Dance Images.
Dance Films as an Example of the
Representation and Production of Movement

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Movement and emotion are central categories for dance and choreography – as well as other time-based media, especially film. Film takes aspects of physical movement in space and sets them into relationship to its own potential for creating movement, visualizing and simultaneously recording them and so thus making them reproducible.

In the following paper I will discuss these points based on the example of dance in film. The discussion will focus neither on video performance, nor experimental film or avant-garde mixtures of dance and film. Instead I will focus on 'popular' or 'mainstream' film and within this field more specifically on fictional, in other words, feature films. Mainstream films are produced both for movie theaters as well as for television. 'Mainstream film' here means: the films are intended for a broad general audience and therefore rely on conventional norms of representation and their universal comprehensibility. We are therefore looking at films that are ascribed to popular culture in the widest sense, not special artistic artifacts, which may provide new concepts, new possibilities for the further aesthetic development of dance for the stage. The question that I will address here is thus how popular film handles physical action and dance. I would like to begin with some basic remarks on the subject of 'Movement and Film'.

Film as Movement-Image

Gilles Deleuze called film the "medium of movement-images" (cf. Deleuze 1986) and by doing so only formulated what has already been widely accepted in film theory since the 1910s: that the mediality of film is essentially determined by movement as image. This movement is achieved through the impression of movement. A series of still images is shown in quick succession, each image capturing a single phase of the movement. The impression of continuous movement is created by projecting the images at a rate of at least 16 images per second or to produce a stable flow of images without flickering: a minimum of 24 images per second. This effect is not because our eyes are too lazy to follow a quick succession of individual images, but because the human brain simplifies the process and creates continuous movement under certain conditions out of a succession of images and the transitions from one image to the next. In film, we are therefore not dealing with ontologically stated movement, but always only with an individual spectator's impression of movement. This will be important for further definitions of movement later.

Movements in film are above all movements by living creatures or objects in front of a camera, which then records and stores single images of these movements on photographic material (cf. Hickethier 2007: 59). The camera records that which it sees and hands it over to the spectator – the camera's point of view thus becomes the spectator's point of view. It shows him what he sees. Film supports this form of total identification, but the spectator nevertheless is always free to take his eyes off the film image and look elsewhere (for example at the woman sitting next to him in the movie theater). Again, this means that film makes the spectator a certain offering of what he can look at – and ultimately the spectator is aware of this, even though he is usually happy to go along and identify with the camera's point of view.

Movement in film is therefore always connected to the gaze, first that of the camera and then that of the spectator. *Movements in film are thus observed movements.*

In film, the action in front of the camera is called 'mise en scène', or simply movement in front of the camera. The camera itself is however also capable of moving and can therefore bring about changes in the depiction of what is happening in front of the camera lens. These changes are not caused by the object being filmed, but by the camera itself, which can also be said to have authority over the gaze. These movements are movements by the camera in the space surrounding it, especially in the space in front of it, which is thus constantly in flux (contracting, expanding, or offering the spectator new spatial perspectives). The

spectator experiences these movements through his perception of the continuous changes in the spatial composition of the image, not through visible movements of the camera itself. The camera as the determining figure remains invisible throughout – it is never seen in the image. If there is a camera visible in the image, it is not the one whose image we, the spectators, are seeing.

So what does this mean for the perception of dance in film? We are dealing with three different actors or rather authorities: the characters acting in front of the camera, the camera itself, and the spectator as observer.

These three have different scopes of action available:

In spite of being the most important of the three – as addressee of all actions by the dancers or characters in front of the camera, as well as of the camera itself – the spectator has the fewest possibilities for action at his disposal: he is stuck in the situation as recipient, unable to leave what the filmic products provides him with: the world of images. He is unable to interact with what is depicted, not even in a limited way, as is the case with video games. He basically remains 'immobile'; the actions he experiences are the actions of others, whose movements can only be conveyed inductively (for example, in car chases, falls from great heights and so on, which have the spectator holding on to his seat as he physically has the impression of also chasing, also falling, for example in films such as Steven Spielberg's *Duel* [1971] and his *Indiana Jones*-series, in particular *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* [1984]).

The camera has distinctly greater range of action. Since its gaze and range of movement are of a technical nature, changes in the technical apparatus open up numerous possibilities. Moreover, editing and montage are able to create and suggest movement that has never actually happened in front of a camera. This opens up new filmic possibilities that far exceed the physicality of human movement. In the image itself, these technically produced or cinematographically induced movements are not recognizable as technical, but they seem to place the actors in front of the camera in a new context and give the spectator the impression that they themselves are also capable of completely different movements.

The actors in front of the camera have to rely on their own physical abilities to create movement, but these can be improved with periphery technical equipment. In the case of especially complex or fast movements, this can mean that the actor is moving in a car, a train, a plane, on horseback, or in any other kind of movement apparatus. The imagination knows no bounds and digital film production is able to create human or humanoid movements never seen before with the help of digital enhancement or modification (for example in films such as *Matrix* [1999] or *Avatar* [2009]). Within these movement processes and constel-

lations, which are often linked to the narrative, dance appears as specifically choreographed movement that is integrated into the film as part of a broader ensemble of movements and dynamics.

THE ISOLATION OF DANCE IN FILM REALITY

In order to be able to locate the specific quality of choreographed dance movement in the context of film, I will first introduce a few more characteristics of film.

First of all: film sees itself, and is also seen as such by its users, as a medium for rendering reality. As Siegfried Kracauer wrote, film is a medium for "saving exterior reality" (cf. Kracauer 1964) and what we see on screen is a medium that depicts reality and thus produces a new – filmic – kind of reality. The spectators are guided by an appearance of reality created by the film. Film theory therefore refers to the reality effect that occurs when we watch a photographic film. This reality effect is the result of the 'dispositif' of cinema, in other words the medial structure of perception, which fundamentally influences how we watch films.

The appearance of reality is further strengthened by the audiovisual quality of the film, as the images are accompanied by sound, by language, and by music. Silent movements appear artificial, not real. The bodies seem to lack a grip on reality; the illusion of being present in a moment of real movement disintegrates. That is why images in sound films and also in television are always accompanied by sound, be it only atmospheric sounds, the so-called 'atmo', which is however what truly makes the images come to life. This audiophonic accompaniment of the visual in popular film means that the action and therefore also the movement are strongly orient themselves towards the spoken action.

Action that largely manages to do without language is therefore rare in popular film. As a result, the physical actions of the film characters are also strongly dominated by the spoken word and therefore also by the narrative of the story.

When language is not used and movements are presented without the accompaniment of language, physical movement is forced to replace language, in other words movements must evoke meaning for the spectator.

Usually, this pantomime-like type of performance does not at first appear 'realistic', but is alienating instead. In the early days of silent movies, Max Reinhardt made such a pantomime type of film with *Sumurun* (1910). The actors used theatrical pantomime to give the actions of the characters a dreamlike quality; they seemed to float through the cinematic space. The actions therefore appeared to convey something unreal. However, this form did not catch on as a ba-

sis for arranging movement and creating cinematic meaning. Film aesthetics went down a different path and relied on silent speaking. Experienced spectators were able to read the meaning of what was being said from the actors' lips; written text (intertitles) conveyed the meaning to all others. The characters' movements were not exaggerated through pantomime, but were modeled more closely on the physical movements of every-day life. Only their meaning was made more explicit and pronounced if needed (cf. Hickethier 1986: 11-42). Such physical and silent performances were therefore often employed in the field of film comedy.

Jacques Tati's films are good examples of the effects of performed movement. In *Play Time* (1967), there is a scene in which we see the protagonist (Tati himself as Monsiour Hulot) in a modern office building in Paris, waiting to be admitted. The film leaves a lot of space for Tati's movements; the spectators are able to follow the protagonist's movements in long shots as he leads them through a flight of rooms. Tati's movements and the camera eye behind him visually enter and travel through the rooms in the film. The comic moment is triggered on the one hand by the protagonist's movements, which are evidently inappropriate for the exploration of a building, but also gradually appear more and more natural to the spectator, while the modern architectural setting with its automatic doors, lamps, and glass room partitions, which don't really bring transparency into the space, appear less and less suitable for human movement.

The film accentuates the arrangement of the rooms through editing and montage, creating new spatial perspectives and thus constantly confronting both the protagonist and the spectator with new rooms and new situations. This provides a stage for the protagonist to act on – a special sphere of action. This impression is underlined by the fact that the character is often shown from head to toe, thus also directing the spectators' gaze towards proxemic movements.

However, mainstream films usually operate differently from Tati's film *Play Time*, which mainly used long shots and wide angles. In mainstream film, a long shot is often employed to give an overview of the scene or used as a symbolic angle (to show something of general meaning, which is not conducive to the action). Here, the camera is often very close to the characters and alternates between a socially accepted distance (1,20 to 3,50 m) and a personal distance (less than 1,20 m). This also has an effect on the presentation of movement. In mainstream film, movements recorded by the camera are usually accentuated by frequent shifts between the positions of various observers and their various distances to the action.

Unlike Tati in his films, the actor usually is not 'master of his movements'. The film makes the selection, often only showing parts of the body and only for

a very short space of time. The body and the movements are thus fragmented; the fragments are reassembled and synthesized. The film accentuates and underlines this. An arm movement may be continued by or confronted with an eye movement. This is then followed by the image of an upper body turning, followed by the position of a pair of feet. The montage usually depends on whether the plausibility of events is familiar enough to the spectator – a probability deduced from the knowledge of everyday movements. This can also produce new physical movements, constituted by film itself, and new sequences of movement, which are no longer identical with the movements of the actor or actress in front of the camera.

FRAMING AND ORNAMENTATION

As far as dance in film is concerned, we can now say for the time being that dance challenges the claim to reality posited by the cinematic narrative. Dance elements must therefore be specially legitimized in the film's plot. In short, dance is here a movement made by the body, which expresses a meaning that cannot always be put into words, but can stand for itself as a genuine form of physical expression. For the film and its own claim to reality, dance is thus usually a special, not necessarily natural form of physical movement, a special event. Dance in film is often framed by specific accentuations or markers. The frame also emphasizes the distinctiveness of the dancing.

In Sergio Leone's film *Once Upon a Time in America* from 1984, the hero Noodles (Robert de Niro) returns to New York after many years. He left the city in the 1930s after having been cheated in some prohibition deals and in danger of being murdered by rival gangs. He has now become a respectable elderly citizen. Returning to the bar of his youth to find an old friend and in search of those responsible for cheating him in the past, he goes into the back room of the bar. There, he climbs onto the toilet seat and peers through a small window into a storage room. And sees – a girl dancing.

It is an image from his memory, and it provides the starting point for the subsequent story of his childhood and youth. The dancing is framed as an anomaly in several ways: the film changes color and becomes sepia-toned. As spectators, we therefore now know that we are in a different, past age. The dancing takes place on a stage, in the storage room of the bar. The girl is the bar owner's daughter practicing for her ballet class; we have already been told that she went on to become a famous star. And the scene introduces as observer, the older

Noodles, whose gaze we see and which is then replaced by the gaze of the younger Noodles, thus marking the scene as a starting point for a flashback.

The spectator's point of view is close to that of the observer, whose gaze is returned by the gaze of the small dancer – he, who thought himself invisible in his viewing post is recognized and himself observed – while the spectator in turn observes this exchange of gazes from a third position. The camera repeatedly takes him into the storage room, but he always remains at a greater distance from the dancer than from the observing Noodles. We have here a multiple combination of different characters and their actions, accompanied by, what is now, leitmotif music. This becomes a choreographed movement – the girl's dancing transforms into the mental movement of the observer Noodles, which in turn becomes the (e)motion of the spectator.

The result of this kind of framing of dance in a plot that lays claim to filmic reality, is that, since the 1920s, 'dance in film' has manifested mainly in a specific group of films, a genre or sub-genre, which we call 'Dance Film'.

Dance in mainstream movies is generally dance supported by music. Therefore these films are also referred to as music films, revue films, musical films, etc. Here too, dance usually occurs in framed situations, in other words, a specific space is created for the dancing in the plot of the film, a dance floor, often a clearly defined space in the cinematic image, which is itself defined by a frame and therefore presents the action within this frame as a composed unit – with various emphases, balancing surfaces and forms, and not just simply as dance.

One of the most important examples in film history is from 1934, when sound movies were just emerging. In *Wonder Bar*, the mere depiction of a dance is cinematically enhanced by camera technique and a montage of images and angles, as well as stage machinery and film architecture. The film goes beyond simply framing the dance space and does what it is good at and what has become its main principle: the enhancement of space into a cinematically altered and structured space. Still, all this remains in the realm of physical dance.

The director and screenwriter (Lloyd Bacon) as well as the performers (Ricardo Cortez and Dolores Del Rio) never achieved wide recognition, unlike the film's choreographer: Busby Berkeley. He drove the producers mad with his choreographies and the staging of his dance pieces, but his films set a precedent worldwide and in the end inspired Siegfried Kracauer's famous formula of the "ornament of the masses" (cf. Kracauer 1963).

In *Wonder Bar* (other Busby Berkeley films later resumed this motif), the camera shows a small dance club, a round dance floor surrounded by tables, a host, a small orchestra, a singer. A male and a female dancer enter. Applause. They begin to dance along to the singing and the music: a ballroom dance. The

camera follows their movements. Then it slowly withdraws up to a higher position, so that the dancers move to the bottom end of the image. Suddenly a staggered line of singers moves in front of the dancing couple, they turn around, and taper open, leaving the stage visible again. The two dancers draw back a curtain, a new stage opens up; the dancing couples multiply between the pillars into numerous different formations. They move between the pillars, the space is shown in ever new variations, multiplied by various mirrors. The camera moves to an overhead position: the dancers form circular ornaments and the space keeps changing accompanied by indulgent music: first a mirror cabinet, then the vanishing points dissolve and finally the space itself is multiplied. The cinematic realm acquires a fantastic quality. A female dancer runs away and deliberately loses a shoe, the male dancer follows her, they find each other under leaves moving in the breeze, become leaves themselves by using masks, then break away. As they say at the end of the dance sequence: "Oh, if only this dream would never end."

The focus here is not on the dancers, but on the spectators. It is they, who are supposed to be drawn into the movements to experience the whirlwind of emotions. These music revue films were the starting point for the history of dance film. It is not possible to give a complete overview here, but I will sketch the most significant aspects.

THE RHYTHMIZATION OF CINEMATIC ACTION

An important characteristic is the rhythmization of cinematic action. This can be seen in a German music film, which incorporated dance elements in the depiction of cinematic reality at roughly the same time as Busby Berkeley's reinvention of the revue film in Hollywood. The film in question was made by Reinold Schünzel – a director of various comedies in Germany – who was forced to leave the country after 1933 because he was regarded 'half-Jewish'. One of his masterpieces was the revue film *Viktor and Viktoria*, made in 1933: The unemployed comedian Victor Hempel (Hermann Thimig) has caught a bad cold and is therefore unable to perform in a female role at a Kaschemme (pub), a job that would earn him 10 Deutschmark per show. So he asks a female colleague (Renate Müller in one of her best performances), whom he met at his agency, to stand in for him. Her subsequent performance – she thus plays a man playing a woman – is so successful that she is discovered by a theatre agent and goes on to perform in big theatres, always accompanied by her co-partner Viktor Hempel. She tours across half of Europe to adoring audiences before her bluff is called and she ends

up marrying a rich husband. Gender crossing therefore takes place on multiple levels, and the film draws its fascination from the constant mix-ups and ambiguity.

The film deals with the production of dynamics and rhythm in cinematic reality – outside of the stage performances, as for example, in the following film scene accompanied by music: Viktor Hempel is leaving the agent's office and meets the young Susanne Rohr (Müller) on the stairs. She is a young actress dreaming of a stage career. The physical acting of the two is totally different in spite of the underlying rhythm: her physical expression makes her a prototype of what is natural on film – while he becomes a prototype of what appears theatrical, not natural on film, exaggerated and therefore funny. Rhythmically, they walk down the stairs, their body movements becoming more and more aligned. Their movements pointedly refer to one another, and the exaggeration and slightly hammy gestures of the one are counteracted by the more reserved, seemingly 'natural' gestures of the other. Their walk down the stairs is crucial as a rhythmically structured process, which simultaneously unfolds the exposition of the narrative, laying the groundwork for their relationship. The movements are not allowed to fully destroy the impression of cinematic reality, even though they are structured and transformed into a dance element.

THE CAMERA AS OBSERVER AND CO-ACTOR

A rhythmization of the cinematic action can also be achieved by moving the dance action away from the enclosed stage, the specifically marked area, into the reality of every-day life, into the streets. Backyards and street corners are now the spaces in which the performance takes place, the dance action turning them into dance spaces: ad hoc – only to immediately lose this status as soon as the dancing ends.

In this kind of film, we are thus dealing with a ballet choreographed to music, which only bit by bit reveals itself to us as such. The world is expressed through dance.

First, we have an almost documentary view of New York City. The dancing is introduced little by little. Robert Wise's *West Side Story*, made in 1961 (choreography by Jerome Robbins) based on music by Leonard Bernstein, combines documentary images of inner city life with the space manifesting itself through dance.

The main theme is introduced through and in the dance: a fight between rival youth gangs. The camera is involved as a co-actor: the scene begins with the

skyline of New York. Then the camera travels along the houses, picking up the music that can now be heard. It wanders through the streets and ends up zooming in on some backyard where two gangs, The Jets and The Sharks, clash, provoking and fighting each other, to escape and pursue each other. A danced duel. The dancers constantly form new constellations, break apart, come together again, all the while continuously producing new images of dance movement. The film setting remains the same throughout; it only changes when the camera eye opens up new perspectives and passageways.

The spectators are invited to move through the streets and backyards of New York along with the characters, they are often directly the 'target' of the dancers' movements and are addressed head-on, although ultimately they are only observers after all. The movement sequences are designed in such a way that they are quickly recognizable and identifiable.

There is no underlying irritation of perception, as Busby Berkeley created to some extent. The spectators are meant to be involved; this involvement is achieved through the interaction of the camera eye and the dance movements of the actors in front of the camera. The film musicalizes and rhythmizes the characters' sphere of action, as well as the urban space, and makes the city vibrate and move. The dance fights between the gangs translate the aggression of battle into dance steps, choreographies, which become more and more recognizable as such in the film and increasingly correspond to theatrical conventions. However, they are thus also simply steps, which solidify their theme's claim to reality and thereby consistently separate the dance movements as anomalies from the non-dance movements.

Despite the impressive choreography framed by conventional comprehensibility, what remains with us is: that even in the face of all rhythmization, the order of the world is not overturned.

A more recent example of rhythmization in film and a certain type of audience involvement is *Moulin Rouge* by Baz Luhrmann from 2001, which attempts to create cascades of movement, involving the spectators in a frenzy of movement. Here the separation of the dance scene from the cinematic world with its claim to reality, the definition of the dance as something set apart and different from reality, often depicting feelings and emotions, is largely abolished. In the beginning *Moulin Rouge* also presents the dance scenes in a space set apart from the every-day realm of the film's reality – the cabaret theater that gives the film its name. However, the outside and inside worlds soon begin to mingle, blurring the boundaries between the two. This blurring and overstepping of boundaries is however not achieved by the dancers and their dance movements,

but by the movement of the camera, through montage, and the high frequency of fast-paced cuts.

What is therefore important here is how the dance is presented. In contrast to the almost contemplative treatment of the dance action in *Wonder Bar*, the movements in *Moulin Rouge* are totally fragmentized and re-synthesized in a fast montage of different points of view. The determining factor is the rhythm of the music: the performance becomes an almost frantic whirl of bodies, which is directed straight at the audience and attempts to overwhelm them.

In one scene, about half-way through the film, the young writer and artistic nobody Christian meets the star of the show, the dancer Sadine, and falls in love with her and her dancing. He becomes involved in the action (and with him the spectator in an illusionary way) through a cancan of film characters and cinematic perspectives, which increasingly pick up speed. Here the dance space within the film is no longer clearly separated from the rest of the action. Scenes from the inside of the building, of the stage, and of the dancers are mixed with exterior scenes; the actors seem to be here and there, constantly on the move. The cinematic space is shaped by the 'dance' of the camera, the excessive montage. The bodies of the dancers are disembodied, become visual ciphers, which alternate, disappear and reform in staccato. The film itself and its sequences of camera perspectives and images becomes a frenzy of movement. Singular dance movements become indistinguishable, as everything dissolves in a whirlwind of movement.

The rhythmization of the entire cinematic action abolishes the framing of the dance within the cinematic reality, as has by now become the convention in most mainstream movies. The spectator is invited to abandon his contemplative gaze, his observation post in the distance. He is involved with the help of superficial visual stimuli that are not only founded in the physical movements of the actors, but in all optical tricks that film has to offer. His senses are so overwhelmed that he is hardly able to distinguish single movement sequences and he experiences a rush of excitement. The film therefore focuses on itself and its presentation of the world (and not on dance as an art form in its own right set apart within the film). In doing so, film – especially mainstream movies – has thus returned to its carnivalesque beginnings as spectacle. However, as far as dance in film is concerned, it comes close to what Luuk Utrecht has called "Postmodernism-Dance" (Utrecht 1987: 442), with its tendencies of depersonalization and dehumanization in dance and with parallels to developments in other artistic genres.

CONCLUSION

As far as dance in popular mainstream film is concerned, we can conclude that:

Film and dance are related in that they both focus on movement, the body, and rhythmization.

Due to its nature as a technical medium, film makes other forms of presenting physical movement possible; it fragmentizes movement and re-synthesizes it in new and different ways. It accelerates human movement, enhances it and mechanizes it.

Film lays claim to the representation and depiction of reality. In its presentation, it usually separates dance from the depicted reality by framing it in order to avoid dance threatening its claim to reality.

Film uses dance to create special moods, characterize situations and open up particular narrative spaces.

Film can also integrate dance as an element of rhythm in its depiction of reality and use dance to structure its cinematic reality. This, however, means that the cinematic reality becomes subject as a whole to the mode of a depiction of the world through dance.

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FILMS

Avatar (2009) (USA, D: James Cameron)

Duel (1971) (USA, D: Steven Spielberg)

Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (1984) (USA, D: Steven Spielberg)

Matrix (1999) (USA, D: Andy Wachowski/Lana Wachowski)

Moulin Rouge (2001) (USA/AU, D: Baz Luhrmann)

Once Upon a Time in America (1984) (USA/I, D: Sergio Leone)

Play Time (1967) (F/I, D: Jaques Tati)

Sumurun (1910) (DE, D: Max Reinhardt)

Viktor and Viktoria (1933) (DE, D: Reinhold Schünzel)

West Side Story (1961) (USA, D: Jerome Robbins/Robert Wise)

Wonder Bar (1934) (USA, D: Lloyd Bacon)