

# DIGITAL PERCEPTION, TIME AND MEMORY: TOWARDS A NEW MODEL OF NARRATION IN DANCE

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Current debates on telepresence and telematic performance most often center on questions of immediacy, presence and virtual representation. Referring to Bergson's concept of time as duration, involving 'recollection memory' directed towards the past, and 'habit memory' oriented towards the future, this paper analyzes an interactive telematic dance performance that interrogates Bergson's theory and its link to the perception of time and space.



*Fig. 1. Inter\_views, 2009, Performance at the H2PTM Festival: Retrospective et perspective 1989-2009, Paris, and the University of Chichester, 2009, Dancers: Nanette Kincaid, Tamar Daly & Chris Jannides, Video image, Copyright Andrea Davidson & Jem Kelly*



*Fig. 2. Inter\_views, 2009, Performance at the H2PTM Festival: Retrospective et perspective 1989-2009, Paris, and the University of Chichester, 2009, Dancers: Nanette Kincaid & Tamar Daly, Video image, Copyright Andrea Davidson & Jem Kelly.*



Fig. 3. *Inter\_views*, 2009, Performance at the H2PTM Festival: *Retrospective et perspective 1989-2009*, Paris, and the University of Chichester, 2009, Dancers: Nanette Kincaid, Tamar Daly & Chris Jannides, Video image, Copyright Andrea Davidson & Jem Kelly.

### The project

The interactive telematic dance project *Inter\_views* (2009), developed at the University of Chichester with Jem Kelly in collaboration with dancers Nanette Kincaid, Tamar Daly and Chris Jannides, connects remotely located spaces via a Skype audio link and a QuickTime Broadcast video link. In its first version, the work was programmed at the *H2PTM Festival: Retrospective et Perspective 1989-2009*, Paris, linking the dancers in performance at the University of Chichester to an audience at the *H2PTM* festival. Spectators in Paris were invited to choose phrases displayed on a computer screen and speak them into a microphone. Conceived in a second-person reflexive mode of address, for example, “You go to the window, you touch your hair, you think about your day,” the phrases were communicated as instructions to the dancers in Chichester who responded by drawing upon semi-improvised choreographic structures to build a ‘real-time’ choreography. Their movement was captured by video and re-transmitted to both locations in the form of large-scale projections that encompassed the proscenium arch and accumulating sequences of the choreography in the background forming a *mise en abyme* of the stage action. Though the audio transmission was instantaneous, a fifteen-second delay in the video transmission, occurring as a result of network fluctuations with the broadcast interface, was to create the possibility of a new narrative ‘space’ through which we sought to challenge the common notion that perception is immediate.

Contrary to mediated performances that use technologies as means to enhance, augment or extend the physical presence and dynamics of the dancing body, mediation here, while involving experimentation that renews the way spectators look at dance in performance, remained relatively discreet by comparison to works that involve multiple or split-screen projections, 3D motion capture, animation, or site-re-

sponsive technologies. Movement elaborated in rehearsal was performed unadulterated, and we neither sought to manipulate the body digitally, nor to produce overtly aesthetic effects. The idea was rather to map out a memory space in which the dancers and interacting 'spectator-instructors' could participate in a collaborative intentionality: one that is structured at the intersection of temporal immediacy and delay. A set of seemingly banal instructions was to give rise to a rich palimpsest of moments of an unfolding choreographic narrative; a form of re-embodied memory that is simultaneously reactive and interpretative.

### The visual device

One of the main criticisms of dance performances employing new technologies is a potential tension, even competition, between the presence of live bodies onstage and their mediated representations, whose nature and scale often monopolize viewers' attention to the detriment of live action. Unlike theatre productions in which screens, monitors and their content have been incorporated as dramaturgical elements, screens in dance, when present, most often serve as décors or mirrors of choreography onstage. Furthermore, in establishing a reference to the cinematic model, they also tend to be read as such. By contrast, the staging of *Inter\_views* entailed a different logic with the conception of stage space as a composite visual device designed to induce a particular visuality or way of viewing dance. *Inter\_views'* device operates along principles deriving from the visual arts and photography though it will be shown how it finds its specificity in proposing a new temporal form.

### The framing and isolation of movement

In *The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze analyzes what he notes as a procedure in Francis Bacon's paintings that consists of isolating a "Figure" by tracing and/or duplicating a ring(s), cube(s) or rail(s) around it that produce "a kind of progression, an exploration of the Figure within the place, or upon itself. It is an operative field." [1] The isolation of the Figure signifies that an act that has taken place; creates a sense of place and "defines a 'fact'": it becomes "an Image, an Icon." [2] Bacon's intention is "to avoid the figurative, illustrative, and narrative character the Figure would necessarily have if it were not isolated." [3] Postulating narration as a correlate of representation, Deleuze concludes, remarking that the isolation of the Figure is "the simplest means, necessary though not sufficient, to break with representation, to disrupt narration, to escape illustration, to liberate the Figure: to stick to the fact." [4]

Precedents for Bacon's visual system can be found in the history of Western painting. In Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), a round mirror is placed in the center of the painting above the joined hands of a couple in the foreground. Along with the receding oblique lines of a wall on the left and a bed on the right, a dynamic spatial triangle is set up that both draws the gaze into the represented space and isolates the figures in the foreground. Similarly, in *Las Meninas* (1656), a play of multiple types of frames, further highlighted by zones of light and darkness, creates a certain abstraction of elements that isolates the action of a portrait session while signifying Velasquez's own presence as painter.

To paraphrase Deleuze, *Inter\_views'* projection device frames and isolates the dancers as "Figures" while emphasizing choreographic "facts" that have taken place and creating 'a sense of place.' Rather than proposing pre-recorded dance sequences or a mirroring of stage action, the device functions as a window or repository of images: frames-within-frames, each isolating different scenes of the choreography as "an exploration of the Figure within the place, or upon itself." Produced by the feedback loop generated when a camera is pointed at its projection space, the effect constitutes a visual mode that lies

somewhere between the figurative and the abstract, thus marking a distance from iconic and representational codes normally associated with video. Drawing the spectator's gaze into a vortex of successive planes that constitute memories of a choreography that continues to unfold, the device offers a new way of constructing narrative and meaning. If this visual mode is easily hypnotic, the spectator's gaze can be refreshed by effectuating the equivalent of 'zooming back' to encompass the stage action where space is of another visual texture and scale.

To compare the effect produced to Marey's chronophotography or to principles of collage/montage that integrate heterogeneous elements to generate "an original totality manifesting ruptures of sorts" [5] would be too simple. As Gregory Ulmer notes of photographic representation with respect to the real, the image "signifies itself and something else – it becomes a signifier remotivated within the system of a new frame." [6] Moreover, if as Benjamin argues, the association of figure and verticality in painting and by extension, performance, distinguishes the representational function of art, [7] the presentation of movement seen receding in both space and time rather accents depth-of-field over verticality, abstraction over pure representation. The device constructs a process, an object, a perspective.

### The framing of perception and deconstruction of Euclidean spatiotemporality

The principle behind *Inter\_views*' visual device bears resemblance to Florence Henri's photographic work *Autoportrait* (1928). The artist captures her own image seen in a mirror as she stares out towards the spectator. Any other trace of her physical presence or action as a photographer is absent. An astute staging of the photographic frame exactly duplicates the elongated form of the mirror while extending the lines of the table before which Henri is seated in the spectator's direction. A powerful bidirectional and dynamic spatial contiguity is established between the spectator and Henri as subject. More crucially, it situates the spectator at precisely the point from which the photograph was taken and thus highlights (the) photography as an act. According to Rosalind Krauss, the device displaces attention from content to the container, "towards what one could call the semiotic or emblematic nature of the frame [...] it is the capture of the photographic subject by framing." [8]

This said, far from producing a purely abstract form or precluding a sense of corporeal substance, the work's play of surface and volume "guarantees its density (*épaisseur*)." [9] The frame "intervenes in the content [...] through morphological consonance – what one could call visual alliteration": it is a device of "repetition and echo." [10] In much the same way, *Inter\_views*' projection space can be described as a "visual alliteration" or device of "repetition and echo" within the larger frame of the stage. More importantly, the device reveals and stages how framing organizes perception or visibility.

Noting how cinema had "transformed" the spectator "into a perceptual apparatus" [11] Annika Blunck suggests that expanded cinema in its turn was to challenge perception through its dismissal of the single unified screen, resulting in spectators having to mentally assemble elements that are spatially and temporally displaced. [12] So too, in *Inter\_views*, meaning is created from what is fragmented. The device makes a break with Euclidean spatiotemporality, producing, as in mediated postdramatic theatre, a deconstruction of the unified stage and the illusion of events occurring in a causal, linear flow. Through introducing multiple layers of content, a classical form of narration and its stability of meaning are disrupted.

## Temporal multiplicity

This deconstruction of performance space is further accentuated by temporal multiplicity, interactivity and telepresence. In cinema, temporal variability is typically organized through editing and postproduction effects that operate a “*trucage*.” [13] In the visual arts, multiplicity primarily concerns spatiality: through compositional strategies such as collage, montage, variation of viewpoint, transparency, focal or other optical effects such as the use of mirrors. It would not be until the advent of time-based art, interactive art and mediated performance that diverse responses to the question of temporality would emerge. However, while destabilizing perception, it is rare that these arts reconstitute diegetic and extradiegetic action, or analogical and reiterative temporalities, within the single screen/frame simultaneously. Digital programs such as *Isadora*, *EyeCon* or *Max/MSP*, allow for temporal delay in real-time but only with specific and predetermined programming of object behavior and it is also worth noting that conceptors rarely address the question of temporality in space with respect to depth of field.

In Bergson’s theory of time, duration figures as its fundamental characteristic, inferring a prolongation of the past into the present and of the present into the future in coexisting temporalities. Poised on a continuum of ‘recollection memory’ – as in contemplation– and ‘habit memory’ – as in motor mechanisms, goals or tasks that actualize or prolong the past – the present and perception of the real are experienced in a contracted state of tension pointed towards the future. Perception however, is “never a mere contact of the mind with the object present; it is impregnated with memory – images which complete it as they interpret it.” [14] As Bergson explains:

Our actual existence [...] duplicates itself all along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image. Every moment of our life presents two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other [...] for the present moment, always going forward, fleeting limit between the immediate past which is now no more and the immediate future which is not yet, would be a mere abstraction were it not the moving mirror which continually reflects perception as a memory. [15]

Though the actual and virtual aspects of time coexist, normally, the human mind neither consciously perceives nor assimilates time’s double nature. When confronted with *Inter\_views*’ visual device, that very precisely articulates time as waves of distinct scenes evolving simultaneously, the dancers were at first perturbed. Executing a choreography within these parameters was not easy for several reasons. The dancers were firstly challenged with having to process and retain information relevant to past, present and future movement phrases while at the same time, remaining aware of their spatial coordinates and the dynamics of relationships evolving amongst themselves. The need for precise spatial positioning had come to the fore in rehearsal as a means of maintaining clarity amongst sequences that were to be viewed in multiple planes of the visual field. Furthermore, the dancers were not always able to verify their exact position in space with respect to what was transpiring in the projection space behind them. Lastly, they also had to take into account the unpredictable nature of changes in instructions coming from the spectators in Paris, requiring that they be able to alter the course of actions underway at any moment. True virtuosity was at play: the visual device demanded increased and multiple sensory perception and real training!

The conjunction of temporal immediacy and delay in *Inter\_views* cannot simply be described as the juxtaposition of live events unfolding in present time with the mediated time of virtual images that are submitted to a time lag. Each image is seen evolving in its entirety and every configuration of the work's choreographic content makes an ongoing reference to the future. This is why, along with the semi-random and interactive nature of the work, surprising encounters between the dancers can occur as if they were communicating with each other over and through time. One example of this can be seen in Fig. 1 where the arm of the male dancer in the foreground frames a scene in which the two female dancers are seen embracing, while at the same time, a face-to-face relationship is set up with one of the women in another frame as if the two were in conversation. Meanwhile, the action underway onstage between the three dancers establishes new relationships that propel the story forward while also determining the course and outcome of events in the other images with their unexpected juxtapositions.

Deleuze's concept of the 'crystal-image' or pure image of time can also elucidate this form of diffracted temporal conjunction. The crystal-image's bi-faced actual and virtual nature contracts and short-circuits time, condensing the past, present and future. Situating depth-of-field as cinema's closest tool for approximating this pure nature of time, Deleuze remarks:

[...] depth of field creates a certain type of direct time-image that can be defined by memory, virtual regions of past, the aspects of each region. This would be less a function of reality than a function of remembering, of temporalization: not exactly a recollection but 'an invitation to recollect...' [16]

It has been noted that depth-of-field in *Inter\_views* constructs a process, an object, a perspective – of space and time – through which the choreography is seen developing in a multi-temporal manner. The actual and the virtual images are viewed within a composite visual field but are understood as an ensemble. Perception of this field is immediate. However, one question remains. The work's (re)construction of time depends on the device's fifteen-second delay for its articulation. If this delay were to be removed, could one still say that perception is immediate? Further, in the light of Bergson's admonitions about the way the human mind perceives movement and reality by substituting "for the continuous the discontinuous, for mobility stability" [17] and contemporary digital culture's parceling of data as discreet, autonomous units, can one still say that perception is immediate? It is these questions that persist and that *Inter\_views* ultimately interrogates.

## References and Notes:

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London, New York: Continuum, 2003), 2.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Gregory Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, 84 (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983).
6. *Ibid.*, 85.
7. Walter Benjamin, "Peinture et graphisme," *La part de l'œil*, no. 6 (1990): 13.
8. Rosalind Krauss, *Le Photographique* (Paris: Macula, 1990), 102.\*
9. *Ibid.*, 103.\*
10. *Ibid.*\*
11. Annika Blunck, "Towards Meaningful Spaces" in *New Screen Media, Cinema/Art/Narrative*, eds. Martin Reiser and Andrea Zapp, 55 (London: British Film Institute, 2002).
12. *Ibid.*, 57.
13. Christian Metz, *Essais sur la signification du cinéma, Volume 2: Trucage et cinéma* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1973).
14. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1988), 133.
15. Henri Bergson, *Mind-Energy*, trans. H. Wildon Carr (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 169.
16. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 109.
17. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt, 1907), 222–223.

\* Excerpts translated by the author.