

The performer, camera and the gaze in my screendance practice by Katrina McPherson.

Screendance has the potential to expand our notions of narrative, location and movement, and affords the experience of somatosensory storytelling, a deep language of the body told through the frame of cinema. Essential to this hybrid artform is the camera, telling unique stories, witness to a whole range of different lives and circumstances, showing alternative spaces and populations and offering varied points of view.

In the early years of my art-making, coming from a background of live dance and video art, I sought to use the camera as a tool to “take the viewer to the heart of the action’ by ‘entering the dancer’s kinesphere, or sphere of movement, framing the detail of the movement and creating an intimacy unattainable on the stage.” (McPherson, 1998, McPherson 2006, McPherson, 2018, Pinsloo 2018).

This is exemplified in works that I have directed such as *Fragments* (1990), *These Three Rooms* (1992), *Pace* (1995), *Moment* (1998) and *Sense-8* (2001). In my earliest work, I did this through meticulous storyboarding and framing, positioning and movement of the camera in relation to specifically choreographed movement. I used Laban’s concepts of spatial orientation, in combination with chance procedures, to determine where and how the camera would be located and moved in relation to the dancing performer. As my practice evolved, and as I grew frustrated by the loss of spontaneity of this approach, I began to explore improvisation of both camera and dancer, drawing on the visual and perceptual knowledge that I had gained in these very early experiences. (McPherson 2006 & 2018)

From *Mur Mur* (1993), onwards, I have used improvisation – of the camera and by the onscreen performers, both scored and free - as a method for generating screendance material in the films that I have directed, and also as the philosophical under-pinning of the individual artistic works. This approach became established as a recognisable characteristic of my approach to making screendance and is exemplified in such well-known works as *Pace* (1995), *Moment* (1998) and *Sense-8* (2001).

Initially, it was through the use of score and manifestos that I put improvisation at the heart of my practice. (Banes, 2004; Rosenberg 2012; McPherson, 2006 & McPherson, 2018) Over time, and taking courage from my collaborative work with dance artist Kirstie Simson, I shifted my filming and directing practice into the form of completely ‘free’ improvisation of camera and dancer (s). This commenced a period of time in which I directed and /or co-directed, and filmed a series of screendance works, most often set in the natural landscapes of the Highlands of Scotland, in which I employed what I have come to describe as ‘mise-en-scene’ directing. In this approach, the freedom of the performer(s) and cameraperson is made as free as possible by preparing the location, designing the mise-en-scene and refraining from imposing any scores, or direction on any of the performers or on the cinematographer (which in all these cases was me). The result is a rich and highly complex, site-specific screendance material, in which the dancer and cinematographer have equal agency in the creation of the images.

In my most recent works, the distinction between these roles is further blurred, and moved into the realm of post-production too. I first stepped out from behind the camera in *Force of Nature* (2013), a dance documentary which I directed and filmed. A few years later, with we

*record ourselves* (2016), an artist film that I was commissioned to make by Threshold Arts in response to the Margaret Morris Archive, this shake up of traditional roles followed all the way through to post-production, with all 4 of the artists involved performing, filming and editing the work (they were myself, Simon Ellis, Natalua Barua and Owa Barua, a team that I assembled on the basis of their ability to perform, film and edit, as well as their openness to investigation and experimentation) .

In these productions, it was only possible to side-step the traditional, role-based hierarchies by having a clear intention for the work. In the case of *we record ourselves*, this was defined by my initial artist manifesto for the work and, subsequently our collective use of scores in the process of making this screendance.

Similarly, in *Paysages Mixtes/Mixed Landscape*, a 13-minute screendance work co-directed by Katrina McPherson and Harold Rheume, Harold and I are the sole performers, visible in almost every frame, as well as the cinematographers for around 50% of the material (we employed a Quebec -based and a Scottish-based cinematographers to film the duet shots on location), as well as the directors of the entire project, including the edit. Drawing on the idea of a score-based editing approach, Harold and I created a book of screenshots to determine the structure of the film, giving this 'score ' to the editor and then working in a collaborative way with them.

In a series of constantly evolving collaborative processes, and over many productions, I have favoured an approach to making work that seeks to *democratise* space, time and the human body, as framed through the camera lens. Moreover, by redefining the traditional roles of the filmed and the filmer, and through enabling the emergence of skilled and dexterous dancer/camera/director/editor artists, through my teaching and my practice, I have sought to challenge the hierarchies of filmmaking and choreographic traditions. In doing so, I suggest that this provides an alternative to the *male gaze*, in which the (usually female) dancing body is objectified, even fetishized and which, which, sadly or surprisingly, still occurs often unconsciously in the work of contemporary screendance directors.

As a woman artist who in my own practice takes the role of performer, cameraperson, director and editor, in my artistic productions - as in my teaching - I also focus on ideas, questions and research specifically around privilege: who is seen by whom and how are they viewed; the ways in which power is present, and absent, in front of and behind camera; the lens as representing male, female and /or *human gaze*; the primacy and power of images in our visual culture; the currency of the live body.

By turning away from top down, patriarchal production methods, and in creating spaces and processes which honour the technical and aesthetic needs of both moving imaging making and performance, whilst at the same time allowing for different, more responsive and personal approaches to be engaged, new opportunities for creativity can be enabled.

Furthermore, as the cinematographer of many of my own screendance works, I delve into the nature of framing, camera movement, mise-en-scene in relation to filming screendance and draw attention to the relationship between the dancer and the camera; performer and viewer; watcher and watched – as mediated through the frame.

The dominance of the *male gaze* in mainstream cinema was identified/ proposed in the 1970s by film theorist Laura Mulvey ( in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*). The *male gaze* theory is described as the objectification of the (usually) female body by the camera (typically in the hands of the male director) and that these women are usually represented as passive objects of male desire. The *male gaze* suggests that the female viewer must experience the narrative secondarily, by identification with the male.

This is a generally voyeuristic and manipulative relationship and can also be seen as the basis of the traditionally hierarchical production processes of mainstream film, in which the person behind the camera (the director) dictates the actions of the person in front of the camera. It is often hard to recognise the male gaze at work because we are so used to seeing women's bodies sexualised in television, music videos, and advertisements in this way.

Over the years, there have been attempts to identify what an early 21<sup>st</sup> century *female gaze* might be. For example, at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2016, American writer and director Joey Soloway (*Transparent; I Love Dick*) gave the keynote address in which they define their version the *Female Gaze* as the following:

**"I Feel See** – a use of camera that is located in the body". Their concept includes "the feeling camera" (or "bodies over equipment" wherein emotions are prioritized over action");

**"I feel how it feels to be seen"**. "the gazed gaze," which shows viewers how it feels to be the object of the gaze;

**"I see you seeing me"**- returning the gaze".1/

When I first came across this talk, what Soloway describes resonated very strongly with me in terms of the ways that I feel certain approaches to making screendance question and offer a site - or practice - in which the male gaze can be challenged. Particularly, as I have described above, for the past three decades in my screendance practice, I have questioned the traditional hierarchies of film-making by using improvisation in the screendance-making process can give the person in front of the camera as much agency over the image created as the person behind the camera. In the process of my teaching, I have augmented Soloway's definitions to include suggestions how her Female Gaze approach might transfer to screendance, as exemplified in my own artistic practice:

**I Feel See** – a use of camera that is located in the body = *the embodied camera*.

**I feel how it feels to be seen** = *the empathetic viewer*.

**I see you seeing me** = *the empowered performer*.

More recently, there has been criticism of Soloway's Female Gaze proposition as not going far enough to re-dress imbalances in representation, and in particular their claims on intersectionality. As Caetlin Benson-Allott argues in her article *No Such Thing Not Yet: Questioning Television's Female Gaze*.

"Women-led serials have been getting a lot of attention lately for bringing "the female gaze" to the small screen. Jill Soloway—the television auteur behind *Transparent* (Amazon, 2014–) and the recent adaptation of Kraus's novel, *I Love Dick* (Amazon, 2017–)—even taught a class on "The Female Gaze" at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2016, defining it as

“an intersectional gaze”. While all three shows feature diverse casts and strong female leads, *I Love Dick* and *GLOW* introduce characters of color only in supporting roles that contest but never destabilize the white protagonists' racial solipsism. This strategic but facile gesture reveals how far these shows have to go to confront the entangled injustices of social inequality.”

In the light of this, I am currently interrogating my past and current work and reflections with the intention of understanding and further articulating the problematic duality of male/ female gaze, and in doing so, aim to recognise the limitations of thinking in binary terms, and the potential of widening out the circle, expanding to terms such as the *human gaze*, the *aware gaze*, the *questioning gaze*. In this next stage of my research/practice, I am engaging with the important ideas of writers such as Caetlin Benson-Allott, and also bell hooks, in particular her essay: *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators* (hooks, 1992), as well as the more recently published thinking on the subject, for example, *White Feminism – from the Suffragettes to Influencers and who they left behind* by K. Beck (Simon and Schuster, September 2021), with the aim of enabling me to rigorously (re) assess my work, past and future, within this context.

With these consolidated, I continue to make work, teach, write and attempt to investigate these ideas further. In doing so, I am left considering the following questions:

- Can the employment of the empathetic /embodied camera provide a counterpoint/ alternative / challenge to the *Male Gaze* and to what extent can this then support inclusivity and diversity in screendance?
- Can this in turn encourage a different engagement with the world that we live in?
- How does the *Female / Other/ Aware Gaze* offer as alternative space for voices and stories?
- How is it represented in my own screendance practice?
- What happens when the screendance artist turns the camera on themselves?
- Can improvisation in screendance practice draw attention to the nuanced differences of bodies, place, people?

Katrina McPherson, Spring 2020.

Footnotes:

1/Soloway, J., Toronto International Film Festival, 2016. Accessed online October 2017.

2/ Benson-Allott, C. *Film Quarterly*; 71 (2): 65–71 ; 2017.

3/ McPherson, K. *Making Video Dance* (Routledge, 2006 & 2018)

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<https://loie.com.ar/en/ediciones/> on-line magazine of dance, performance and new media. (Spanish language/ some English)

Journal of Teaching in Higher Education, (Taylor and Francis online)

Film Quarterly.org