind of the viewer to draw upon associations and symbolism regarding care, tenderness, and protection.

Borrowing from the horror genre allows Branson to utilize yet another mechanism to maintain a portal of accessibility to the non-dance, mainstream film viewer. A sequence in which Tom again meets his darkest fears and self-loathing in the elevator, which then follows him, creates a moment of terrified anticipation. The beating that ensues is traumatic viewing. It is relentless. Tireless. And yet—not a mark on Tom—a reminder that this is a context of the psychological. Who hasn't 'beaten themselves up' before? The invisible and brutal inner destruction of depression is given a palpable dimension that cuts deep, and in the lack of bruising and bloodiness that would inevitably occur in reality, *Tom* places value and legitimacy on physicality as a descriptor, embodiment, and signifier of meaning. Emotions made manifest in the body are given voice in their nuanced posture and the particular shine, or lack thereof, that they produce behind the eyes.

There is a sense of helplessness and despondency in Tom that resonates loudly in the viewer within the historical moment of the pandemic, and which makes the emotional impact of the image both difficult to watch, and difficult to ignore. Our shared—yet separated—experience of isolation makes us painfully able to relate these ideas to our own person and also allows us to generate a sense of empathy and concern, or acknowledgement, for the suffering of others trapped with their own destructive thoughts. Through the articulation of loneliness, we somehow gather a sense of camaraderie and understand that in our individual suffering, we are sharing in what is in fact, a largely collective experience.

The film arcs into a resolve as Tom settles in a room and plays with the toddler. We return to our inner child and are left with a sense of healing—through their eyes we are

able to see ourselves without judgement. The spectacular destruction of the world in which we've lived for the past 55 minutes feels magnificent. There is a sense of loss, but we can celebrate its destruction in the idea that it's all just a construct of our own minds. The return to images of the workshop brings this home, reminding us how much labor we put into building those walls around ourselves.

*Tom* is innovative for screendance in how it seamlessly merges multiple genres—and their particular language and relationship to the viewer—to direct the viewing experience. Its use of 360° filming, photogrammetry, and layered accumulation of multiple image-making processes is an insight into how technological developments might advance the potentials of dance film—or at least, how we might approach pursuing those potentials; how we might consider or implement the act of choreographing for camera is opened up to vast new possibilities.

It is also exciting to see in *Tom*, how screendance can successfully engage viewers for a longer duration, and its hailing by *The Guardian* as a 5-star “sublime, slow-burn study of isolation,”<sup>2</sup> should liberate screendance-makers to explore new potentials. Even without dialogue, there is a strong sense of narrative content in *Tom*. Though abstract, we follow a clearly articulated inner journey to which we can all relate. The lyrics in vocalized sections of the score might be seen to act as a kind of modern Greek chorus, adding dramatic impact and anchorage to emotional milestones in the dramaturgy. Recurring and developing visual motifs of birds in flight, trains, and high rises, when contrasted with a remote island, accumulate symbolic meaning and generate a pacing and kind of motor that drives us right the way through. This is perhaps what makes this film feel so accessible to a mass audience—there is plenty to follow. Slower moving than other dance films, the understanding we gain of a character by spending this time with them is something we can rarely achieve in an eight-minute work. Traditionally screened on television, dance film has been constrained by the limited time slots offered to short films—am I mad to think that this wouldn't be out of place on Netflix, Mubi, or on BBC Two, or Channel 4? I don't think it would get X factor ratings—but I believe it has potential to gather a significant following and in as much expose screendance as a medium and genre of work that can speak to vastly diverse sectors of the global community.

## Biography

Jo Cork is an independent dance artist, choreographer and screendance-maker, drawing on exploration of the human experience to create her work. She is interested in the territory between choreographic practice and film composition and in finding

effective ways to use digital formats of work to bring screendance to broader audiences and more diverse venues.

Jo completed an MA in Screendance in 2020, studying at London Contemporary Dance School. She has worked both independently and as choreographer for Studio for Electronic Theatre. She is a guest lecturer at London Contemporary Dance School, Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts and London College of Music and is currently engaged as screendance mentor to One Dance UK's Young Creatives programme.

In 2016, she completed the award winning dance film, *Sensate* and has since developed numerous screendance works including films, multi-screen/device and hologram installations, and pieces utilising QR codes and elements of augmented reality. Her works have been shown across the globe in festival settings, art galleries and museums, as well as in less conventional spaces including pubs and restaurants.

Current projects include the outdoor screendance installation, *Finding Ground*, independent dance films with film/TV choreographer Anthony Van Laast, and with director Phil Taylor, and a research project exploring the potentials of using haptics in screendance, in partnership with Studio Wayne McGregor.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Branson, interview with the author.

<sup>2</sup> Winship, "Wilkie Branson."

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