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Feature Film and Dance Film: A Match Made in Movement

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Alexandra Thomsen

Thesis Committee:  
Professor John Crawford, Chair  
Professor Mary Corey  
Professor Alan Terricciano

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## ABSTRACT

Feature Film and Dance Film: A Match Made in Movement

By

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Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor John Crawford, Chair

This study identifies correlations and mutually beneficial approaches in film making styles and techniques in the works of selected feature films, experimental films, and dance films. Key compositional elements in the signature styles of film directors can be applied to dance film. Feature film directors Terrence Malick, Alfred Hitchcock, and Wes Anderson, as well as dance film artist Maya Deren, provide diverse materials for this study. Deren, a pivotal figure in experimental filmmaking and an artist highly regarded in the dance film field, is central to this analysis because of the role of human movement and bodily forms in her aesthetics.

Studying film directors can inform the creation of dance film by relating techniques in filmmaking to dance and movement as well as by developing a deeper understanding of signature styles in cinema. For this thesis I created one dance film to represent the techniques I studied based on the signature style elements of Terrence Malick. In the broadest sense, this study investigates how applying the methodology of one artist to another might guide the development of one's own signature style.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to find correlations and mutually beneficial approaches in film making styles and techniques in the works of selected feature films, experimental films, and dance films. By analyzing key compositional elements in the signature styles of three feature film directors, I develop an understanding of how their strategies might be applied to dance film. Feature film directors Terrence Malick, Alfred Hitchcock, and Wes Anderson, as well as dance film artist Maya Deren, provide diverse materials for this study. Deren, a pivotal figure in experimental filmmaking and an artist highly regarded in the dance film field, became a central connection in this analysis because of the role of human movement and bodily forms in her aesthetics.

In order to show the correlation between dance film and cinema, I looked for parallels between Deren and the three feature film directors based on specific dance filmmaking techniques and characteristics. This approach allowed me to understand the ways in which feature film directors are similar to dance filmmakers. I also studied ways in which various experts in the field of dance film relate techniques in filmmaking to dance and movement, based on the proposition that studying film directors can inform the creation of dance film through developing a deeper understanding of signature styles in cinema. In the broadest sense, the goal of this study is to understand how applying the methodology of one artist to another might guide the development of one's own signature style.

Chapter 2 gives background information on the film directors as well as dance film researchers and authors. In Chapter 3, I provide observations and insights about the interrelation of the films by Deren, Hitchcock, Malick, and Anderson. I draw parallels between dance film and cinema through specific tools and techniques that are utilized in each, showcasing the ways in which these two art forms align. I then present ways in which Deren,

Hitchcock, Malick, and Anderson also utilize these techniques. Additionally, I give specific examples of the signature style elements I find most appealing in terms of aesthetics in each of these director's films.

Chapter 4 focuses on my own methods when creating my dance film as well as an understanding of why this medium is appealing to me as an artist. Chapter 5 discusses my discoveries about utilizing cinema to inform creating dance film as well as studying other artists. I reflect on the ways in which these studies have led me to discern how I see myself as an artist and which methods I want to use to continue shaping and defining my artistry.



## CHAPTER 2

### Sources and Influences

The filmmakers whose stylistic techniques are the main focus of this study are Maya Deren, Terrence Malick, Alfred Hitchcock and Wes Anderson. Each of these film directors have inspired me and they all have specific elements that I find intriguing and appealing. The next figures I present are the researchers and authors who shed light on the film directors' methodologies in relation to dance film. They include dance researcher Erin Brannigan, filmmaker Karen Pearlman, and experimental filmmaker Amy Greenfield.

With a background in dance, Maya Deren was one of the first experimental filmmakers to take choreographic principles and apply them to cinema. She was born in 1917 in Kiev, Ukraine, immigrated with her family to New York in 1922, and earned her undergraduate degree from New York University where she studied journalism and political science. She also earned a Masters Degree in English Literature and Symbolist Poetry from Smith College in 1939. Deren continued to broaden her skill set and range of abilities by working within the dance field. She became an assistant to Katherine Dunham and toured and performed with the Katherine Dunham Dance Company. In 1941, she met Alexander Hammid, a Czechoslovakian filmmaker who she later married. Together they collaborated on her first experimental film, *Meshes of the Afternoon*.<sup>1</sup>

Deren is "considered the founder of the avant-garde film movement."<sup>2</sup> Films of hers that I will discuss and analyze include: *A Study in Choreography For The Camera*, *Meditations on Violence*, and *Rituals in Transfigured Time*. She is an inspiration to me as a dance film artist as she was one of the first filmmakers to move away from traditional narratives and begin working

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<sup>1</sup> Haslem, Wendy, "Maya Deren," *Senses of Cinema*, December, 2002, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/deren-2/#bibl>

<sup>2</sup> Greenfield, Amy, "The Kinesthetics of Avant-Garde Dance Film: Deren and Harris," in *Envisioning Dance on Film and Video*, ed. Judy Mitoma, Elizabeth Zimmer, Dale Ann Stieber (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 21.

with film in more abstract ways. Her films are similar to dance as the meaning has to be extrapolated from her films in the same manner that audiences have to interpret dance.

The feature film director Terrence Malick was born in 1942 in Ottawa, Illinois. He studied philosophy at Harvard University and was a philosophy teacher for a brief amount of time before becoming a freelance journalist. He then turned to filmmaking and enrolled in the American Film Institute. Upon graduating, he self-financed his first film *Badlands* in 1973, and then made *Days of Heaven* in 1978. Malick then took a two-decade long break from filmmaking. His next film, *The Thin Red Line*, did not come out until 1998. Since then he has directed six more films including *To The Wonder* and *Tree of Life*, to name a few.<sup>3</sup> Malick's films are generally extensive and languid, with little to no dialogue — more reminiscent of the silent film era. His films are known for their philosophical overtones and Lloyd Michaels calls his films, “aesthetic objects of contemplation.”<sup>4</sup> With beautiful landscapes that create a sense of awe and wonder, as well as cerebral themes to be contemplated, his films capture the essence of the sublime.<sup>5</sup> Malick, like Deren, is a very abstract film director and I find his films to be inspirational and thought provoking in a spiritual sense. They cause me to stop and reflect deeply on myself and my views on life. His films are also visually beautiful as they are filled with stunning imagery.

Alfred Hitchcock, born in 1899 in London, England, began his career as a scriptwriter and assistant director in 1923. He was then sent to Germany to study expressionism in film. Upon his return to England he became a director. In the 1930s he moved to America and continued his career as a film director.<sup>6</sup> Hitchcock is widely known for his films being

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<sup>3</sup> Michaels, Lloyd, *Terrence Malick* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 14-19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Dufreigne, Jean-Pierre, *Hitchcock Style*, ed. Martine Assouline (New York: Assouline Publishing, 2004), 26-27.

suspenseful, elegant, and macabre.<sup>7</sup> But more so than real suspense or terror, Hitchcock preferred the “manipulation of appearances.” Elements of distrust, fear, and underserved punishment are all themes that are sprinkled throughout his fifty three fiction films.<sup>8</sup> What I find most intriguing about Hitchcock is the way in which he portrays women in his films. They are elegant yet mysterious and he is able to capture this essence of his female characters with the way he composes shots of them.

Feature film director Wes Anderson was born in Houston, Texas in 1969. As a child he experimented with Super 8 mm films and staged plays, however, he never received any formal training at a film school.<sup>9</sup> Instead, he studied philosophy at The University of Texas at Austin, where he met Owen Wilson. Together they began working on a script as they shared a common interest in writing and movies. They co-wrote Anderson’s first film, *Bottle Rocket*, in which Wilson starred.<sup>10</sup> Since then he has written and directed numerous films including *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, and *Moonrise Kingdom*. Anderson is well known for his distinctive style, which includes elements such as the use of “retro pop/rock music and a commitment to primary colors.”<sup>11</sup> He has developed a loyal fanbase due to quirky theatricality in his films, which is distinctive because of his acute attention to detail and his involvement with so many aspects of the film production from writing, to directing and sometimes producing his own films.<sup>12</sup> Anderson represents the quirky and silly side of myself. I find that Anderson’s dry brand

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 18-22.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>9</sup> Browning, Mark, *Wes Anderson: Why His Movies Matter*, Ed. Vincent Libretto (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), ix.

<sup>10</sup> "Wes Anderson Biography.com," A&E Television Networks, February 12, 2016, accessed August 17, 2015, <http://www.biography.com/people/wes-anderson-20617561#synopsis>

<sup>11</sup> Browning, *Wes Anderson*, 143.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., ix.

of humor aligns with mine. I am also intrigued by the innocent themes in his movies that bring out the inner child of his characters.

In *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image*, Erin Brannigan investigates common approaches to creating dance film, how choreography is created for the screen, and elements that unite dance and film. She also discusses how early dance and film practices informed and influenced the new interdisciplinary dance films that are being created today. The elements of her book I will be focusing on include her emphasis on the parallels between choreography and cinema, which points out that both are interested in moving bodies. Brannigan also does an extensive study on Deren, dedicating an entire chapter of the book to her.<sup>13</sup> Brannigan emphasizes the strategies and cinematic techniques Deren uses in her films that are applicable to dance films. The techniques I found particularly interesting relate to strategies that the feature film directors also employ. They are verticality, stylization or gesture-dance, and micro-choreographies through the use of the close up shot. Brannigan is the author who introduced me more thoroughly to Deren and piqued my interest in her dance films.

Karen Pearlman is the author of *Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit*. She discusses the creativity that can be inherent when editing a film, especially in relation to rhythm — how rhythm is created, where it is found, and how it is implemented through the use of editing. Editing is often referred to as an intuitive process. Pearlman's aim with this book is to unravel and discover in more depth how this intuition is manifested when editing. She expresses how parallels can be found between choreography and editing in terms of the shaping of movement and energy over time, as well as working with rhythm. Editing can be seen as a choreographic process which utilizes intuition, timing, trajectory phrasing, movement, and style. This book helped me to pinpoint and understand the more specific ways in which I edit my dance films. It

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<sup>13</sup> Brannigan, Erin, *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 100-124.

helped me to delve a little deeper into my own process, recognize how I was editing, as well as the reasons behind my editing choices.

Amy Greenfield, an experimental filmmaker, contributed an essay to the book *Envisioning Dance on Film and Video* in which she investigates dance films by Deren as well as filmmaker Hilary Harris. She discusses how Deren influenced Harris and explains that both of these artists informed her own work.<sup>14</sup> She points out that there is a lineage of influence in the dance film world that leads back to Deren, acknowledging the specific influences Deren had on Harris when creating his dance films.

According to Greenfield, Deren's film *A Study in Choreography For The Camera* was the first experimental dance film to be critically discussed in mainstream venues. It was mentioned in both *Dance Magazine* and *The New York Times* and later became recognized as a milestone in experimental filmmaking. Greenfield also claims that some of Deren's contemporaries, such as Shirley Clarke and Ed Emshwiller, as well as Michael Powell's dance sequences in *The Red Shoes* were inspired by her.

In discussing Harris' *Nine Variations on a Dance Theme*, Greenfield says that even though Harris's film is quite different from *A Study*, he is indebted to Deren. Investigating this lineage of influence further, Greenfield references how Harris' *Nine Variations* had an impact in Hollywood. Specifically, his film made an impact on John (Saturday Night Fever) Badham who had dancer Janet Wilber use *Nine Variations* as a point of reference when filming the dance dream sequence in the film *Whose Life Is It Anyway*. Greenfield also claims that Harris' smooth circling camera work in the first few variations of his film influenced the creation of the steadicam, which is a camera stabilizer that allows for smooth movement while filming. Greenfield also points out how both of these artists and films impacted her own experimental filmmaking career. She recognizes that it was Deren's work that pushed her across the

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<sup>14</sup> Greenfield, "Kinesthetics," 21-26

threshold of being a dancer and choreographer to making experimental film, video, and dance works. She notes how in the same way that Harris acknowledges his being indebted to Deren, she feels she is indebted to Harris. Harris was a mentor to Greenfield in terms of film structuring and was the cinematographer for two of her films.

## CHAPTER 3

### Film Techniques and Signature Style

#### *Aligning Dance Film and Cinema*

Dance film is a contemporary art form that emerged in the twentieth century. Brannigan defines dance film as “a modality that appears across various types of films including the musical and experimental shorts and is characterized by a *filmic performance* dominated by choreographic strategies or effects.”<sup>15</sup> She also states “The dance that is realized in dance film did not exist prior to the invention of film. . .”<sup>16</sup> The leap from cinema to dance film was an inevitable merging of two art forms that were destined to coexist.

Robert Haller says that dance and film have coexisted for roughly 110 years, stating that, “In most of the dance films of those years cinema has been a recording mechanism.”<sup>17</sup> Dance was filmed with the purpose of documenting dance works for a variety of reasons, including: maintaining the longevity of a dance piece, codifying a choreographer’s work, and being able to accurately replicate a dance piece by viewing it in its original form. There did not seem to be a desire or need to artistically film dance as the argument can be made that the camera cannot capture the essence of what is felt while watching a live dance performance — the energy, the excitement, the overall encompassing feeling one gets when watching a live performance.<sup>18</sup> This lack of feeling is most definitely true when watching a recording of a dance that is shot in a wide angle format without any camera movement. This is because the purpose of these kinds of films is to be able to see everything that happened in the dance as a whole.

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<sup>15</sup> Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, vii.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>17</sup> Haller, Robert A., “Some Propositions about Cinema Dance,” (lecture at Screendance: The State of the Art Proceedings, American Dance Festival, Duke University, Durham, NC, July 6-9, 2006), 30, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://www.dvpg.net/screendance2006.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Eventually, artists began using the camera in a wide variety of ways to integrate more fully with dance instead of being just a recording tool. It was discovered that there are things that can be captured by the camera that cannot be captured in a live performance. Directors and cinematographers learned the skill of commanding the viewer in terms of focusing in on small details and doing close up shots of various body parts to convey meaning. The camera brings the viewer in and directs their attention to various elements in ways that cannot be done in a live performance. This type of film performance has an energy of its own. Cinema has also allowed for a disruption of time and space by addition or subtraction in the ways the film is edited together. Haller describes film as existing in the viewer's "mental space." By expanding or subtracting what the viewer sees or does not see, it allows for the blanks to be filled in by the viewer as well as for the viewer to develop an emotional reaction where meaning is created.<sup>19</sup>

Once the ability to command the viewer was realized through cinema, dance artists were able to similarly utilize the camera with a more artistic and aesthetic intention. Deren began using the camera to capture and express movement and other film artists have been integrating similar strategies when creating movement in their films that are not specifically dance based. Dance artists were influenced by filmmakers and filmmakers were in turn inspired by dance artists who were making films. A merging of the two art forms was beginning. Since then, new forms of dance have been created because of the merging of dance and film and it has allowed for new ways of capturing human emotion. The way we now view dance has been altered forever.<sup>20</sup>

UCLA Professor of dance and editor of *Envisioning Dance on Film* Judy Mitoma believes dance for the camera is a natural progression for choreographers and dance artists in the way

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Mitoma, Judy, Elizabeth Zimmer, and Dale Ann Stieber, eds. *Envisioning Dance on Film and Video*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), xxxi.



that dance is sensitive to such elements as space, time, motion, and light.<sup>21</sup> These same concepts are explored in cinema. It is for this reason Mitoma suggests that when one understands how to utilize and manipulate space, time, motion, etc. to create dance, it is easy to transition ones thinking and apply these same ideas to creating a dance film.

Brannigan also draws parallels between choreography and cinema, pointing out that both are interested in moving bodies. Both forms investigate the qualities of movement through their respective mediums with the use of human bodies, objects, cameras, set design, editing, and the like. Brannigan states, “Dance and film meet in a *cinema of movement* where a dancerly or choreographic approach to filmmaking emphasizes exceptional movement on various levels of filmic production.”<sup>22</sup> Both Mitoma and Brannigan are emphasizing the attention to stylistic elements to do with movement, as well as techniques utilized in creating dance film and cinema.

Pearlman elaborates on this alignment further by addressing the role the editor plays in creating a film. In her lecture at the American Dance Festival in 2006 titled, “Editing as a Form of Choreography,” she states, “what an editor is doing is analogous to what a choreographer does because they shape movement’s direction, shape, time, emphasis and so on into significant form. Further, the movement being shaped through choreographic principles is not just the physical movement, but the movement of emotions and of story.”<sup>23</sup> She believes editors and choreographers share the same tool of shaping movement. When creating a dance, choreographers use a certain amount of intuition that is based on understanding physical intentions in relation to efforts such as force, speed, and shape. This helps them understand the natural flow of movement and how to alter it in order to elucidate whatever it is they want to

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, viii-ix.

<sup>23</sup> Pearlman, Karen, *Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit* (New York and London: Focal Press, 2009), 52.

convey through the dance. Editors use intuition similarly. It has to do with kinesthetic empathy where they can understand the intentions behind movement. This allows them to feel and sense the movement of the film, or have a somatic experience, which informs where they make their cuts and edits in the film.<sup>24</sup>

Dance film and cinema both have their respective histories and origins, but have come to a place of aesthetic similarity. Dance film and cinema align in terms of their filming of movement, intuitively understanding movement in order to inform choreographing and editing, and the wide array of artistic intentions that can be realized with the use of the camera.

### Maya Deren

In her book, Brannigan emphasizes the strategies and cinematic techniques Deren uses in her films that are applicable to dance films. These include, but are not limited to, “. . .multiple exposures, jump cuts, slow-motion, negative film sequences, superimposition, matches-on-action, freeze-frame, and acute camera angles. . .”<sup>25</sup> The specific techniques of Deren’s that I am interested in are verticality, stylization or gesture-dance, and micro-choreographies through the use of the close up shot.

Verticality is “a concept developed by Deren to account for the different film structure in non-narrative films — what she calls ‘poetic film.’ Rather than progressing ‘horizontally’ with the logic of the narrative, vertical films or sequences explore the quality of moments, images, ideas, and movements outside of such imperatives.”<sup>26</sup> In her film *A Study in Choreography For The Camera*,<sup>27</sup> Deren employs the technique of verticality. The dancer is Talley Beatty. Though his movement in the film is continuous, the locations where he is dancing change multiple times. He

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 52-56.

<sup>25</sup> Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, 100.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>27</sup> Deren, Maya, “Maya Deren - A Study In Choreography For Camera.(1945) Music by Tomas Friberg (2009),” posted July 8, 2010, accessed January 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnUEr\\_gNzwk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnUEr_gNzwk)

begins in a forest and at one point is completing a circling gesture with his leg when, suddenly, a close up shot of his lower leg finishing this movement places him in a new indoor location. The audience is brought on a journey with the dancer that is not related to a narrative. The film progresses from here with the dancer moving to an open courtyard, then spinning next to a statue, and finally ending up back in the forest. The dance he performs is seamless and continuous, suggesting a continuity of time. However, it feels dreamlike in the sense that he moves from one space to the next with no linear explanation for how and why. This allows for what Brannigan suggests as probing the “ramifications of the moment.”<sup>28</sup> Verticality is represented here as the film seems more concerned with the essence of the movement and what it might mean as opposed to what is literally occurring.

Another technique Deren utilizes in her films that relates to dance film is stylization or gesture-dance. In the film *Rituals in Transfigured Time*,<sup>29</sup> Deren uses gesture that is not quite dance, but not typical gesture either. It is gesture that is performed with grace and stylized movement. Brannigan states that when discussing her film *Rituals in Transfigured Time*, Deren used language such as calling the film a ‘dance’ and used the word ‘choreography’ when talking about the overall culmination of the film.<sup>30</sup> These dance themes are present in the film, despite it not being a dance film and not utilizing actual dancers. It is evident in the way the actors in the film move that they are not acting in such a way as to represent the literal ways we move in day to day life. For example, in a scene with a room full of people who are seemingly at a party, the movements of each of the people in the room is reminiscent of the gestures of saying hello, getting someone’s attention, and moving through a crowded room. However, each of these

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<sup>28</sup> Brannigan, Erin, “Maya Deren, Dance, and Gestural Encounters in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*,” *Senses of Cinema*, October 2002, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/filmmaker-profiles/deren/s>

<sup>29</sup> Deren, Maya, “Maya Deren - ritual in transfigured time,” posted July 20, 2011, accessed January 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IG5K65gkTU>

<sup>30</sup> Brannigan, “Maya Deren.”

gestures is done with a specific intention that is more stylized and dancier than these gestures would normally be done in real life. Brannigan feels that gestural movements that are familiar and relate a corporeal attitude allow the body to be inherently expressive.<sup>31</sup> Deren furthers this expressiveness with the use of stylization of the gestures. In this film, Deren is representing the ritual of greetings that we commonly use and turns them into stylized movements reminiscent of dance.

Another dance film strategy that Brannigan discusses is the close-up shot and micro-choreographies. Brannigan states that, “. . . the close-up in dance film creates a specific choreographic order by extending and redefining the parameters and nature of screen performance and thereby extending the parameters of dance.” She elaborates, saying that this is made possible through ‘*decentralized micro-choreographies*,’ — a type of dance film where various body parts are given the opportunity to be more expressive and create meaning even when isolated from the rest of the body through the use of the close-up shot.<sup>32</sup> According to Brannigan, “. . .the close-up in dance film restores the body’s expressive capabilities.”<sup>33</sup> By focusing on isolated body parts, Deren was hoping to “unravel the privileging of the face and spoken word in narrative-based cinema.”<sup>34</sup>

The film of Deren’s where this technique is noticeable is *Meditation on Violence*<sup>35</sup>. The movements in this film are performed by Chao Li Chi and are based on the traditional training movements of the Wu-Tang and Shao-Lin schools of Chinese boxing. The majority of the film rarely shows Li Chi’s body in its entirety. We see him from the waist up more often than not and

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<sup>31</sup> Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, 64.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>34</sup> Brannigan, “Maya Deren.”

<sup>35</sup> Deren. Maya, “Meditation on Violence,” posted June 20, 2010, accessed January 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VNuBNsZNRI>

there are sections where his body enters and exits the frame. In the beginning of the film, the focus is on his arms and hands; they come in and out of the frame as he performs various movements. Li Chi also moves closer and further away from the camera which enhances the focus on specific body parts such as his hands and face. All of these techniques allow for his body to be inherently expressive in ways that capture the basis of the film, which is a meditation on violence. These movements that are originally intended for training in violence become graceful and artistic as they are abstracted with the use of the close-up shot. The micro-choreographic movement created with the close up shot in this film disrupts the tension between violence and beauty. Violence and beauty meld together and exist simultaneously in the context of this film with the use of the close-up shot and micro-choreographies.

It is these strategies — verticality, stylization or gesture-dance, and micro-choreographies through the use of the close-up shot — that, according to Brannigan, “illustrate her (Deren’s) significance regarding the development of dancefilm.”<sup>36</sup>

Greenfield points out some ways in which Harris was inspired by Deren. In the very first scene in the forest in *A Study in Choreography for the Camera*, Deren uses a panning shot. Harris developed this further by using a circling shot in the first variation in his film, *Nine Variations on a Dance Theme*.<sup>37</sup> In *A Study*, the opening shot gives a sense of circling which is really a panning shot that is cut together to seem as though it is circling. We see the trees in a forest and Beatty standing among them. The camera rotates past him to show more of the forest, but we find Beatty again amongst the trees in a different position. This allows the audience to be introduced to the setting in which the dancer is immersed. In *Nine Variations*, the circling camera also introduces the audience to the setting. The dancer, Bettie de Jong, is the main focus, but we are able to see the floor and walls of the studio around her and feel

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<sup>36</sup> Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, 101.

<sup>37</sup> Harris, Hilary, “Nine variations on a dance theme, de Hilary Harris (1966/67),” posted August 3, 2010, accessed January 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03Qa3KMxXWc>

immersed in it due to the circling nature of the camera which situates the audience in the center of the room along with de Jong.

The next element Harris utilizes of Deren's is overlapping cuts. When Beatty is in the indoor location in *A Study* doing a contraction, Deren utilizes three overlapping shots of this movement. This technique was incorporated by Harris in the fifth variation of *Nine Variations* when Harris interrupts flowing camera work and dance movement with overlapping cuts as the dancer, de Jong, contracts her torso. These overlapping shots create a sense of percussive rhythm in both films as the repetition of the contracting movement in both films enhances the moment and brings it more vitality. The other result of this percussive editing is that the body of each dancer is manipulated by way of various depth perspectives. Beatty's contraction is shown in three separate shots all from the same angle, but from three different distances — a close up shot, a medium shot, and a long shot. This quick overlap of various focuses on Beatty's body creates a sense of distortion around the body that lends to the verticality of the film. Seeing the same body doing the same movement quickly in three different ways gives an unnaturalness to the movement.

The quick cuts of de Jong in *Nine Variations* produce a similar affect. de Jong is on the floor beginning a contraction, when, suddenly, there are multiple cuts of her repeating this movement at a faster speed. Her movement becomes unnatural in the way the overlapping cuts seem to convulse her body forward and backward. In both of these films, one moment is being captured and amplified in order to create tension and a sense of unease around the movement. These quick cuts also serve to build up the tension slightly for the audience and then transfer the audience into the next movement where a release happens — Beatty opens his arms up and moves gracefully throughout the room in a circling fashion and de Jong slowly rises to her knees as the camera softly focuses upon her face. The percussive quality of the cuts in both

films builds tension around one specific movement and then transitions into softer movement with a sense of ease to allow for a release of tension.

Malick, Hitchcock, and Anderson — Dance Film Techniques

I have already pointed out that dance film and cinema align and would like now to address the ways in which Malick, Hitchcock and Anderson employ techniques that are innate to dance film. Malick utilizes the same strategy as Deren of verticality. Hitchcock focuses on the close up shot and micro choreographies. Anderson employs the use of gestural cinema.

Malick's films follow a vertical structure that is non-narrative. In his analysis of Malick's film *To The Wonder*,<sup>38</sup> Nick Schager states that, "he abandons any pretense toward storytelling — for example, the film is so indifferent to creating flesh-and-blood characters that it keeps Ben Affleck's nominal protagonist virtually mute for its entire 112-minute runtime — that it's as if he's refined his cinema to merely its purest aesthetic/symbolic basics."<sup>39</sup> In this way, Terrence Malick is already aligned with dance film. His use of verticality with little to no dialogue creates a film that focuses on ideas and images not directly aligned with the narrative. According to Brannigan, Deren believes that verticality cannot be sustained for great amounts of time, which is why her films are shorter in length. She also concludes that this is why this strategy is only used in longer films as short dream sequences or in opening sequences of films. She believes that verticality can only inform feature length films.<sup>40</sup> This is where Malick differs from Deren, as some of his feature length films follow this vertical structure in their entirety.

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<sup>38</sup> *To The Wonder*, directed and written by Terrence Malick, featuring Ben Affleck and Olga Kurylenko (Brothers K Productions and Redbud Pictures, 2012), DVD (2013).

<sup>39</sup> Schager, Nick, "Hands Brushing Against Wheat, or the Many Mimics of Terrence Malick," *Vulture*, April 24, 2013 10:30 a.m, accessed September 9, 2015, <http://www.vulture.com/2013/04/imitation-of-style-the-terrence-malick-effect-to-the-wonder.html#>

<sup>40</sup> Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, 101-110.

The trailer for Malick's film *The Tree of Life*<sup>41</sup> is actually a microcosm of the entire film. Trailers generally piece together key moments of a film in order to express the feeling tone of the film. However, the trailer for *The Tree of Life*<sup>42</sup> does not give a real sense of what the story is about. This ambiguity in the trailer is a perfect representation of the entire film since *The Tree of Life* does not follow a linear narrative.

The trailer begins with voiceovers from various characters set atop classical music and accompanied by a variety of images: shots of nature, a baby growing up, a family in an American suburb in the 1950's. Then, one of the sons in the family says in a voiceover, "Mother, Father, always you wrestle inside of me," at which point the son is replaced by the adult version of this character. We are then shown more images of nature, more of the childhood home and family, as well as abstract images that do not make sense within the context of what has already been shown in the trailer. For example, we see images of outer space, the childhood home underwater with the young son swimming out of it, a group of people walking through a vast desert landscape. The quality is dreamlike and ethereal. The feeling of this trailer is that of a philosophical movie that is left to be interpreted as opposed to a linear story with an understood trajectory; or in other words, a vertical film.

Hitchcock utilizes the idea of decentralized micro-choreographies through the use of close-up in his films in a similar way to Deren. Jeffrey Michael Bays, who holds a Master of Arts in Cinema, notes the shower scene in Hitchcock's movie *Psycho*<sup>43</sup> as utilizing close-up shots as well as montage to portray meaning without showing everything that is going on. The shower scene, ". . .uses montage to hide the violence. You never see the knife hitting Janet Leigh. The

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<sup>41</sup> *The Tree of Life*, directed and written by Terrence Malick, featuring Brad Pitt, Jessica Chastain, and Sean Penn (Cottonwood Pictures, 2011), DVD (2011).

<sup>42</sup> Malick, Terrence, "The Tree Of Life - Trailer," posted January 13, 2012, accessed September 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvQZfLavWfU>

<sup>43</sup> *Psycho*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, featuring Janet Leigh and Anthony Perkins (Shamley Productions, 1960), DVD (2012).



impression of violence is done with quick editing and the killing takes place inside the viewer's head rather than the screen." In order to emulate Hitchcock's techniques, Bays says to, ". . . carefully choose a close-up of a hand, an arm, a face, a gun falling to the floor — tie them all together to tell a story."<sup>44</sup> The use of body parts and various objects shown in a close-up montage allows them to each portray meaning in their own way and allows the audience to then piece everything together. Or as Brannigan would note, the close-up is a way of, ". . . drawing meaning out of the performer's body. The close-up is significant in granting access to these bodies."<sup>45</sup> In this way, film can convey meaning through the body and give the idea of events happening without actually showing it happening in full.

The shower scene in Hitchcock's film *Psycho* illustrates Brannigan's idea of micro-choreographies through the use of the close-up shot. In this scene, the character Marion Crane, portrayed by Janet Leigh, is stabbed to death by an unidentifiable figure while taking a shower at a motel. What is unique about this death scene is that Hitchcock managed to convey everything about the death without showing it in a long or even medium shot where all of the actions are caught on camera for the audience to see. Instead, he chose to quickly piece the individual actions of the murder together with close-up shots. For example, you see the killer pull open the shower curtain and raise a knife. You hear Leigh scream and the camera cuts to a close-up of her face, then a close-up of just her mouth. It then cuts back and forth between Leigh's face, the killer holding up the knife, the knife slicing through the air towards Leigh, various parts of Leigh's body, and blood mixed in with the water going down the drain. The individual body parts involved in the murder are expressing what is happening, not the entire

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<sup>44</sup> Bays, Jeffrey Michael, "How to turn your boring movie into a Hitchcock thriller..." Borgus, Written: June 2004 Updated: July 2004, January 2006, December 2007, Accessed September 2015. <http://borgus.com/hitch/hitch2011.htm>

<sup>45</sup> Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, 42.

body. Having body parts be responsible for invoking meaning creates a sense of visceral intimacy.

Anderson's style of film relates to the type of dance film that Brannigan calls "gestural cinema,"<sup>46</sup> which suggests themes and narrative with the entire body utilizing gestures, which are inherently expressive. By using recognizable, familiar, and everyday movements, meaning can be conveyed.<sup>47</sup> James McDowell argues in his essay "The Andersonian, the Quirky, and 'Innocence,'" that Anderson's films, ". . . encourage an appreciation of what we might consider a childlike aesthetic,"<sup>48</sup> as well as ". . . a sincere endorsement of the childlike and the innocent."<sup>49</sup> I suggest that Wes Anderson uses gesture in his films in order to convey these thematic elements of childhood innocence.

In the opening credits of his film *The Royal Tenenbaums*,<sup>50</sup> Anderson introduces the characters of the film one by one as they seem to be getting ready for the day. The characters are shot from the waist up and they are each doing familiar gestures with their arms and hands. Ben Stiller, portraying the character Chas Tenenbaum, is shaving his face alongside his two sons. Angelica Huston, as Etheline Tenenbaum, is putting on her makeup and fixing her hair. Bill Murray, as Raleigh St. Clair, is brushing his teeth. The characters are facing the camera directly as if looking at their own reflection. As the audience, we are getting a glimpse into these characters' private moments while they get ready. There is a sense of vulnerability portrayed in this shot sequence as we are witnessing the gestures the actors are performing with a direct

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>48</sup> MacDowell, James, "The Andersonian, the Quirky, and 'Innocence,'" In *The Films of Wes Anderson*, edited by Peter C. Kunzel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 159.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>50</sup> *The Royal Tenenbaums*, written and directed by Wes Anderson, featuring Angelica Huston, Gene Hackman, Ben Stiller, Owen Wilson, Luke Wilson, Gwyneth Paltrow, Danny Glover, Bill Murray (Touchstone Pictures and American Empirical Pictures, 2001), DVD (2002).

view. It conveys a sense of childhood innocence in the fact that the gestures that these actors are performing are familiar to all humans and we are seeing them in a way that feels a bit like an invasion of each character's privacy. It unites the audience with the characters through this vulnerability and sense of oneness in our fundamental actions as human beings, bringing us to our innocent nature. James Macdowell shares this view in saying that the audiences are able to be brought into the various worlds Anderson creates in his films by, ". . . addressing his audience with a simultaneously self-conscious and innocent tone. . ."51

### Malick, Hitchcock, and Anderson — Signature Style

Brannigan suggests different strategies for creating dance films and Malick, Hitchcock, and Anderson each incorporate at least one if not more of these strategies in their films. This is why I feel that studying their signature stylistic elements is helpful in facilitating the creation of dance films. I have already pointed out reasons for why each of the three directors align with Brannigan's dance film techniques and would like now to introduce the other stylistic elements that I find aesthetically pleasing about each of these directors.

The signature style elements of Malick's that are most interesting to me include his shots of nature, a constantly moving camera, and natural lighting. Malick often uses images of nature to draw parallels to his characters or add additional meaning to their experiences. In describing how nature plays a vital role in the film *The Thin Red Line*,<sup>52</sup> Francesco Baldo points out the way Malick utilizes nature to represent how insignificant the characters are when compared to nature. He states, "The images of nature serve to dwarf and render insignificant – relative to the macrocosm of nature – individual human lives, intentions, actions and deaths."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> MacDowell, "The Andersonian," 165.

<sup>52</sup> *The Thin Red Line*, directed and written by Terrence Malick, featuring Jim Caviezel, Sean Penn, and Nick Nolte (Fox 2000 Pictures, 1998), DVD (2001).

<sup>53</sup> Baldo, Francesco, "Each like a coal drawn from the fire': Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," July, 2012, accessed September, 2015, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/feature-articles/each-like-a-coal-drawn-from-the-fire-terrence-malicks-the-thin-red-line/>

In the film *The Thin Red Line*, Malick renders the character Private Witt, played by Jim Caveizel, insignificant compared to nature through the death of this character. Witt is running through the jungles of Guadalcanal in the South Pacific away from Japanese soldiers. He finds himself surrounded and is shot to death. In this scene, Witt's literal death is cut short. After standing still with the camera focused on his wide eyed, stricken gaze, Witt raises his gun only to be shot instantaneously. As viewers, all we see is the moment he is shot, but nothing more. No fall to the ground, no collapsing and gasping for breath, no fight for his life. Instead, right after seeing Witt being shot, Malick cuts to a shot of mist and light filtering through the jungle trees, followed by an underwater shot of young boys swimming in the ocean. The boys swim past the camera to reveal Witt in the water with them, swimming pleasurably, smiling. And then a tall tree is shown from its base; the shot looking up the tree's sturdy and strong trunk to its branches high above. Witt has just been killed, but instead of dwelling on the tragic state of this occurrence, Malick instead minimizes his death by comparing it to the aliveness of nature and it's majestic, healing properties. Nature is everlasting, our lives are not.

Another signature technique of Malick's is the constantly moving camera. Bilge Eberi references an interview with Malick's cinematographer, Emmanuelle Lubezki, in which Lubezki describes the way Malick wanted him to shoot the films. In the interview, Lubezki describes the process of filming as being more similar to a dance as opposed to traditional filming, since Malick asked that the camera be constantly moving. He wanted the camera to be interacting with the actors and in the middle of the action.<sup>54</sup>

In a scene in Malick's film *To The Wonder*,<sup>55</sup> the main character Marina, played by Olga Kurylenko, is shown walking through the open plains of Oklahoma. She is smiling and laughing

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<sup>54</sup> Eberi, Bilge, "Radiant Zigzag Becoming: How Terrence Malick and His Team Constructed *To the Wonder*," April 18, 2013 11:30 a.m., accessed September 9, 2015, <http://www.vulture.com/2013/04/how-terrence-malick-wrote-filmed-edited-to-the-wonder.html>

<sup>55</sup> *To The Wonder*.

at her lover Neil, played by Ben Affleck, who is walking slowly behind her. The camera rushes over the grass and up towards the horizon as Marina walks into the frame. The camera continues to move forward as if it is another character walking alongside her. The camera movement allows to audience to feel caught up in the moment with the characters, as if we are experiencing this loving walk through the open fields with them. The camera moves back and forth between Neil and Marina in sweeping motions and at times has to get out of their way as they move past the camera. Even if the two characters are still, the camera is in motion moving past them or oscillating as a person standing next to them might.

The final Malick technique I am intrigued by is the use of natural light. In his interview, Lubezki extrapolates on how Malick uses natural or available light sources. They would film primarily at the 'magic hour' when the sun is either rising or setting, or let natural light come in from windows when shooting indoors.<sup>56</sup> In the same scene as described above from *To The Wonder*, Marina is walking while smiling and laughing at her lover Neil in the plains of Oklahoma. She is shot up against the sky at sunset, with the sunlight illuminating her from behind. The sky is pink, purple, and blue as the sun is dropping lower in the sky. There is a sense of peace and love between these characters as represented by the beauty surrounding them in nature and the soft light dancing on their bodies.

An example of Malick using a found source of light as opposed to studio lighting is found in a scene in *To The Wonder* where Marina and Neil are playing with Marina's young daughter. They are jumping on a bed and have taken the shades off of the bedroom lamps. Neil is holding one of the lamps and directing the light at Marina and her daughter. They jump and roll on the bed, teasing each other while wearing the lamp shades on their heads. The light from the lamps is used in the rest of the scene as there are close ups of the actors faces in which the lamp is not seen by the audience, but it is clear that it is this light which is illuminating them.

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<sup>56</sup> Ebiri, "Radiant Zigzag."

The Hitchcock techniques I am interested in are the following: voyeurism, his representation of female characters, and the close-up shot. Voyeurism is defined as, “The practice of obtaining sexual gratification by looking at sexual objects or acts, especially secretly.”<sup>57</sup> The way Hitchcock utilizes this in his films, however, is more subtle and not always sexually based. He frames the shots in such a way that it shows what the characters are looking at. The characters are often seen spying on others in the same way that a voyeur would spy. Mark Duguid notes that, “Hitchcock understood, in a way that few other filmmakers have, that the attraction of cinema is the way it allows us to look without being seen, to satisfy our curiosity about other people's lives. His films frequently concern the act of looking, often in a way that is obsessive or unhealthy. . .”<sup>58</sup>

An example of the camera showing the gaze of the characters in the film comes from Hitchcock's film *Rear Window*<sup>59</sup> starring Grace Kelly and James Stewart. Stewart's character, J.B. Jeffries, is a photographer who is in a wheelchair after breaking his leg. To pass the time, he spies on his neighbors through his camera lens. Kelly portrays Lisa Fremont, a woman who is in love with Jeffries and visits him often in his apartment. In this particular scene, the camera follows both Stewart and Kelly's gaze as events take place in the courtyard of the apartment complex he lives in. It begins with Kelly and Stewart in the apartment when suddenly a bloodcurdling scream is heard from outside. They rush to the window and the camera follows them, zooming in on the window to see what is outside. It cuts to a woman on her balcony who is crying. Her husband rushes out to join her as she points to the ground below. The camera cuts back to Kelly and Stewart, but this time from outside the window looking in on them. Their

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<sup>57</sup> <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/voyeurism>

<sup>58</sup> Duguid, Mark, “Hitchcock's Style,” accessed October 5, 2015, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tours/hitch/tour7.html>

<sup>59</sup> *Rear Window*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, featuring Grace Kelly and James Stewart (Paramount Pictures, 1954), DVD (2012).

eyes go from looking out and forward at the crying woman to simultaneously turning their gaze downward to see what the woman is pointing at. There is a quick cut to the courtyard below where a dog is lying on the ground. From here, there is a succession of quick cuts showing various neighbors coming onto their patios, turning on lights, or looking out their window to see what is going on. Finally, one woman approaches the dog and announces to the entire complex of curious neighbors, "It's dead. It's been strangled, the neck is broken." In this scene, the camera acts as Kelly and Stewart's eyes, showing what it is they are taking in as they look around at their neighbors in the courtyard. This gives the audience the sense of being in the movie as an onlooker right alongside Kelly and Stewart, participating in their anxious watching.

Many of the female characters in Hitchcock's films are elegant while also suggesting underlying eroticism. Jean-Pierre Dufreigne states that Hitchcock, ". . . preferred his women to be altogether unforgettable and irresistible. . . Because he could not undress them, he arranged their hair and decked them out splendidly, in other words, with discreet elegance."<sup>60</sup> I prefer when female sexuality is not overtly expressed in a film, but rather hinted at. Hitchcock does this very well with the female characters in his films and is a technique of his I find appealing. The women do not need to reveal their bodies in order to convey a sensuous undertone.

Kelly's character in *Rear Window* exemplifies an elegant woman that elicits a feeling of desire. The first scene where Kelly's character Lisa Fremont is introduced shows Stewart, as J.B. Jeffries, awaking to Kelly's presence in his apartment. A medium shot shows Stewart sleeping in a recliner in his living room. As the camera slowly zooms in closer, a shadow is seen inching up over his face. It then cuts to Kelly's face looking directly at the camera and moving towards it — explaining the shadow over Stewart's face. It cuts to Stewart as he awakens with initial confusion turning to recognition as Kelly's shadow creeps further up his face. There is then an extreme close up shot of Kelly's face with directness in her eyes as her lips softly part. It

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<sup>60</sup> Dufreigne, Jean-Pierre, *Hitchcock Style*, ed. Martine Assouline (New York: Assouline Publishing, 2004), 68.

then cuts to a close up profile shot of Kelly kissing Stewart slowly and deliberately, rousing him from his slumber. They remain nose to nose after the kiss and she asks him questions about how he is feeling in a low, breathy voice. Throughout the rest of the film Kelly is portrayed as a high society woman always dressed in elegant attire. However, this initial introduction to Kelly's character is of a sexual nature. Hitchcock chose to first highlight her character's ability to elicit lust and desire and it was done only through showing her face.

The signature style elements I admire in Anderson's films include: wide angle shots, his use of music, and themes of childlike innocence. Mark Browning points out that Anderson utilizes, ". . . longer-than-average takes, often with little or no camera movement, achieved with frequent use of a rostrum camera and wide-angle anamorphic lenses that capture a greater amount of on-screen detail."<sup>61</sup> Anderson uses wide angle shots to create establishing shots for his films and introduce the audience to the world in which the film will take place. In *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*,<sup>62</sup> Bill Murray's character, Steve Zissou, gives a tour of his boat which is shown as a life-size, half cut, hull model. It starts with a wide angle shot of the model while Murray describes all of the rooms and amenities on the ship as various characters go about their business in each location. The camera pans evenly up and down, sideways, and diagonally from room to room as Murray elaborates on them. The audience is introduced to the various locations of the ship as well as some of the characters in this clever way.

Diegetic sound is where the source of a sound is seen on screen and it is understood that the characters in the film can hear the sound. Examples of this are music that plays from a radio that the characters are listening to or an instrument in the film is played by one of the characters. Wes Anderson utilizes diegetic sound where his characters turn on and off music

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<sup>61</sup> Browning, Mark, *Wes Anderson: Why His Movies Matter*, Ed. Vincent Libretto (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 131.

<sup>62</sup> *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, directed and written by Wes Anderson, featuring Bill Murray, Owen Wilson, and Angelica Huston (Touchstone Pictures, 2004), DVD (2004).



that they are listening to. Lara Hrycaj states that Anderson often uses music in his films as, “. . . songs associated with montage, songs associated with slow motion sequences, and songs that emanate from musical devices.”<sup>63</sup> What is interesting about the way he uses music, though, is that the diegetic music may start or end as non-diegetic music. A song may play at the end of one scene as thematic music, but then, as we transition to another scene, the new characters we see turn off a turntable and the music that we as the audience thought only we were listening to, is now a part of these characters’ world. Or the opposite may happen. A scene may have characters listening to a particular song, making it diegetic sound, but then the song continues after that scene ends, transitioning it into non-diegetic sound.

An example of Anderson using diegetic sound is in his film *Moonrise Kingdom*.<sup>64</sup> The characters Sam and Susie, played by Jared Gilman and Kara Hayward, are two kids in love who have each run away from home so that they can be together. Having set up camp along a cove near the seashore, they are enjoying their freedom in their underwear with flowers in their hair. A long, symmetrical shot shows Susie kneeling down and starting up a portable mini-turntable on the sand by the water. She quickly runs out of the frame as guitar music begins playing from the turntable. Sam and Susie then enter the frame, walking hand in hand through the shallow water. He spins her up onto the shore where they begin bobbing their heads and swaying to the music. A woman starts singing in French and the two young love birds begin dancing more courageously and vigorously. They join hands again and come together where they have their first kiss. The scene ends with an overhead shot of the turntable spinning as the music continues playing.

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<sup>63</sup> Hrycaj, Lara, “Life on Mars or Life on the Sea: Seu Jorge, David Bowie, and the Musical World in Wes Anderson’s *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*,” in *The Films of Wes Anderson*, Ed. Peter C. Kunze (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 139.

<sup>64</sup> *Moonrise Kingdom*, directed and written by Wes Anderson, featuring Bruce Willis, Edward Norton, Bill Murray, and Frances McDormand (Indian Paintbrush, 2012), DVD (2012).

In studying these individuals and filmmaking techniques such as verticality, the close-up shot/micro-choreographies, and gesture dance, I have learned how dance filmmakers are similar to feature film directors. I also developed a deeper understanding of how signature style in cinema can offer new knowledge to dance filmmakers. In addition, I have ruminated on how applying the methodology of one artist to another might inform one's own signature style and artistic voice.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Process of Creation

#### Motives

Before attending graduate school, I never would have thought of myself as a dance filmmaker. I felt it was too technical and that I did not have the skill set to successfully create a dance film. I was under the impression that the technological aspects would be road blocks to mastery. After taking a course in dance film, however, I realized that the technical skills can be learned and are not as intimidating as I had originally anticipated. I also discovered that my interest in dance film was less about the technical skills and more so about the artistry that came through my own body and movement as I was filming. My training as a dancer and choreographer had actually laid the foundation for becoming a dance filmmaker.

Evann Siebens states, “Dance film is a visual art that involves movement, strength, and physical awareness. What better field for a dancer?”<sup>65</sup> She points out that dance cinematography, when it is fully realized, is like “dancing with a camera.”<sup>66</sup> When I film movement, I feel like I am dancing. There is a preciseness with my movement where I need to be steady on my feet, solid in my arms as I hold the camera, or operate a tripod with the smoothest of motions. My dance training and bodily awareness is what helps me to film movement.

Siebens also describes what she calls “kinesthetic movement,” which is a synergy between the dancer and the filmmaker.<sup>67</sup> Siebens goes so far as to call it a non-intellectual experience.<sup>68</sup> When I film with a hand held camera, I react intuitively to what I am filming and

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<sup>65</sup> Siebens, Evann, “Dancing with the Camera: The Dance Cinematographer,” in *Envisioning Dance on Film and Video*, edited by Judy Mitoma, Elizabeth Zimmer, Dale Ann Stieber (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 223.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

move with the person so as to compliment them with my own motion. It is not a coherent thought as I either circle the dancer, zoom in on their collarbone, or quickly dart from dancer to dancer. It is a feeling that comes from within as I react to their every shift and gesture. Dance training comes into play here as a valuable tool for the dance filmmaker. In studying improvisation, dancers learn to accommodate other bodies in space and react accordingly to their movement. I use this same approach when filming.

I compare myself to Tracie Mitchell in calling herself a choreographer who fell in love with the screen.<sup>69</sup> I have always been drawn to cinema. I am compelled by the stories, the beauty that is represented, the interesting scenes and characters, and the movement. So much can be represented in a film without any words at all. As Mitchell writes, seeing “The image of a body, a face, a thought, a decision, or the detail of a fingertip,” can create, “A totally sensorial experience. . . .”<sup>70</sup> There is much that can be understood in a film just through images and the movement that happens within those images, whether it be a person, an object, or the movement of the camera. Mitchell describes the process of creating a dance film as being an intersection between critical and creative practices. She utilizes her skills as a choreographer and filmmaker “in order to search out, communicate, form, capture and craft ideas.”<sup>71</sup> To be able to capture those moments and have it relay the intended meaning is the thrill of creation.

### Methods

For my dance film, called *Emerge*, I chose to focus on the style of Terrence Malick, which includes the use of natural light, a constantly moving camera, and images of nature. I used his signature style elements as inspiration in creating my film. My reason for choosing

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<sup>69</sup> Mitchell, Tracie, “Where to Now the Romance is Over? Thoughts of a Choreographer Who Fell in Love with the Screen,” (lecture at Screendance: The State of the Art Proceedings, American Dance Festival, Duke University, Durham, NC, July 6-9, 2006), 21, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://www.dvpg.net/screendance2006.pdf>

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 22.

Malick over Hitchcock and Anderson was for many practical reasons, such as logistics of securing dancers and rehearsal space, finding set locations, and having proper equipment. Aside from these logistics, I found that in my preliminary stages of planning, my mind kept gravitating towards the thoughts and visions I had for my Malick inspired film.

When I thought of what my film would be like and how I would go about creating it, my body would feel like moving. I imagined myself behind the camera, moving with the dancer. It seemed that my body was preparing for Malick's method of utilizing constant camera movement when filming. I was also consistently looking at my surroundings when outdoors thinking of which shots of nature would align with my film. Whenever I was captivated by something beautiful in nature, I was compelled to take footage of it. Little did I know I was capturing footage that would actually make its way into my dance film. Malick's techniques were coming naturally to me and very little of it needed to be forced or planned upon. Creating my film utilizing some of Malick's signature style elements seemed intuitive.

When I was ready to begin filming shots of nature, I would bring my camera equipment with me. Every time I did this, however, the outdoor conditions were never quite right. Either the lighting was off or the setting wasn't as glorious as I had hoped for. Alternatively, when I was without my camera equipment, I would be captivated by the most beautiful scenes in nature. I decided to shoot this film with my phone since it was what was available to me when I was presented with the images that I wanted to be included in my film.

### Filming

I found moving with nature to be slightly harder than I thought in comparison to moving with another body while filming. I tried to film tall grass blowing in the wind, but could not predict the ways in which the wind would blow. I found myself jerking my body to accommodate the directional changes in the motion, which did not allow for the smooth movement I envisioned for the film. There was a learning curve to filming things in nature that were already moving. I

realized that though I am drawn to the beauty of nature, I haven't studied its tendencies as thoroughly as I have studied movement of the body. I can adapt and react to a moving body in an improvisatory way due to my years of training as a dancer. I am in no way an expert on the movement that is inherent in nature.

Filming the dancer in my film, *Martha White*, came much more easily to me. As I discussed above, I react intuitively when filming dance due to my own experience as a dancer. What was also extremely beneficial to me in creating this film was that Martha and I have previously danced together. I can anticipate her movements because I understand her style of movement. I also understand which movements look good on her as a dancer, as I have choreographed a solo for her. When asking her to improvise, I was able to respond in the moment to her movement choices. And when giving her specific directions, I was able to keep her movement style in mind.

It was while filming Martha that I realized how difficult it would have been to have a cinematographer do the filming for me. There are dance filmmakers who are the directors of their films, but do not actually film the work. My worry in having someone else film my work is that a cinematographer who is a non-dancer may not be able to capture movement in the way I would envision it. It makes me curious about the communication that has to happen between a director and a cinematographer. I am unsure as to how I would communicate to a cinematographer the way I want them to capture movement.

A lot of the reason for my apprehension is that I am not sure how things will unfold with a dance film until they are happening. So much of my filming is done by reacting intuitively in the moment. I like the freedom to be able to change gears or run with a different idea at a moment's notice based on what is currently happening. For example, while filming Martha, I realized that she was doing something interesting with her leg and I wanted to film it in a certain way with light streaming in behind it. I wanted to parallel the movement of her leg with a vertical motion of

my camera. This was not planned at all and I figured out in the moment how to do it. If I had a cinematographer filming for me, I don't know how I would have been able to explain this idea to them. I also do not know that I would have witnessed that moment in the same way and had the idea to do it if I was not behind the camera. If I was directing, I would not see certain things that the cinematographer might see in the moment.

### Editing

Karen Pearlman relates editing to rhythm and movement saying, "If we actively see and hear and feel the world's rhythms, what we are actually seeing, hearing, and feeling is *movement*. Editors need actively to perceive and shape the flow of time and energy through movement to shape a film's rhythm."<sup>72</sup> In the past when asked about how I come up with my choreography, my answer has always been that the music shows me what to do. When I listen to music, I see visions in my mind's eye of movement. As the rhythm ebbs and flows, the movement in my mind responds accordingly. With each successive listen, the images become more and more clear and the ideas become set. I am then able to take what I have envisioned while listening to the music and set it on dancers. This is the same process that happens when I edit a dance film — it is the rhythm and timing of the music that determines a lot of the editing. I feel and perceive movement from the rhythm of the music.

Pearlman mentions an interview with film editors in which many of the film editors mention their background and training in music. She believes that through this background in music, "their awareness of rhythms in the movement of sound has been specifically and consciously activated. . . Music is an intentionally formed instance of rhythm, but knowledge of music has developed these editors' capacity to perceive any rhythm."<sup>73</sup> I have a background in music and feel it has greatly informed my dance film editing. In my youth I took music lessons in

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<sup>72</sup> Pearlman, *Cutting Rhythms*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

the Kodály Method that was developed in Hungary. It is an approach to music education that focuses on rhythm and movement. Movement is done in timing with music in order to help children internalize rhythm. I believe this is something that has helped me greatly as a choreographer and film editor. I also think it is why I feel as though the music tells me what to do. I feel the rhythm of the music and react accordingly to it when I create movement.

While filming, I did not have or utilize any music. I had music in mind, but hadn't settled on anything yet. When I began editing with the song I ended up choosing, I must have listened to the music ten times before I actually began compiling the footage. I listened and thought about all of the different shots I had of nature and of my dancer. The music brought to mind the images I had and showed me how they all fit together in time with the song. There were musical transitions that established for me specific cuts from one shot to another.

Pearlman believes that the movements 'sounding' in an editor's head or body is a kind of synesthesia, or a sense from one body part relating to another part of the body. She says, "During the cutting process, movement trajectories shaped by cuts can 'sound' in the editors head."<sup>74</sup> This synesthesia is what is happening for me, but in the opposite way. Instead of the movement and cuts I edit together sounding in my head, the sound is what establishes which cuts I make. What I am hearing translates into movement that I see in my mind's eye.

Pearlman states, "Making an edit feel right is the editor's contribution to a film, her special skill, her signature, but it is not just a gift or talent. Knowing when something feels right is an awareness of the rhythms of the world and the rhythms of the body — an awareness that can be trained and developed."<sup>75</sup> I create from my intuition, however, I have come to realize that my intuition is informed by my past experiences and training. For example, my training as a dancer and in music inform how I edit. The way I go about editing comes from my intuition, but I

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 247.



also recognize that I am able to act upon my intuitive hunches because of my background and training.

### Final Product

I applied the techniques of Terrence Malick for my dance film and these techniques can be seen in the shots of nature, the constantly moving camera, and the use of natural light. In the first half of the film, which was shot indoors, the only light used was natural light from windows. This light created a dim and subdued environment, which was exactly the aesthetic quality I was hoping to create for the first scenes. The second half of the film, which was shot outside, utilized sunlight at the 'magic hour' of the sun setting. A silhouette effect was created from placing the dancer in front of the sunset. This light also softly colored the dancer's skin with warm tones, which contrasted the more dull and sullen light that thematically characterized the first half of the film. I chose to use these contrasting natural light sources in the first and second half of the film in order to create a thematic dichotomy between the two sections.

The outdoor scene of the film heavily relied upon Malick's stylistic element of a constantly moving camera. Every shot was done with a moving camera in which I moved around the dancer while filming. This was with the intention of creating a more dance-like film, without it being a choreographed dance piece. The camera movement also enhanced the dancer's movement by making it feel more expansive, allowing the audience to experience kinesthetic empathy. I was not so much interested in having the audience view the movement like they would a dance, but rather wanted the audience to feel the movement that represented the emotional themes at this point in the film. For the indoor section of the film, the feeling tone I wanted to create was more somber to begin. I therefore used slower camera movement as well as a few still shots. I also created movement in the editing with quick cuts so as to convey a jarring effect that matched the tone of the first half of the film.

The shots of nature in the film turned out to be less varied than I had originally intended. I had shot footage of grass blowing in the wind, dried cracks in the earth, and leaves shimmering on trees, but ended up only using footage of ocean waves and water ripples. The film turned out to have a focus on water, which was not my initial intention. I was very pleased with this, however, as this theme of water as a cleansing and healing element tied everything together to convey the meaning of the film.

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusion

As I conclude this study, I notice that my enthusiasm for film has increased. I now have a more precise eye when watching film as I notice how movement is incorporated in new ways. I pay attention to not only the movement of the performers, but the movement of the camera and of nature. I have a newfound appreciation for the forethought and methodology that goes into creating a film as well as developing a signature style. I have also come to understand things about myself as an artist through studying these various filmmakers and their signature styles.

The three specific methods I used to show the overlap between dance filmmakers and feature filmmakers were verticality, the close-up shot, and stylized gesture. Maya Deren uses these various techniques and each of the three directors I studied align with each of these methods. The overarching alignment that exists to encompass these specific techniques is that dance filmmakers and cinema filmmakers are aligned in the ways in which they utilize movement to convey meaning. Whether it is a dancer in the film or an actor, movement is a universal language used to convey meaning. Movement of the camera as well as movement that is conveyed through the editing of images is also used to enhance the ideas and meaning that filmmakers wish to convey.

Throughout this investigation of dance film and cinematic filmmakers, I discovered that studying the stylistic elements and techniques of filmmakers can be extremely beneficial to dance filmmakers. It can open a dance filmmaker's eyes to new ways of filming, creating meaning for audiences to interpret, shooting from various points of view, and utilizing movement of the camera to convey meaning. It can be helpful to study the ways in which other artists create their work.

In understanding the signature styles of cinema directors, dance filmmakers can learn to define their own signature style. They can analyze themselves to see what recurring themes

exist in their artwork, or pick and choose which stylistic elements they feel best represent themselves as an artist. They can focus on mastering these elements to become identifiable in their signature style.

When I set out with this thesis topic and began my research, my sincere wish was that I would be able to discern for myself what my own signature style elements were as a dance filmmaker and choreographer. I've always been able to pick out signature dance movements of other choreographers in their work. There are also signature movements that prominent dance artists are known for. For example, Martha Graham, Jose Limon, Bob Fosse, and other prominent figures in dance can all be characterized by their signature style that is prevalent in their choreography. In a very limited and general sense, Graham is known for contractions, Limon for fall and recovery, and Fosse for his hunched shoulders and open hands. In film, it is the cinematic techniques that identify the filmmaker. I had high hopes that through studying the signature styles of others I would be able to recognize and hone in on my own signature style. I wondered if while focusing on the techniques of others, I might find recurring themes in the ways in which I create. I thought I would be motivated to analyze myself in a similar fashion and discover what common threads are evident in my choreography so that I might understand my own preferences.

What I discovered about myself turned out to be the exact opposite of what I had hoped for. Instead of identifying within myself a consistency of specific movements or themes, I found that I am actually quite eclectic. My background in dance and art in general is diverse. Each of the dances I have choreographed have been extremely unique in terms of movement, theme, and style. I realized that even the fact that I chose such varied film directors to study was evidence of my wide range of preferences. I truly enjoy the work of all three directors equally, just for different reasons. They all represent different facets of my personality: Wes Anderson

shows my humor, Terrence Malick my spirituality, and Alfred Hitchcock my interest in mystery and the macabre.

I think that part of my yearning to discern my own signature style was because of a desire to be known. I find it fascinating to study artists who have one primary style in their artwork that they are masters of. So many of the artists that are the most prominent in the world are those who have carved out a specific place for themselves that is easily identifiable based on their style. Artists who dabble in a variety of genres or styles are oftentimes less known. I thought that in order to be known or admired, it would be beneficial to be identifiable for specific traits or techniques. I realize now that I actually do not want to be easily identifiable. I find it to be too limiting in terms of my artistic expression. I prefer being of an eclectic background where anything and everything has the potential to inspire me in life and in creating art.

By studying film directors who have very distinct signature styles, I was able to expand my understanding of a variety of filmmaking techniques. Instead of using this knowledge to narrow my gaze on myself, I used this opportunity to expand myself. I do not have to pick and choose which specific elements compose my signature style. Instead, I can let my style grow and continue to be diversified from the influence of others. By studying those who have signature styles, I have been able to incorporate new techniques into my repertoire of skills and broaden my artistic ideas.

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