

The Art of Dance in a Digital World

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Abstract

In the last decades, the influence of digital technology has affected almost all aspects of our lives, including the enchanting world of dance. With a single click, everyone has the possibility to access more than 900.000 dance videos, being able to view a performance or dance tutorial whenever it is desired. Art renews itself when it manages to integrate in the present, and digital technology has embraced the art of dance, giving birth to new interdisciplinary approaches. This paper surveys the use of technology regarding dance education and performance on the screen and analyses in what manner the development of digital machineries is supporting innovation in dance.

Keywords: digital technology, dance education, dance on the screen, syncretism, the future of dance.

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Introduction

Modern times are defined through speedy transformations, therefore human beings must possess a developed sense of adaptation, as well as plenty of creativity. Because of the spectacular evolution of the digital technology, teaching and performing dance also encountered changes. Dance pedagogues and researchers use videos to record and interpret performances. This fact coincides with the first relatedness between dance and technology (Birringer, 2002, pp. 84-93). Dance could be the only one discipline that was late to embrace technology, the causes of

this issue being the following: the reluctant attitude of dancers and dance choreographers towards technology *per se* (because of their desire to keep a pure and unaltered kinaesthetic experience) and the low marketability of dancing (Calvert et. al., 2005, pp. 6-12) (which generated a delay in technological applications of this branch). Choreographers and researchers in teaching and composition have applied Digital technology from the years of postmodernism and these days, multimedia applications are constantly evolving. For example, *Association for Dance Performances Telematics* uses the Internet for blending the choreographic drawing and virtual environments.

Content sharing platforms represent one of the most accessed sources of information and entertainment. Noticeable to specify, performances uploaded on such platforms are no longer ephemeral. The ranges of movements, which explore a wide palette of emotions and sensations, attract a great number of dance lovers in online. Needles to mention, that those web users have the possibility to discover a manifold of dance films and videos in a glimpse. One of the most delightful gifts the art of dance could offer the humankind, is the collective gathering through a universal language. Grace has travelled the world more promptly than ever because of the use of digital devices. The future of dance encourages therefore, interdisciplinary approaches, enlargement of audiences and inventiveness.

The fusion between dance education and digital technology

New times generate new methodologies designed in a way in which art would continue to thrive and flourish at its highest. The relationship established between art and digital technology plays a major role in the concerning of artistic future. The participants of this sphere should embrace the blending between the usage of clever devices (i.e. computer, iPad, mobile phone) and the traditional form of teaching dance: "The introduction of computers in the Art education should not replace current methodologies, but should be an extension of the creative process employed in any valid Art instruction" (McCulloch, 1984, p. 46). Technology has also the ability to facilitate the artistic and creative activity, as Madejda Stanley stated: "for Art education, it implies a total rethinking of how we deliver instructions [...] in the content of the Art curriculum at every level" (1993, p. 12). Therefore, through digital devices, dance pedagogues could reshape the traditional perspective of teaching art, presenting it in a more attractive manner.

Nowadays, interactive multimedia has developed such a significant ascend, that it has become one of the most complex applications for the teaching of dance. CD-ROMs or USB flash drives can be used for dance classes, improvisation or demonstration, preservation and access to some of the most considerable choreographic productions, for the teaching of dance notation and for any other artistic aspects which manage to integrate new technology in it. A suitable example could be the introduction of mobile phones, Mini-Netbook or other handheld devices at dance classes for educational motives. At the end of each class, dance teachers could suggest to their students to watch dance videos containing the elements or the technique they have learned that day. Thusly, newly achieved skills and information would become much better understood and assimilated. Also, perhaps at repertoire class or improvisation, with the teacher's consent, students might position their mobile phone so as to film their interpretation. While surveying their performance, students are converting into autodidacts, so could certainly enjoy using their mobile phones for this purpose. Furthermore, during the last decade, the attention of dance researchers was focused on the usage of teleconference and distance education. Learning on Internet confers a substantial advantage to the expanding communities of dance, by breaking the traditional classroom or studio. Although in dance education is not so common to work with this system as in other disciplines, the distance learning is still evolving and many educational institutions enhance Internet learning for the mastering of dance. The latter includes a multitude of software teaching implements, such as dance history, classical ballet class, improvisation class, dance aesthetics, all arranged in units. Moreover, dance universities around the world promote the digital art in various ways. London Contemporary Dance School, for instance, has lately become the first conservatoire in the world to offer a Master Degree with the unique competence in Screendance (screenlifer.com, 2023).

Dance teaching encounters new lands due to technology. But in what manner could cyber stimulation become successful in the circumstances in which each student has a different academic background or life experience? What if some students prefer the tradition means of dance training, happening in studio or in classroom? Unquestionable, the physical side of dance training could never be replaced by the improvement of technology. The possibilities of human beings are boundless and unique and consequently remain the most substantial quality of the artistic area. Hence, training in a dance studio, or in an adequate space for the

artistic activity, will never vanish. Nonetheless, no dance professor desires his/her students to feel discriminated against. Modern societies require a moderate digital knowledge and more important, open minds. It is incontestable that technology has a great potential in the discipline of dance and its power should facilitate both teachers and students' activity. The world of technology is a spot where "it's about peering: sharing, socializing, collaborating, and most of all creating [...]" (Tapscott and Williams, 2006, p. 45). The world of dance is about spreading grace and emotions through the artists' image and motion. Surprisingly or not, those spheres are extremely similar to each other, therefore could be blended together. The key of effective pedagogy consists perhaps in an individual, yet flexible way of combining traditional dance teaching methods with modern ones.

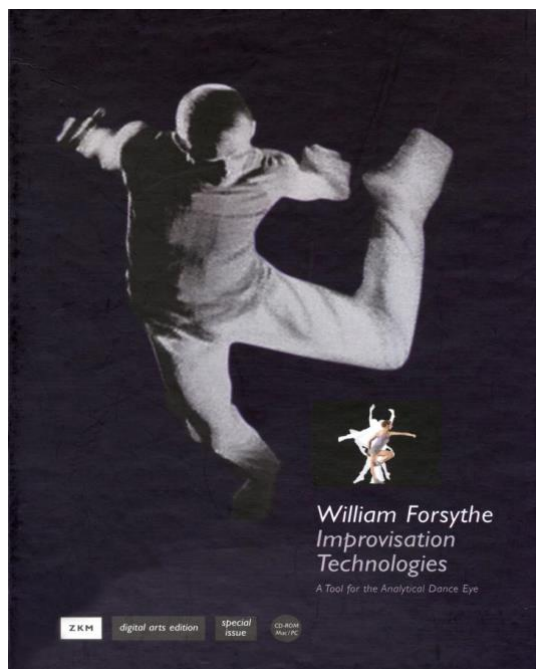


Figure 1. The cover page of Forsythe's book. From *Improvisation Technologies. A Tool for the Analytical Dance Eye*, by W. Forsythe, 1999, Hatje Cantz. Copyright ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe.

Performing on the screen

One of the most delighting achievements of the collaboration between digital technology and dance performances is the fusion of cinema with the Art of motion. The resulting syncretism emphasizes "things unavailable and even unthinkable upon a stage" (Nade and Strauss, 2014, p. 67). Film and video (DVD/ Blue-Ray

or other formats) have provided an exceptional alternative to live performances, which is much more advantageous. Needless to mention there is no other way of perceiving a finer experience than through live performances. From films running in movie theatres (i.e. *Save the Last Dance* [2001], *Mao's Last Dancer* [2009]), series on Netflix (such as *Tiny Pretty Things* [2020]) to videos or digital video discs (DVD), dance illustrations are created with the art of the camera, exploring different shapes on screen.

It is inexorable to remark that dance, as a form of expression which entered the world hundred years ago, is an individual manifestation of art. More specific, a manifestation that gained its independence from film and video, art types which occurred subsequently. By merging two or more different genres in Art there are countless possibilities and indispensable compromises, but all of them are developing a foundation in which Art renews itself. Possessing other principles and historical characteristics, the art of cinema shared some of them to the dancing world. As Strauss argued

film does not have to be edited synchronously, with one moment followed by the next, as in everyday life or on stage; yesterday's activities can be spliced onto tomorrow's performances, actions and thoughts in innumerable ways and for varying lengths of time. Quick cut editing, slow-motion, fast-motion, close-ups, reverse angles, fades, washes, segues, and a host of other cinematic tricks exploit the mind's ability to sustain an image in the eyes for 1/10 of a second, thereby fooling us (willingly) into thinking a sense of continuity exists (Nade and Strauss, 2014, pp. 67-68).

These are just some of the tools of cinematic techniques, which dance borrowed through some versatile film & dance pioneers, such as:

- Busby Berkely (1895-1976) was a choreographer or dance director- as he was entitled- who exploited in particular the woman's lines and beauty. For thirty-three years, he produced fifty-three films that astonished the audience with some flamboyant dancing images, which are nowadays still available on the screen. Berkely created eclectic effects on bodies and exposed insights from the cultural, social and economic issues of that time being, whereas Berkely had the chance to collaborate with Hollywood's biggest studios (i.e. Warner Bros, MGM, Goldwyn). Some of his most considerable productions are: *42nd Street* (1933); *Pettin' in the Park* from *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933); *The Lullaby of Broadway* from *Gold Diggers of 1935* (1935); *The Gang's All Here* (1943)- where he created an animated moment of inflated fruits, which was named *Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat*.
- Fred Astaire (1899-1987) was also a noticeable film choreographer whose desire was to capture dancers's bodies in a full-figure, as Bill Adler explained into his biography: "To [Astaire], a dance was an artistic statement made by the

body of a dancer. [...] The image of the dancer must be seen at all times, in its entirety, with no visual break" (Adler, 1987, p. 112). Astaire was an idealist who fully perceived the tenets of montage and mise en scene. Some remarkable musicals of thirty-ones are *Cheek to Cheek* from *Top Hat* (1935) and *Dancing in the Dark* from *The Band Wagon* (1953).

- Eleanor Powell (1912-1982) was known as the first female choreographer of MGM who created her own dancing numbers. Her extraordinary talent impressed even Fred Astaire, who felt intimidated by her strength and agility. Their partnership from *Broadway Melody of 1940* mesmerized the audience, and Fred and Eleanor became one of the most iconic couples in the history of cinematic dance. It is worth noting that Powell's career had a great influence on Gene Kelly.

Nonetheless, there is a variety of other outstanding ballet or modern dance choreographers who have integrated their works into Hollywood productions:

- George Balanchine (1904-1983) has created the *Water Nymph Ballet* for *The Goldwyn Follies* in 1938, where Vera Zorina, as a principal dancer, was standing up out of a fountain.
- Roland Petit (1924-2011) has choreographed *Le Jeune Homme et la Mort* in 1946 and its masterpiece was incorporated into Taylor Hackford's film, *White Nights* in 1985. At the premiere of the film, Mikhail Baryshnikov (b. 1948) played the lead role of the hopeless and tragic tale, where he enthralled the audience with his performance. Petit's fusion between classical ballet and theatrical art has also permeated into Hans Christian Andersen (1952) stories, such as *Dream Fantasy* and *The Little Mermaid Ballet*. In the last one mentioned, Zizi Jeanmaire and Petit himself have explored the surrealism.
- Hanya Holm (1893-1992), the modern dance choreographer who was trained by Mary Wigman has included her work about the poet F. Villon in Michael Curtiz's *The Vagabond King* (1956)



Figure 2. Eleanor Powell and Fred Astaire dancing in *Broadway Melody of 1940*. Once Upon a Screen (2013, 8 May). *Eleanor Powell and Fred Astaire (1940)*.

<https://aurorasginjoint.com/2013/05/09/dancing-on-air-fred-astaire/eleanor-powell-and-fred-astaire-1940/>

Postmodern times have simultaneously supported film, video& dance on the screen, and the phenomenon continues to evolve. Russia's Bolshoi Ballet, for instance, has developed its own digital project named Bolshoi in Cinema; The UK's Northern Ballet has launched a digital Dance Programme, headed up by the extraordinary Kenneth Tindall, and Scottish Ballet has created Digital Season, emphasizing "Reality, identity and transformation" (Scottish Ballet, n.d.).

Furthermore, dance on the screen is being promoted by various festivals and art sites. An appropriate example could be Dance Media Film Festival, which embraced the syncretism between dance and film. The aim of it is to constantly enhance both arts and develop them to their fullest potential. In such festivals, the

organizers usually offer total freedom to the participants, the latter having the chance to approach any choreographic genre and montage technique.

One of the most notorious practices both in the world of dance and in that of digital art is Screendance. It is a particularly complex interdisciplinary genre which is still in the process of being theorized. Screendance took shape in the years

of postmodernism and being a collaborative practice, it includes a multitude of subgenres, among which are the following: cinema, video art, visual art, dance. The resulting syncretism stimulates the creativity and potential of the artists by constantly inspiring them to get out of their comfort zone. Also known as dancefilm, cine-dance, dance for the camera or video dance, Screendance arouses a lot of enthusiasm among artists of any age, and, in my opinion, it must be integrated as a mandatory component of the education of today's dancers.



Figure 3. Poster image of a Screendance Laboratory from Wicklow. Wicklow ScreenDance Laboratory (2021, 11 October). *Submissions for Wicklow ScreenDance Laboratory 2022 are now open!*. Theatre and Dance NI. <https://theatreanddanceni.org/submissions-for-wicklow-screendance-laboratory-2022-are-now-open/>

Conclusions

The body is not the only interest for dance performers, pedagogues or choreographers any more. The tech-evolution, besides of being a significant support to the art of dance, contributed to its progress. Although digital devices generated a new pattern in both dance education and performance, technology should not substitute the traditional methods of teaching dance. Moreover, both ways should complement each other. Given the fact that digital knowledge represents nowadays a necessity, not using it could certainly be translated into a disadvantage. According to my beliefs, the key of being a dance pedagogue consists in understanding the desires and abilities of each student, and to adapt them to the new pedagogical forms. There is no specific recipe of teaching dance, as it does not exist in any other discipline. However, as a widely spread quote states, "If a teacher takes a hand, open a mind and touches a heart", he/she has already fulfilled his/her purpose.

All in all, when referring to performances on the screen, dancing has found a glorious way of entering people's hearts. The choreographic art has thrived along with cinematography, and this partnership led to the development of a unique concept for the 21st century generation: Screendance. We all agree that there is no replacement for viewing live performances, as human's emotional connection through devices is not as powerful as face-to-face one. Still, the interdisciplinary projects are the ones that arouse the greatest interest of the current society. The fusion of genres in Art reveals the eclectic character of our era, which is why I consider to be absolutely necessary the studying of choreography in relation to the continuous advances of technology.

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