

## INTERNATIONAL SCREENDANCE FESTIVAL FREIBURG

### AN INTERVIEW WITH THE CO-CURATORS MARISA C. HAYES AND FRANCK BOULÈGUE

Monday, 29th of April 2019

*Bettina Földesi: Screendance as an independent art form is fairly new in Germany. Therefore let us begin with: What is screendance, how would you define it and how does it differ from other forms of art on screen?*

Marisa C. Hayes: The definition of “screendance” varies from place to place and from festival to festival. Our definition of screendance – and it's one that I think is quite common internationally – is “an approach to filmmaking that focuses on the composition of choreography made specifically for the screen”. I mean “film” in a very broad sense of what we call “expanded cinema”. This could be digital or analogue video, a film reel, an installation – any type of moving images. So screendances are moving images in which the choreography has been created in collaboration with audiovisual tools.

This is a rather simple definition, but the questions it raises are more complex when you have moving images that are composed of camera work and editing, as well as moving bodies and/or moving objects. This invites us to consider what dance is, who the choreographer is, and where the choreography is found. Is it found in the camera work? Is it found in the editing? Is it only reserved for what's moving on screen or within the image? There is no one answer because the responses vary considerably from project to project within screendance.

Franck Boulègue: Screendances are works that are situated between choreography and cinematography. Sometimes they are closer to choreography, sometimes to cinematography, but screendance is always about the interaction of these two art forms. The idea is to make choreographic cinematography and cinematographic choreography. Another interesting fact is that there are many words used to describe screendance, i.e. Tanzkino, Tanzfilm, videodance, etc. But the word “screendance” seems the most accurate to me, because it explains that the screen is the place where the dance takes place. This proposes a different way of thinking about dance – it is not just the dance on the image (what is being filmed), it is also the dance *of* the image itself, because the camera is part of the dance and of the choreography. In a sense the screen itself dances.

MCH: A negative definition of screendance could be: screendance is not a fictional film with a dance sequence, like a musical. It's not a documentary about dance, transmitting information about a dancer, a style of dance, or a school of dance. Even though there's a lot of video being used today in stage dance as a tool of transmission serving an archival purpose or as a pedagogical tool for dancers to learn a piece of choreography or to master a certain style. Of course, screendance could be used as an archive of a certain time, or of a certain art movement, but that's not necessarily its chief purpose. Screendance is also not a music video clip. Of course, genres can overlap and blend into one another in interesting ways and so, at times, these categories are dangerous if considered too narrowly. But the idea behind a music video for instance, is that the song is the starting point. That's not the case for screendance, which doesn't even need to contain music.

*BF: As you have already alluded to, screendance is an extremely multi-faceted art form. It brings forth a huge variety of aesthetics – cinematographic aesthetics as well as choreographic aesthetics, always at the meeting point of those two art forms, as you have just explained. There are a lot of different styles and genres that intermingle. How did screendance develop historically? Where lay the beginnings of this specific coming together of dance, choreography and film?*

FB: I think there are two answers. One regarding people who make screendances knowingly and one about people who made films with dance not knowing they were actually making screendance. If we say that cinema began in 1895 with the Lumière Brothers, the first film with dance that came out was in 1896<sup>1</sup>, right at the very beginning of cinema. Already back then it was not just documenting a dance, but it was changing the dance for the image, by coloring it frame by frame – it was a work of art in itself. It already was a kind of screendance, even though its makers at the time were not familiar with the term screendance. It's only retrospectively that we can read it as screendance. This is very much the case until the 1940s. Because it's in the 1940s with Maya Deren that screendance really begins to become theorized and a discipline of its own.

MCH: The origins of cinema at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century follow a time in which a lot of photographic experiments took place that were interested in movement studies and how movement is represented, be it that of a human body or the flight of birds. Here, I'm referencing the work of Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey, two photographic inventors, Marey having created chronophotography. They were thinking about the representation of time and movement via an image questioning how to represent the evolution of movement. These are important precursors to what we know as cinema today. So even though screendance didn't exist yet as the name of an art form or an approach, we have seen a real fascination with the representation of movement that comes into play at that time. I think the entire corpus of silent cinema can be imagined or read as screendance : without dialogues everything was expressed through the body and later, camera and editing movements). For me, silent cinema is a real treasure trove of screendance.

Maya Deren, who Franck mentioned earlier, was not only the first person to dedicate her entire career to choreographing moving images. She was also the first person to coin the term “choreography for camera”. She wrote about the specificity of making movement that has been imagined for the camera as a unique space – a space that does not exist anywhere else outside of the film. She also created the first term that we use to discuss the genre. She used the term “filmdance” by combining the two words together with no space in between to show how interconnected they were.

Another important marker is the arrival of video cassettes. They entered the public market at the very end of the 1960s and started to gain a lot of interest in the early 1970s. During this period Merce Cunningham experimented with what we call “video dance”. This is also the time when video art was theorized and given a name. The accessibility of the equipment is a very interesting turning point – it became a lot more mobile and a lot easier for choreographers to acquire. Until that time, if a choreographer wanted to make a dance film, they would've likely had to collaborate with a trained filmmaker. It was very complicated and expensive in terms of film development. More recently, the arrival of digital video has multiplied the accessibility of small devices, which made screendance proliferate even further.

*BF: I think the context of presentation, representation and discussion – be it a theatre space, the choreography scene, the visual art scene or gallery spaces for instance – informs our notion of the art form of screendance, it informs the way we conceive of it and how we define it. So which were the contexts in which these experiments were presented? For instance: Was Maya Deren's work considered in the choreography world? Which were the places she could show her work – the cinema, theatre spaces and/or galleries?*

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<sup>1</sup> Lumière Brothers: DANSE SERPENTINE by the dancer Loïe Fuller (editor's note)

FB: I think the advantage of screendance is its hybridity, the fact that it is a fusion of multiple art forms. But this is also its main drawback when it comes to promoting it. Because people tend to ask: Is it dance or cinema? My answer would be you can include it in all of these contexts. It is a certain form of dance, a certain form of cinema, a certain form of visual arts.

MCH: The context certainly impacts how screendance is received and it influences the type of works that are being produced. I think we are just beginning to discuss this in screendance scholarship, to look at what happens when screendance is shown in a gallery versus what happens when it is shown at a choreographic center or a theater, for example. In relation to these contexts of production and presentation it is also interesting to take into consideration which specific resources the artists are able to tap into. And this often depends on which artistic discipline the respective artists come from. Interestingly, Maya Deren received some funding from film and arts grants. Merce Cunningham, who was such a giant in the world of contemporary dance, was able to touch much more of a dance public through his work, even though a lot of the video dance work he made was exhibited in museums and galleries. It really varies from project to project. Screendance festivals today tend to mostly present the work in a cinema and I'm asking myself, what kind of experience this creates for the public. And I think it's really interesting that we are starting to see screendance in dance institutions more and more, like here at Theater Freiburg. I think it is really important to think about how screendance affects choreographic culture today. I think it's important not to forget that screendance is a part of choreographic culture, however different and challenging it may be to our notion of stage choreography.

*BF: Speaking of presenting screendance works in theater contexts, let's talk a little about the first INTERNATIONAL SCREENDANCE FESTIVAL FREIBURG. Via an open call Theater Freiburg received almost 200 submissions in three categories: INTERNATIONAL SCREENDANCE, NATIONAL SCREENDANCE and the festival specific category WILIS – NATURE SPIRITS FROM THE BLACK FOREST. With this last category the team of curators, i.e. the two of you together with Adriana Almeida Pees, encouraged artists to produce films specifically for this festival in Freiburg. A huge variety of films in different aesthetics was sent in, which makes it all the more interesting but also hard to select the films for the festival's program. Which criteria did you choose for the selection and which shape did you want to give the festival here in Freiburg?*

MCH: I felt a lot of responsibility curating these sections because I'm very much aware of the fact that this is the first screendance festival here in Freiburg and in the region. And although Theater Freiburg's dance audience has had the possibility to discover screendance through TANZKINO<sup>2</sup> it was important for me to share the diversity and the richness of approaches and type of works that are being made in screendane. Another aspect of screendance that I love today is its international flavour, the fact that it gives you the opportunity to see works from all around the world (including countries and artists that you might not otherwise have access to), because a film can travel so much easier than a live performance. So it was really important to me, and I think to all of us, to create a selection that includes a variety of approaches, as diverse as possible not only in terms of the styles of dance, but in the styles of filmmaking, as well as the approach to sound and music. And to try and represent the international scope of who is making screendance today, presenting films from diverse countries.

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<sup>2</sup>Since the season 2017/2018 TANZKINO has been an integral part of the audience development program called TANZVERMITTLUNG at Theater Freiburg, screening historical dance pieces, dance documentaries as well as screendance short films relating to a large variety of different topics, programmed in cooperation with Marisa C. Hayes and Franck Boulègue.

FB: I think it's always important when you're a curator, to understand that you are not just there to promote the films that you like best, but to also mediate between the artist and the audience, to help understand certain tendencies in the art form, and also to bring the audience little by little to appreciate something different, something perhaps that's a little difficult at first. So of course you don't want to scare people away by putting all the experimental films right at the beginning. There's no one in the room after five minutes. You really want to find the right balance between quality programming, but also something that is going to keep the audience with you. I think this is something that we constantly have in mind. What is the best kind of dialogue we can have with the audience that is respectful both of the artist and of the audience, at the same time.

Another important point for me is, when you have such an international selection, to find a balance and not to only screen films from Europe, but also from areas that usually don't get as much access to our screens. The internet is wonderful for this, because even if you live on the other side of the planet, you only need access to the internet to submit your films. And that is a real improvement to get to know the works being done by artists in countries far away from here. So yes, geography is important, where people live and where the films come from. We also try as much as possible also to make sure that we have a certain balance between dancers and creators who identify as male or female, making sure that all genders are represented. And I think screendance is great from this point of view because there are quite a lot of women who make films being seen, contrary to more commercial forms of cinema. I would like to add that I find it important to support German screendance in this festival, because Germany has some screendance, but it is definitely not the country in Europe that is producing the highest amount of screendance so far. So I think that having this festival here in Freiburg is a good opportunity for German film makers and choreographers to get to know screendance.

MCH: I also believe it is good to have a category of national films, because sometimes we need to implement a specific category to provide visibility. Until we achieve a better form of equality, it is necessary to provide a spotlight, to encourage the work and to get it out there.

*BF: Now all films have been selected, the program is out. What is awaiting us in the three different categories?*

MCH: The amount of diversity that you can find in each selection never ceases to amaze me. There are no two films that are alike, which means that even if there is one film that is not particularly your cup of tea, we move on to something else, and you may find that this is the film that you love or challenges you. There is a great variety of work especially in the international and German categories. What I love about the Wilis category is that we are creating a bridge between the past and the present, between Wilis as figures in the story of the classical ballet Giselle and as figures appearing in the folklore of the black forest with more contemporary ideas. How can we take this archetype of the Wilis, translate it via film material, and change its representation today, relating to it, departing from it, and looking globally at how this might be an archetype that exists around the world. It wasn't just German artists that were sending in films about the Wilis. There were many different manifestations of the Wilis around the world, from Brazil to the United States.

FB: I think this can also relate to the audience in Freiburg very well – showing works that the viewers relate to this beautiful area near Freiburg, relating to their reality and their culture. The creations that were sent in are very interesting and of high quality. So it was a very good initiative from the side of the festival to have proposed this category.

MCH: And it's a real strength to show that a festival can be not just a place where we can come and see work, but a festival can also inspire the production of work, to provide a theme, and to ask people to respond to it. It is a contribution on the part of the festival, to encourage the creation of new works of screendance to challenge and encourage the art form.

*BF: Complementing the screenings the festival will also provide workshops, lectures and discussions. Both of you will lead the workshops and hold lectures. Claudia Kappenberg and Blas Payri, both members of the jury, are also invited to speak to us. What are you planning to do in the workshops?*

MCH: We are teaching one workshop for younger participants, which I'm really excited about. We are going to be taking what has become everyday technological material for most young people today, that is smartphone, webcam, laptop, etc. We are going to look at very basic equipment. Some people hear the word filmmaking and they get scared and think they need an enormous budget and very high quality camera to make something good. And actually, we really believe in strong ideas and what we can do with very little money but a very good idea. So we love to encourage young people's creativity to express an idea through these tools that have become a part of everyday life. Something very personal in our teaching is that we aren't here to push a certain aesthetic, a certain style of dance, or a certain way of working. We want to facilitate a space where we can all exchange and understand how through screendance we can create hybrid-works that express an idea that's very unique to each participant. This is a similar approach in the second workshop for adult artists, who would like try making screendance. In both workshops, the idea is to exchange and to understand how the material can best be used to put into motion ideas and each person's own unique voice. It is not about technology overruling the art form, but about how to use technology to collaborate and put ideas into motion.

FB: And I think that the participants don't need to have a specific background to be interested in this workshop. We are not asking for any specific knowledge. In our countries, nearly everyone has used a mobile phone to film something. So as long as you know how to do this, that's fine, you can make screendance. As long as you're willing to move a little behind and in front of the camera, we hope you'll enjoy this workshop.

MCH: Or move something other than your body.

FB: Yes, or move something. It doesn't have to be bodies, actually. Movement is not limited to human bodies or to animal bodies. It could be movement of the trees, or something else entirely.

MCH: In both workshops we would like to provide some basic filmmaking tools, looking at some fundamentals of filmmaking: the different angles of the camera, the different types of shots that you can make. Having this kind of knowledge at your disposal definitely allows you to understand how you can use the camera to express certain ideas, or to frame certain movements. So we will be looking at the relationship between camera and choreography and how we can create choreography specifically for and with the camera.

*BF: You are both experts on screendance. You are screendance makers, theorists and scholars as well as producers and curators of screendance through the International Video Dance Festival of Burgundy. What do you love about the art of screendance, what fascinates you about it on a personal level?*

MCH: Initially I come from dance. I trained very intensively in a professional school for classical ballet from a very young age, but as an adolescent I also had an amateur practice of photography. And I come from a family of visual artists. What I really enjoyed when I practiced photography was the relationship I had to my body, which wasn't necessarily visible when I took a photo, say of a landscape, but I remember the physical sensation of how I placed my body and how I positioned myself, in relationship to the subject. And I realized it felt choreographic, like composing for the image. So there was both a kinaesthetic experience on my part, that even if it didn't look like dance in the photo, it still had this feeling for me, like a movement practice. Also, I have always been much more interested in composition and choreography than in performing. So, before I even knew what screendance was, I think I felt it in my body. I discovered experimental film works like Maya Deren's during my adolescence as well, at the time not necessarily knowing that they were screendance. When I did my undergraduate degree in the United States, I enrolled in a course on screendance. That got me started making my own work. I became so fascinated with screendance that I dropped doing a dance degree and did an interdisciplinary degree instead, where I followed visual art classes and I knew that I needed more practice based knowledge of video equipment and film editing. I took a lot of film history and film theory classes alongside dance history and other areas related to choreography.

All of the things I am doing now, researching, curating, making, are intimately connected, and I think of them all as creative work. Even a written research feels like an art project, because all projects are just different ways of expression and putting ideas into the world.

FB: I originally come from political science, a field I studied and worked in for years. But at the same time, I have always been interested in cinema and for about fifteen years I have been writing about cinema for several publications. When I met Marisa in the early 2000s, I discovered screendance, which has led me to question the nature of cinema. I now believe that there is a very strong choreographic call to any good film making. I don't think you can't make a good film if you are not a good choreographer. I think a good filmmaker will know how to move the camera, how to compose the actors and the way they move around and really give you a choreographic feel. If you don't know how to do this, everything falls flat on the screen. Little by little, I have come to think that screendance is the essence of cinema in a sense. It is the core body, the ideal type of what strong cinema is. Of course, screendance is not just cinema, it is also choreography and visual arts and sound, but I come from cinema in my analysis and practice of screendance. Strong filmmaking, as far as I am concerned, is related to screendance.

*BF: Thank you both very much for having taken the time to speak to us, I am very much looking forward to the festival!*

MCH: We are really glad to share this experience with you, we've enjoyed working in Freiburg, and we are excited to share this first festival edition with everyone here. And we are very curious to discuss with the public and see what they think!

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