

“Setting the Frame” Panel Discussion Paper
by Karen Pearlman

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What follows is the Critical Path website publication of a work in progress academic conference paper by Karen Pearlman. Readers are welcome to quote from the paper if quotes are attributed, and the author welcomes comments and questions as she prepares the paper for publication. This paper was originally written and excerpts were presented at the Setting the Frame Conference at Critical Path in February, 2008. This paper is structured by two questions posed by Margie Medlin, Artistic Director of Critical Path “Is there a paradigm to describe screen dance production in Australia?” and “Can Dance on Screen move into the mainstream?”

At the 2006 American Dance Festival Screendance Conference, the question put to us by Doug Rosenberg, conference convenor, was: can we propose a theoretical paradigm for understanding screendance?

Lively discussion refined the question to make use of existing theoretical paradigms – midway through the conference we were asking: “Is dance on screen a dance art, a cinema art or a visual art?”

This question ultimately led to a diagram of three overlapping disciplines: dance, cinema, and visual art. Unlike the typical result of these models, it was determined, however, that the ‘ideal’ screendance production was not necessarily a mix of all three. Rather, that each approach, and each overlap provided a way of comprehending a given work.

A dance on screen which prioritises dance as its central discipline will foreground the composition and exhibition of the danced movement. The dancing is the first concern, superseding story, defining image composition and borrowing methodologies of other arts only when they can usefully frame or display the dance.

To my eye the works I’ve seen by Sue Healy and Narelle Benjamin are dance-driven dancefilms. But these categories are not categorical, people move through them depending on their interests at a given moment, the influences they come across, the people they work with, and the tendencies of a given work.

A dancefilm which is working in the overlapping areas of cinema and dance will prioritise the directorial vision and emphasise the collaborative coordination of all of the elements of cinematic production from script to mise-en-scene to sound mix. It makes use of the form language of cinema including point of view, and the manipulation of time to construct an experience for a viewer.

In Australia/New Zealand artists like Shona McCullagh, Cordelia Beresford, Madeleine Hetherington, Richard James Allen and I are working pretty squarely in cinematic screendance. Tracie Mitchell's film "Whole Heart" is also an example of cinematic screendance.

A video dance that is based in the thinking of a video art maker, a performance art maker or a visual artist will have its effect through techniques, schools, theories and premises of those disciplines, which I am not an expert in, but about which I can generally say: it prioritises aesthetics over story or choreography, and is structured by patterns of sensory stimuli such as colour, movement, light, shape, line, texture, and so on.

Mahalya Middlemist, Margie Medlin and Gina Czarnecki are examples of artists working in visual art driven screendance.

Determining this framework for critical discourse through the distinctions within these three approaches allows artists to identify their own priorities and to educate and develop themselves within and around the history of their own approach and mix of influences. There is lots of room for innovation within this, and it is more likely to be true innovation, I think, if artists know **what is important** to them and use that knowledge to set their frames, locate themselves, and know the history, techniques, issues and possibilities of their own approach.

With this paradigm in mind, I turn now to another question which is "Can Dance on Screen filter into mainstream cinema and entertainment?"

The response I will propose is that some dance on screen could move into some mainstreams. The possibilities and impediments to dance on screen being mainstream include at least two factors: 1. what we mean by the mainstream; and 2. how the dancing figure is positioned vis a vis the spectator.

First, what do we mean by "the mainstream"? Let us say, roughly, that we mean 'where the money is and where the cultural norms are'.

But this is interesting, because, even for cinema, let alone for dance which has long been at the far fringes of money or cultural norms, the mainstream is splitting, diffusing, disintegrating, dying and being reborn as a million, million subcultures some with money, most with comparatively little (comparison is to the money formerly known as mainstream!) The cultural norms of subcultures are less different from each other than they might think, but they take pride in difference, difference from the 'mainstream' is a cultural norm of subcultures.

But in order to understand this split, let us first examine the mainstream as it was, say somewhere between 5 minutes, 5 months and 5 years ago, depending on what sub-culture you now belong to!

The mainstream, in cinema is, or was, dramatic narrative film. Stories which may emphasise spectacle to a greater or lesser extent, but which are defined as mainstream by their adherence to the grammar of drama: characters pursuing goals, encountering obstacles, and overcoming them. Dramatic questions being opened, complicated, developed with respect to the characters and what is at stake for them and then being resolved satisfactorily, that is, within a closed system of probable cause and effect.

Dance has a long and venerable position as spectacle, but not as narrative drama. It does not conform to the grammar of narrative drama, in that it rarely has characters pursuing goals, encountering obstacles, risking stakes, or even acting in a pattern of cause and effect. As such, it loses out on occupying the mainstream because mainstream audiences find story compelling. They want to know what happens next. And they care about the characters, empathise with them, learn from them, admire or despise them, hope and fear for them, in other words, emotionally engage with them and their plights in a way they are **not invited** to in dance.

More on this question of 'not being invited to emotionally engage' in a moment, first, if narrative drama is the old mainstream, what is the new mainstream? And is it possible for dance to filter in?

Well, yes, and, of course, no.

The new mainstream is characterised by cross platform distribution and interactivity, particularly in the form of co-creativity. It is built around social networks, its most powerful gatekeeper is the problem of being found, in amongst the million possibilities, and once found taken-up, recommended, spread virally by engaged networks. The key to this gate is not story, I hear, but identification. My kids confirm this. It is more important, they say that you identify with Bart than that you hear his story. You are like Bart or like Lisa, others are like Homer or like Maggie, and that's how you understand people and yourself. (This used to be the function of story, helping us to understand ourselves and others) Are you a subscriber to Club Penguin or to World of Warcraft? If I know that then I know if you are a hunter or a nester. I understand you, I'm like you, or I'm not.

Think of anything you know, believe or are curious about. There is an online subculture that shares that trait with you. You can participate in that community, create in it, share in it, believe in it. Even, to some extent, if what you know, believe or are curious about is contemporary dance. But that subculture is not, or not yet, a very mainstream one.

The world's biggest, wealthiest, most culturally normalised sub-cultures have available behaviours to emulate and merchandise to buy, with which you can flag your identity to the world.

Dance, as yet, does not.

At least not art dance or cinematic dance or contemporary dance.

Spectacle dance is huge. And dance within drama, which is essentially contextualised spectacle, is growing huge. (This includes reality tv where spectacle is contextualized by the competition story.)

If we say then that the old mainstream is emotionally engaging narrative drama, and the new mainstream is iconic sub-culture identity, then I think that the thing which most prevents dance from becoming part of either mainstream is the problem of how the dancer as an onscreen figure addresses the audience, or, how the dancing figure is positioned vis a vis the spectator.

The question is: is the dancer or the figure on screen being represented as a person, an image or a character? It is a vexing question, too often unexplored in the construction of dance where a dancer generally sits very uneasily between the position of being a person or an image and is rarely effectively a character.

This may sound like a highly theoretical question but there is a very pragmatic translation of it which is: who is the audience for this work, or who is it for? First the theory:

Dancefilm sits uneasily between what film theorist Tom Gunning calls "cinema of attractions" and the conventions of dramatic narrative film. Gunning is referring to early cinema when he talks about Cinema of Attractions, which he characterises as cinema of exhibition rather than voyeurism. The players acknowledge the audience, they invite us to watch their spectacle either directly with a wave, a wink or a bow or indirectly, by performing a feat to be observed, not to be done if un-observed. Later cinema is constructed around the conventions of narrative form which does *not* acknowledge the audience's presence. The spectator gains the impression that we are watching something that is going on without the characters knowing we are watching. The performers present characters in a story, doing actions which they would do if unobserved, not actors on display.

I return now to the paradigm of three approaches to dance film, the cinematic, the visual art and the dance-driven – in order to examine each one and ask 'is this approach positioning the dancing figure as spectacle to be observed or as character unaware that they are being observed?'. The dancing figure can be positioned differently in each approach and these different positions may effect whether the approach to the form can crack the mainstream.

Cinematic dancefilm conforms to the conventions of later cinema in that it does not acknowledge the audience but presents characters in a closed world, behaving within that world in a manner that they would behave in whether observed or not. The audience are outside of the story. This use of the cinematic space and point of view conventions doesn't mean cinematic

screen dance is headed straight for the mainstream. It's doing well in the film festival circuit where stories don't have to be too explicitly told, but not enough people read the dynamics of dance as a dynamics of story, yet, to get cinematic screen dance into millions of living rooms. There is of course, another problem for cinematic screen dance and story which is that dance has a limited capacity to convey circumstances or to convey subtext in relation to text. Dance is good at emotion or energy variations, but as George Balanchine said, "You can't say sister-in-law in dance."

Art driven dance film is more like the early cinema of attractions than the later forms of narrative cinema, in that its patterns and aesthetics are on display. They are exhibited, as is traditional in visual art. They are there to be tasted, observed and experienced. Art driven dance film, could, I believe launch into the mainstream-subculture of digital art, where a limited edition art dvd, can sell for \$80,000 or more. It's only a matter of the right connections and representation, and I would love to be a part of making this mainstream happen for us.

But what about dance driven dance film?

In dance driven dance films I am often troubled, as I am in live dance, by the difficulty of locating the dancer and thus of locating myself in relation to her. Am I a voyeur or am I invited to watch this exhibition? The dancers' behaviour does not invite me to believe that they are characters intent on achieving goals, nor to speculate on the possible outcomes of their actions, two distinct hallmarks of dramatic and diegetically contained stories. And the filmmaking rarely uses the point of view or time manipulation devices of cinema to position character or convey change. But, the figures on screen do appear to behave intimately and with intent towards each other, not towards me as the spectator. They do not acknowledge me watching or invite me to watch. In film, they do not even acknowledge my presence by taking a bow at the end. Yet, I cannot think why they are doing these behaviours except for me to watch. Would they rehearse and perfect them alone in a lounge room? No. They require an audience, but they do not acknowledge it.

Doubt nags at me as I watch these displays of skills that are not displays. They are not characters, they are not patterns, and yet they are also not real people, because real people have will and psychology and this is not a not a documentary about real people, it is a construction of people into a pattern. If the construction is that the real people who are skilled at dance are doing this behaviour not as characters and not for display but for some other reason, then I want to know why? The only reason I can surmise is that they're doing it because that's what they've been told to do, and then I want to know: why are these dancers so obedient?

That is probably not everyone's view of dance, few people that I know have this difficulty in watching dance, so I apologise for my curmudgeonly attitude. Dance driven dance film is certainly easier for me, and, I think for the 'mainstream' to grasp than contemporary dance on stage, because we feel comfortable in lots of attitudes towards screens, and can choose to watch it as

spectacle, or psychology or a bit of both or not at all. But this question of how it addresses the audience is actually part of a larger question, which is, who is it for, and if there's one thing I can assert confidently, no screen work will ever reach the mainstream, either the cinematic mainstream or the interactive mainstream, unless it knows who it is for.

So, to summarise very briefly:

The paradigm for dance on screen distinguishes between cinematic, dance driven and visual art driven approaches. Each approach, and all of the combinations, define innovations that could be pursued.

I make dancefilm because I love cinema and I live in dance. The innovations I have to pursue are in cinematic structuring and realisation of dance, and I also grapple with the future of the form as it moves from closed to open and the concurrent shift of technologies

I think that some dance is already part of the mainstream, however the mainstream is defined, and other dance is not and will not be until it defines its approach and understands who it is for.

So, I challenge myself, and invite you to join me, in my subculture of articulating what's important and what approach that requires. And I ask myself, and invite you to ask yourself as you get ready to make a dance film: are these figures I'm putting on the screen characters, patterns, forms, dancers or people? And if, as I do, you would like to filter into the mainstream, another way of asking these questions is: what am I making, and who is it for?

Thank you.