

Tutus and Bonfires

Screendance Curating and Social Theory

“Reappropriating the body is not merely a question of choreography, of which dance represents the maximum resistance, but also a question of sociography, of relating to others and to the world. Otherwise it’s madness.” (Virilio, 1999)

This quote is referenced in an essay by Sarah Wood, a maker and curator of artist’s film in the UK. The essay accompanies her 2006 programme of black dance films, *Playing in the Light*, a project by the UK’s Independent Cinema Office and the British Film Institute. *Playing in the Light* is an excellent collection of films which ranges from personal, poetic works to explicitly political provocations, and together illuminates the weight of black culture, history, identity and politics.

As a frequent viewer of screendance, I feel that few works from that particular pool ask me to consider how social and political thought is articulated by artists in this field^[1]. Consider this short super 8 sequence, *Jordan’s Dance*, shot by Derek Jarman and later used in his 1977 feature *Jubilee*. It shows punk icon Jordan dancing round a bonfire dressed in the fragility of a tutu while the landscape of England falls into disrepair. The power of this image highlights the general absence of social critique I see in the films that I usually work with. The body of work that we refer to as screendance rarely comments on socio-political issues, or shows a critical distance in employing visual imagery.

However, in the absence of a body of work that actively addresses or incorporates such themes, curating offers an opportunity to address social constructs, ideologies or issues within the genre, and create a layer of meaning that isn’t necessarily inherent in the works that are being presented. In other words, works are being appropriated. The inherent ambiguity of dance and movement begs for interpretation, for a reading informed by a social theory or concept. As Claudia Kappenberg has stated, “[a] film/video installation work is generally conceived as a complete thing in itself, as a discrete object, even though it always sits in a wider context and will be informed by that context. Through the process of curation, through placing a work in the direct context and proximity of other work, a new level of meaning can be added to a work, meaning can be shifted significantly and even lost and new aspects can be drawn out that the individual maker may not have intended. In curating, films cease to be the discrete object and enter a wider stream of issues and ideas. (...) Curating can raise issues and challenge individual practices.” (Kappenberg, 2008)

Taking the example of appropriation in queer theory^[2], in the absence of representation of gay, lesbian and transgender characters on screen (especially following the Hays code in the US), queer audiences became very adept at reading something ‘their way’: the viewer fashions an alternative reading. A single woman with a cat is read as a lesbian and a hairdresser as gay (unless he’s played by Warren Beatty). This appropriation of images allows the viewer an – albeit heavily restricted – sense of representation, and therefore the possibility of constructing gender and identity. (Russo, 1987) (Gauntlett, 2002). The next step then is the possibility of creating a discourse and critique of these representations – making visible the underlying assumptions in familiar constructs, or even directly challenging or displacing them.

Maggie Humm, in talking about bringing feminist knowledge to film critique states that “the linkage of feminism and film matters because all representations, visual or otherwise, are what make gendered constructions of knowledge and subjectivity possible. Without representations we have no gender identities, and through representations we shape our gendered world” (Humm, 1997)

This construction of knowledge extends beyond gender, of course; visual representation of race, age, body, ability etc is present in most screenance, and whether or not it is foregrounded by the artist, it adds to an inventory of cultural visions. No matter how apolitical the work of art may seem, every work has political relevance.

There may not be a perceived need to articulate social or political themes. However, all art is created from within society, and as such is able to reflect on it, and video dance could be a prime candidate as a site for social comment: It is inherently ambiguous and can bypass language; it offers a palette from the recognisably quotidian to the highly abstracted; and it has a pervasive and diverse range of canons to be utilised or subverted to reflect on culture.

Like *Jordan's Dance*, Zoulikha Bouabdellah's *Dansons* utilises a particular style of dance, framed in a particular way, to make a very potent social comment.

Dansons shows the midriff of a woman in a static frame, as she puts on three hip scarves in the colours of the French tricolore flag. When she is done, a tinny recording of a full military orchestra starts playing the Marseillaise, and the dancer begins to belly-dance to its relentless beat. The mise-en-scene cleverly layers images and sounds of a significant minority population and the French cultural majority: the perceived exoticism of belly dancing set to a blood-thirsty West-European anthem; the sensuous movement performed by a single female body, framed in close-up, and the recorded sound of a big, unseen orchestra, bringing to mind a marching (male) army in full regalia. The many juxtapositions of this work deliver an eloquent and witty critique of the racial tensions in modern France created by the echoes of a colonial past.

Bouabdellah uses the act of performing a particular style of dance to make her point, and asks the viewer to bring cultural knowledge to the piece, as does Jarman with *Jubilee*; dance is functioning as a political metaphor, and the ballet says as much as the bonfire.

In Belgian artist Kris Verdonck's film *Duet*, the fact that the performers are executing a particular kind of choreography is not in itself loaded (although of course nothing is ever neutral). The theme of the piece lies elsewhere, using dance as a metaphor for something else, and thus allowing the viewer to bring social interpretations to it.

Duet shows two dancers, a man and a woman, suspended in a black space. The man is attached to a crane (which we don't see), and is spun slowly; the woman is holding on to the man. As a result of the rotation of the machine, the gravitational forces on the two bodies change all the time and they have to constantly reposition their grip to keep her with him and in the air.

The two are in motion when the film begins, and the film fades out with them still in motion.

The clothing is clearly costume, stereotypical and recognisable: the man in a suit, and the woman in a blouse and skirt, all in shades of grey; her skirt moves up and down as the direction of gravity changes.

As we are watching this piece, we can frame questions informed by social theory: What are the politics of costume, exposing bodies, invoking stereotypical dress, and, by extension, performances of gender roles, that are being articulated here? What models of relating to others are invoked here, and how are they presented? Twice during the 20 minutes, the camera zooms to adjust the frame to the performer's movement, and this opens questions about the identity of

the camera: who is watching and recording this? Observing the dancers' visible and invisible work can we construct socialist readings of labour and struggle?

As a programmer or curator, I can contextualise the piece to lift out any of these aspects for the viewer to consider. Through creating a filter that draws attention to the central assumptions made by the artist or the audience, the audience is engaged in an inquiry. A language, visual or otherwise, is never just a technology of communication, but inherently is caught up in judgements of cultural identity (Humm, 1997). In this vein, I think we should be selectively applying relevant theories or areas of enquiry to creation, exhibition and reviews of work. I should say here that I am not talking about feminist film critique based on psychoanalytic readings; I am looking at feminist, queer, dis/ability knowledge bases and how they can help transport an individual piece and/or a programme of work into informed social political awareness: Lifting the work out of unreflected personal experience and placing it in a wider context; not making it more generic, but in fact less so, by knowing where it touches the bigger picture.

So when it comes to individual works, I would argue that the awareness of social theory can strengthen the conceptual basis of a piece, by honing the specifics after examining them through a particular filter; instead of accepting familiar constructions of gender or race etc, the application of theory can affect a shift in vision, and open up new possibilities of expression.

A word about curating and programming

The question that remains for me is: who will see these carefully curated screenings?

A simple differentiation between curation and programming^[3] is an assumption about the informed observer (Monaco, 2000). The audience in screendance (speaking for the UK) is one comprised mostly of practitioners - a 'general audience' is rare. This means we have uniquely informed observers, ready to bring a depth of understanding to the work screened. As I am talking here about articulating social and political themes, maybe what a curator might try to do is parallel to what Bertolt Brecht defined as the disposition of the viewer created by his definition of Epic Theatre: "Epic Theatre turns the spectator into an observer, arouses his capacity for action, forces him to take decisions (...). The human being is the object of the enquiry; he is altered and able to alter." (Brecht, 1963) Epic theatre assumes "that the audience is a collection of individuals, capable of thinking and reasoning, of making judgments even in the theatre; it treats it as individuals of mental and emotional maturity, and believes it wishes to be so regarded" (Brecht, p. 79 in Willett).

The most common opportunity to present screendance work is usually through the festival format, and over the last few months there has been much discussion on the tendency of festivals to present 'best of' showcases, and the point was made that in other artforms we would not expect to see such an approach.

However, a great number of film festivals market their events in such a way, not least among them such esteemed festivals as the BFI's London Film Festival and The Edinburgh Film Festival, and a host of other, recognised international festivals. 'The Best of' isn't necessarily a bad thing (as long as you have a lot of good work to choose from to begin with), and has economical advantages. To take issue with a 'Best of' approach to programming is, I feel, the

wrong end of the stick; it's the obsession with the new that I see as problematic. Festivals' calls for entries tend to restrict submissions to the last 18 months to two years. Audiences who attend screendance festivals are often actively in search of the 'new'. The reasons are varied, but I would suggest are largely economic, qualitative, and habitual: audiences may well decide that a new contextualisation of something they have seen before does not warrant their time, effort or money; and they are used to the format of presenting selections of current work. It is easy to judge whether I have seen something before; it is much harder to decide whether a new contextualisation of a piece or pieces is of interest to me.

This fixation on the new has also had another interesting side effect: some programmers (and artists) are worried about internet exposure because they feel that audiences will not attend a screening or exhibition if the work is available on the internet (whether as an individual piece to be specifically sought on the web, or found by chance, or contextualised in a web-specific exhibition context), which in turn means we have to, as a sector, investigate these platforms for exhibition fully and the real opportunities and challenges they offer.

While many viewers of screendance are interested in seeing work in a particular context, such as a screening at a festival, where there is a community experience tied in with seeing the work, I think that until audiences are rewarded for re-visiting work in different constellations and new groupings, the "new work" festival model will remain the dominant form of exhibition.

Usually for exhibitors of screendance there is an imperative to throw the doors open as wide as possible: the main deterrent from presenting screenings that could be perceived as esoteric or catering to the 'insider' is an economic one. Even if there is no need to raise direct income from ticket sales, audience figures tend to be crucial in securing funding; never mind that it's demoralising to select and screen work for an audience of ten. Most programmers I have spoken to wish to maximise their audience by being open to a general public, but that is not in contradiction to pursuing festival programming that extends beyond facile compilations of the most recent work available. While we should pursue the cutting edge of curating, the bulk of the practice is likely to lie in good programming, and this will naturally be informed by the conventions and crises of screendance curating. I want to close with a quote from Sarah Wood: "Curating artists' film has a lot of faux mystique attached to it. Unlike an art exhibition, a programme of artists' film has to straddle the twin expectation of a cinema audience and a gallery viewer. It is a compromise in seeing; an experiment with the experimental. There are great models to follow but no recognised codes of practice, no gold standards to trust, and so I find myself in a new job." (Wood, 2005)

Wood speaks about curating artists' film for cinema exhibition, but I think the enterprise, the expedition she is on is one we all are travelling as well.

I look forward to seeing this landscape being shaped and redrawn by artists, exhibitors and audiences alike.

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Films

- Jubilee*, Derek Jarman, UK 1977
Dansons, Zoulikha Bouabdella, France 2003
Duet, Kris Verdonck, Belgium 2005

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[1] In using the term 'screendance' I am intending to be inclusive of a wide range of works in this amorphous genre: referring to the 'Critical Framework' venn of dancefilm, screendance and videodance (<http://tinyurl.com/5nca5r>) which places work in the creative and receptive contexts of dance, visual and cinema arts. By 'dance' I mean choreography of movement (but not necessarily of a human body).

[2] I am using examples from gender theory and queer theory, because they are a personal interest I know them better; but a range of social theory, relating to race, ability, age, class, etc can all be brought to bear on screendance and illuminate something about the work and the culture it was created in.

[3] In the materials for the conference and in conversations between screendance practitioners, we have made a distinction between curating and programming, and I will make that distinction also, but with some caution. In my work I have moved between programming, curating, co-curating, and jurying film programmes and festivals.